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# Towards a new century together

BY JOHN HUME

**I**F one were to judge Christianity and its values on the basis of the number of people who regard themselves as Christians of whatever denomination and who go to church, then Belfast would qualify as one of the most Christian cities in the world.

Yet in this city, in addition to the horrible atrocity of murder, it has been necessary to build 13 walls to separate one section of a Christian people from another and to protect them from one another.

Those walls are an indictment of everyone, and if we are genuinely Christian then they should force us to think and to re-examine in depth our attitudes, because it is our past attitudes that have built those walls. They are in stark contrast to the most fundamental of Christian beliefs, Love Thy Neighbour.

My basic request to all sections of our people is, therefore, to begin a fundamental re-examination of our attitudes, for that we must do if we are to bring those walls down. If we succeed, then in addition to achieving the lasting peace that so many of our people want, we can give an example to other areas of conflict in the world.

At the end of the day, all conflicts are about the same thing — the refusal to accept difference, and treating differences as a threat.

It is an accident of birth where we are born and what we are born. We are human beings before we are anything else. Humanity transcends nationality or identity. That is not only a fundamentally Christian statement. It is the basis of lasting peace anywhere in the world.

First, I ask the Unionist people, largely from the Protestant tradition, to re-examine their attitudes. The objective of the Unionist people — the preservation, protection of their heritage, their ethos and their way of life is a totally honourable and worthy objective with which no-one can quarrel. My question to the

Unionist people is not about their objective, but about their methods.

It appears to me, and to the people that I represent, that the basic methods used to achieve that objective has been to hold all power in their own hands — 'Ourselves Alone'. To include anyone else is seen as a threat and as ultimately leading to the undermining of the Unionist ethos. What we have we hold. We do not share.

It seems to me that such an attitude reveals a deep lack of self-confidence. This is underlined by what appears to the rest of us to be the persistent need for the British Government to repeat their guarantee of the Union.

The fact that British Government Ministers have to repeat it so regularly reveals at the end of the day a fundamental distrust of the commitment to the guarantee by British Governments. History confirms that distrust.

The real question is, do they trust themselves to make an agreement that will preserve and develop their heritage forever, in a manner that will preserve their heritage whether they remain a majority or not?

**T**HE real strength of the Unionist people rests in their own number, their deep conviction and their geography. This problem cannot be solved without their agreement.

They are their own guarantors and we will achieve lasting stability when their representatives stand on their own feet and negotiate an agreement with those other people with whom they share a piece of earth — an agreement that respects our diversity.

Such an approach would be totally in keeping with my understanding of the basis of Protestantism — the acceptance of plurality — which has been so effectively practised by the Protestant tradition in so many countries across Europe where the same religious differences existed.

The essence of unity and stability in any society is the acceptance of diversity. Paradoxically, the exclusivism which Unionism appears to us to represent in our society is in total contradiction to those values that Protestantism represents in world culture: freedom of conscience; liberty of the individual; civil and religious freedom.

The nationalist people, largely from the Catholic community, must also deeply re-examine their attitudes. Many of our young people have become involved in physical force movements or armed struggle, as they call it, in keeping with a handed-down notion of Irish patriotism.

Those who claim the right to kill and the right to die in the name of Irish unity not only contradict the meaning of unity, but undermine the integrity of the concept, for that philosophy is clearly not about unity of people but about unity of territory.

To make the most fundamental human right — the right to life — subsidiary to a political principle is to undermine all human rights. Their political principle is that the Irish people have the right to self-determination.

That is the language of the League of Nations and of the United Nations, but it derives from a period in world history when the nation State was the essential concept of government and was based on territorial interests.

Territory was more important than people. That is the basic philosophy which fuelled 19th and early 20th century nationalism and led to the two World Wars and imperialism.

Thankfully the rest of Western Europe, but unfortunately not Eastern Europe, has moved away from that concept. The world is a much smaller place today, not least because of development in telecommunications and transport. Interdependence is today more important to people than independence. We cannot live apart.

What has to be accepted by everyone is that it is people

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who have rights and not territory. When a people are divided as to how that right is to be exercised — as we are — 'hen agreement cannot be achieved by any form of force or coercion.

In fact, as we know from sad and bitter experience, coercion in any form, particularly violence, only drives peoples further apart and deepens their divisions.

**W**HAT we must achieve, if we are to have lasting peace, is agreement on how we live together on the island of Ireland. The terrible price of our disagreement does not have to be spelt out.

Whatever form that agreement takes, once our quarrel is over and we start working together, the healing process of eroding prejudice and distrust will have begun and will lead in future generations to a new Ireland built on respect for diversity, and whose model will probably be very different from any of the traditional models of the past.

For its part, the British Government has now made clear that it not only wants to see agreement between the people of Ireland on how they live together, but that it will do all in its power to facilitate such agreement, and if agreement is reached it will respect such an agreement.

It goes without saying that any such agreement would have to concentrate not only on giving positive expression to relationships within Ireland, but also to the unique relationships which exist between Britain and Ireland.

Such agreement should be much easier today than 50 years ago. We live together in a Europe which has sorted out much deeper differences and we have a duty to learn from

the European experience. European peoples slaughtered one another twice in this century alone — 35m died in the Second World War.

No-one could have forecast 50 years ago that we would have European unity today, a unity which has respected the widespread diversity and dignity of the people of western Europe, and which has put its bitterness and distrust behind it. It is our duty to examine how it was done and apply the lessons to areas of conflict everywhere. How did they do it?

The people of western Europe accepted that difference is not a threat. The answer to difference is to respect it and to build institutions which accommodate difference and allow the people to work their common ground together — the common ground being economics. That is precisely the approach we should adopt.

In keeping with that approach, with our problem being the need to accommodate two sets of legitimate rights — the rights of the Unionist people to their identity, their ethos and their way of life, and the right of the nationalist people to precisely the same — I believe that, in the context of the new Europe in which sovereignty has changed its meaning and whose very existence is a proclamation that the independent nation State is out of date, it should be easier for us to resolve our differences.

Our situation today is totally different to the 1920s where our problem was a straightforward clash of sovereignties. Today, both British and Irish Governments are sharing sovereignty over our most fundamental interests with ten other countries and are committed by international agreement to "an ever closer union".

If we take the positive view, nationalists can take comfort

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from the fact that an ever closer union applies to both parts of Ireland within Europe, while Unionists can draw comfort from the fact that it applies to ever closer union between Britain and Ireland in the new Europe.

What remains for us to do is to sort out our own relationships so that we can take responsibility for the matters that affect all our people and create the circumstances in which we will at last work together in our common interests.

The challenge has now been put before us by the Joint Declaration. It is a clear challenge to all of us to come to the table armed only with our convictions. It is also a historic challenge to be the first generation in centuries that will take the gun and the bomb out of our politics.

**T**HE peace dividend is enormous. Given the strength of both our traditions across the world — 44m in America alone — the support in economic terms will be enormous and we can all indulge in true patriotism, putting people first before territory or flags and offering hope to our young that they can earn a living in the land of their birth.

To borrow a thought from Louis McNeice, it is too late to save our soul with bunting. And to borrow a quote from Lord Craigavon in 1938: 'We cannot forever live apart'.

Living together means not only respecting our differences, but harnessing our considerable energies and talents for the first time in our history to build, not to destroy.

Have we the moral courage and leadership to accept the challenge?