

Christians and the Anglo-Irish Agreement

AN ADDRESS given by
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I certainly cannot claim to be an expert either in Christianity or in the field of Anglo-Irish relations. What experience I have had comes from having spent 23 years of my ministry in Northern Ireland, in Derry. We have to ask ourselves the question, 'Does the Gospel shed any light on the manner in which we who profess and call ourselves Christians should approach such a major political development in the life of our country?' Surely the first thing which the Gospel teaches us is that we must always be willing to face reality. God in Christ accepted the reality of the human condition in Palestine nearly two thousand years ago. He entered the human situation as he found it, worked constructively and creatively in and through human nature, transforming it into an instrument of redemption, to bring light into darkness and hope and reconciliation to mankind. And Christians who profess to believe in the Incarnation must face facts. The fact is that the agreement has been made and is now the law of the land enacted by both sovereign Parliaments. Fairminded people everywhere will, of course, appreciate and understand the bitter resentment indeed fury, felt by the Northern Protestants and Unionists at their not having been consulted during the negotiations. Lack of consultation with those most intimately affected by important decisions is always a mistake.

Even where there is little prospect of progress in negotiations there must always be a willingness to inform and to listen. A dismissive attitude implies a lack of respect for others resulting in anger and frustration. Jesus never refused to listen. He always had time for others. He was never neglectful or dismissive of anyone.

A MORE CONSTRUCTIVE APPROACH

I would hope that the Northern Protestants and Unionists, much as they dislike the Agreement and the manner in which it has been thrust upon them will nevertheless, in time, when passions have cooled and protests have spent themselves, arrive at a calmer, more positive and constructive approach and endeavour to see the Agreement for what it really is, not as a threat to themselves but as a sincere attempt to promote peace, reconciliation and stability.

The Protestant community to-day in Northern Ireland is in a state of fear and uncertainty largely because of the secrecy which surrounded the negotiations leading up to the Agreement and the various interpretations which have been given to certain aspects of the Agreement.

ALIENS IN THEIR OWN LAND

Unionists see the present policy as

one of joint government of Northern Ireland with the Irish Government representing the interests of the Nationalist community and Britain at best neutral where Unionist interests are concerned. Consequently they feel themselves treated as aliens in their own land, without any role in the making of decisions which affect their daily lives. What are we to do when faced with such a situation? Of course we might say to the Unionists — "You've only yourselves to blame. You brought all this on yourselves." But such a response is neither Christian nor democratic. Any idea of suspending the Conference would only raise false hopes among the Unionists and arouse suspicion among Nationalists. But surely it is not beyond the wit of politicians to find a way of including the suggested talks on devolution say within the broad framework of the Conference and positively to promote and encourage such talks as entirely in keeping with the Conference's declared aim of bringing about peace and stability and reconciliation in Northern Ireland. Or perhaps the Conference might consider going into recession while the talks on devolution are in progress. If such a gesture were made then the leaders of the Protestant community in the North who have already articulated the fears of their co-religionists would be in a stronger position to say to their people, "Fear Not! You have an important role to play in the development of the political life of the province. Grasp the opportunity."

DESIRE TO SEE PEACE

Also we should continue to let it be known in the North that the vast majority of people here in the Republic, Christians and others of all denominations or of none, respect the right of the people of Northern Ireland to decide their political destiny; that there is no desire whatever to coerce them, or to impose upon them a United Ireland. Our only desire is to see

peace and justice and reconciliation in Ireland, North and South, for all the people of this island. When all is said and done most people in Ireland simply want to live in peace and reconciliation, to be treated fairly, to have a home and a job, to be able to pay their way and care for their families. These are their priorities. Constitutional niceties come a long way down on their list.

At such a time as this we need to bridle our tongues, to refrain from inflammatory language, to appreciate the difficult role of the R.U.C., caught up as they are in the midst of the warring factions, and to encourage all sections of the Northern community to give their full support and co-operation to the forces of law and order.

TOWARDS A MORE TOLERANT SOCIETY

We seek reconciliation. The Gospel is the Gospel of reconciliation. There can be no reconciliation without tolerance. True tolerance is not a negative attitude, grudgingly conceding the right to existence of views and values which differ from ours, but a positive attitude, seeing and welcoming diversity or pluralism in society as mutually enriching and stimulating. Reconciliation therefore involves pluralism, a more open, tolerant, liberal society, a pluralism in moral and religious convictions.

It also involves a pluralism in political and cultural convictions. This means, for example, in our Irish situation, that the Unionist will recognise the right of people of the Nationalist tradition to hold an aspiration towards a United Ireland and their right to use every peaceful means, to endeavour to persuade others who disagree with them, that a United Ireland is in the best interests of all. It means that people of the Nationalist tradition will recognise the right of the

Unionists to hold sincerely to their belief that the best interests of the people of Northern Ireland are served by remaining part of the United Kingdom. There is, therefore, in Northern Ireland a British dimension and an Irish dimension. We must be realistic and face up to this fact. And if we are sincere in our efforts to promote reconciliation these two dimensions must be given due and adequate recognition. This is really what the Anglo-Irish Conference is all about. The logical corollary to this is that any administration or government in Northern Ireland, if it is to command the consensus of all the people must include the two traditions and must have close links with both London and Dublin with both Britain and the Republic; for there can be no reconciliation without mutual respect and recognition.

A GREAT MEASURE OF GENEROSITY

Reconciliation involves pluralism and it involves partnership. It also involves, in a historically and sharply divided society, a great measure of generosity on the part of the majority community towards the minority in any form of partnership or shared responsibility. The generosity of the majority community is absolutely essential if that community is to win the consent of the minority. The test of a true democracy is not just the rule of the majority. It must ultimately be judged by its treatment of its minorities. As Christians we have before us the example of the supreme generosity of God shown in sending his only Son, Jesus Christ, to die for us while we were yet undeserving sinners. That is what we are called upon as Christians to emulate. Reconciliation involves pluralism and generosity. Reconciliation also involves honesty. For too long we have been nourished on myth rather than on fact in Ireland. Nationalist myths and Unionist myths, Protestant myths

and Catholic myths. The myths of the tribe have replaced the realities of history. We must see the concept of "Irishness" as inclusive not exclusive. This also requires honesty. It means that we must recognise and keep in focus the two main traditions, the Unionist and the Nationalist traditions in this land, for both are part of our heritage and we can



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experience and appreciate and commend what is valuable in both. Nationalism with its emphasis on our culture, and language and its aspiration towards the unity of all Irish people and Unionism with its emphasis on our Anglo-Irish, Scottish-Irish traditions, looking out beyond this island and recognising that history, geography, economics and family ties all make it necessary for us to have a very special relationship of affinity and co-operation with the Scots, the English, the Welsh in the neighbouring island.

A COMMON IRISHNESS

The two parts of Ireland can never be foreign to one another and Britain can never be as foreign to us as say, France or Germany. In so many ways for richer or for poorer these two islands are bound together and our supreme aim under God must be to bring together what is valuable in both our traditions into a creative synthesis which will enrich the lives and endeavours of all the people in this island thereby enabling us to play a more effective role and to show a more effective Christian witness in the community of nations. We all share a common Irishness although we may differ in religion, in politics and in culture. We must get away from the idea that there is one authentic Irishman or Irishness, defined and classified by the adherence to one particular political or religious conviction. And we must be honest with ourselves and recognise that Irish unity cannot be imposed from the outside and it cannot be brought about by removing paper guarantees. If it is to come about at all it must grow from the inside. Meanwhile we must encourage — and this is incumbent upon us as Christians, seeking reconciliation — we must encourage cooperation in all spheres — recreational, cultural, educational and commercial — between North and South. We must get to know one another better. We must be good neighbours. Unity cannot

be enforced. But if it does come it will only come gradually. For the division of Ireland is not really on the map but in the hearts and minds of men and women unless you change hearts and minds the divisions will remain. And to change attitudes is a very long and slow process.

AIM TO ACHIEVE RECONCILIATION

One thing is certain, unity can only come about if at first there is reconciliation. To talk about unity somehow producing reconciliation is to put the cart before the horse. Reconciliation is primary. It may lead in time to unification. It may not lead to unification. But it is essential that we, in politics and in the churches today, see our supreme aim as that of achieving reconciliation — reconciliation in the North, reconciliation in the South, reconciliation between North and South.

Unionism, is a credible and respectable political conviction but it has been identified too often in Northern Ireland with Protestant ascendancy and as a result both Unionist and Protestantism have been debased.

Nationalism is a credible and respectable political conviction but it has been identified too often in the Republic with Roman Catholic ascendancy and as a result both Nationalism and Roman Catholicism have been debased.

Protestantism and Roman Catholicism in Ireland have both been the victims of political prostitution.

We need neither Protestant nor Roman Catholic ascendancy in Ireland. We have had enough to both and their offspring of strife and division.

We need Christian ascendancy in Ireland, the ascendancy of Christ which paradoxically is shown in his 'descendancy', his coming to dwell amongst us in great humility to reconcile us to God and to one another.