

*The Society for Ecumenical Studies  
in association with the Iona Community*

## **Breaking Down Barriers in the Twenty-First Century**

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*Breaking Down Walls In The 21<sup>st</sup> Century: Who Moves The First Stone?*

I begin with a quotation:

We come with a message which is increasingly a message of our century, - no longer each for himself, but each for all . . . This is the law of Christ for us. No man liveth to himself. Your great heroes are the property of the world. We are outgrowing the day of racial prejudices and bigotries. We belong to one another; we need one another. The fulfilment of the great Christian dream can only come as great Churches exchange their ideals of faith, duty and polity; and as nations of the great sisterhood of the peoples exchange their gifts, of experience, of organisation, of mental and spiritual inspiration.

That was said almost 100 years ago, in June 1909, by a leading English Congregational minister and Liberal MP, Charles Silvester Horne. (Those of us who are aged enough to believe that real comedy on the radio ended in the 1970s will gratefully recall his son, Kenneth Horne . . .). The occasion was a great meeting in Berlin, sponsored by the churches in both Britain and

Germany as part of a series of exchanges in 1908 and 1909, aiming at creating friendlier relations between the two countries in face of the increasing mutual suspicions and the accelerating arms race that marked those years.<sup>1</sup>

How do we hear those words today, in the first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century? Perhaps sceptically, cynically. Just five years after that meeting in Berlin there broke out a conflict which set Britain and Germany, with other nations, against each other in unprecedented carnage. We hear them across a whole century of conflicts. We hear them across the rise and collapse of brutal totalitarianisms, of a yet more destructive war, of genocide and holocaust, of Cold Nuclear War, of apartheid, of intercommunal conflicts from Northern Ireland to Sri Lanka. That was the 20<sup>th</sup> century, which seemed to make a mockery of Silvester Horne's words and all the idealism and the optimism of him and his contemporaries. And today, we hear them from amid our own conflicts and echoing off our own walls of division: between Israel and Palestine, between radical Islam and much of the rest of the world, between fundamentalists and people at large, between those getting richer and those getting poorer, between those with power and those losing power, between those inside and those excluded, and often between men and women.

“No longer each for himself, but each for all . . . This is the law of Christ for us . . . We belong to one another; we need one another.” Looking back with a century's wisdom of hindsight to that time of liberal Protestant idealism, we can easily dismiss it as vain, superficial optimism, which equated the coming of God's kingdom on earth with the spread of white, western, patriarchal “Christian” civilisation – which soon lost all credibility when it went to war with itself in the trenches. In some respects, I have to admit, Silvester Horne and many of the other speechifiers during those visits of 1908-09 were naïve in placing their hopes on a grand alliance of Christianised Europe and North America to ensure peace and progress for all humankind, when they themselves were in fact part of the problem rather than the solution. But

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<sup>1</sup> See *Friendly Relations between Great Britain and Germany. Souvenir Volume of the visit to Germany by Representatives of the British Christian Churches June 7<sup>th</sup> – 20<sup>th</sup> 1909* (Berlin 1909). Horne quote p56.

neither can I disavow the heart of what Horne is saying: “No longer each for himself, but each for all . . . This is the law of Christ for us. We belong to one another, we need one another.” That surely is true to the gospel itself, the good news that in Jesus Christ God has lived among us all, died for us all, risen for us all, in order to draw all humanity into the divine embrace in a new community on earth as it is in heaven. So I cannot deny what Horne is saying as an application of the gospel to the life of the world – unless I deny Christ himself. Divisions that degrade, dehumanise and destroy humanity deny the truth of God in Christ and God’s intentions for the world. This is how I read the Bible, for example in the two passages I have suggested for study later this week: Isaiah 2, the vision of all peoples coming to the mountain of the Lord’s house to be judged by God, to beat their swords into ploughshares and their spears into pruning hooks, so that nation shall not lift up sword against nation, nor learn war any more; and Paul’s Letter to the Colossians chapter 1, where he speaks of Christ as the one through whom and for whom all things have been created, and the one in whom “*all things hold together.*” Our faith speaks of a fundamental, God-given togetherness of all people and all things which it is therefore sinful to deny, disrupt or try to destroy, or to allow to continue in division.

Yet we live in a world where this denial, disruption, destruction continually takes place. Our challenge as people of faith is to be true to our gospel and true to our world, and that is, as I see it, our particular challenge this week on Iona. Our temptation is either to be so focussed on the beauty of the gospel that we skate over the ugly and cruel realities of our world, or to be so caught up in these cruel realities as to ignore the possibilities signalled by the gospel, and become at best cynical commentators or expert analysts, medical diagnosticians without any treatment in mind. Faith means a meeting, in our very own selves, of the gospel and the world as it is, a meeting that engenders hope, hope that in turn spills into new forms of love for this world.

My sub-title for this paper, “Who Moves the First Stone?” is of course an adaptation of the words of Jesus in John’s Gospel, where he challenges the accusers of the woman taken in adultery to cast the first stone, if they are

without any sin of their own. My picture is of us good Christians looking at the walls of division in our 21<sup>st</sup> century world, proclaiming these to be sinful and demanding their removal. And Jesus is standing by us, and saying: “Who will be brave enough, and honest enough, to cast *down* the first stone, instead of waiting for ‘them’ – whoever ‘they’ are – to move in with the bulldozers? Dare you look to see which stone might have your own name on it? ” In other words, let’s not just write up on the board “What’s Wrong With the World” and compile a shopping list of walls to be broken down. Let’s examine our own complicity, our own responsibility, and plot our own engagement with it all. That might be somewhat disconcerting. But to try to view the scene in a detached way usually proves also to be disempowering and in the end frustrating. If we abstract ourselves too much from the world, we should not be surprised if the world goes on without us.

To avoid this danger of abstraction as we look at the walls of division, I suggest we – especially as people of faith - need to attend to two main factors. These are, first, the limits of the rational in human behaviour; second, taking up further what I have just been saying about our own engagement with divisions, the need for self-awareness.

### **The limits of the rational in human behaviour**

In 1991 I heard Eduard Shevardnadze, Soviet Foreign Minister and subsequently president of Georgia, speaking at the Royal Institute for International Affairs at Chatham House in London. It was the time of the break-up of the Soviet Union, we were still getting used to the idea of the end of the Cold War and there was still talk of a “new world order”. It was also, seemingly, the time of the breakdown of old ideological certainties. I well remember Shevardnadze saying, with a smile, at one point, “If social life is really all about economics, then we would not be seeing the fighting going on in Yugoslavia today!” It was a remarkable admission by someone who, supposedly, had been schooled in the official Marxist-Leninist line that economic materialism is the governing factor in all human existence, and the key to understanding its processes. But Serbs, Croats and Bosnians were not

fighting over the economy, nor even just over land, but over identity and the associated values of independence, or dominance, or sheer survival. In the eyes of many, these were “irrational” conflicts where the cost seemed to outweigh any conceivable advantage.

.With the end of the Cold War came many prescriptions for a “new world order”, a new rationality. Among the most famous of these was the American Francis Fukuyama’s prophecy of “the end of history.”<sup>2</sup> By this he meant that with the collapse of the monolithic Soviet system and other corporate identities, the world was now free to embrace the spread of liberal economic values which carried with it individual freedom to choose how to live, what to make and what to buy. People would no longer define themselves by their communal cultural identities and loyalties; history as the story of encounter and clashes between competing cultural blocks was over; the age of the free individual had arrived with the global market economy. It was the neo-conservative kingdom of heaven on earth. More recently Fukuyama has repented somewhat of this extreme view, and has had to admit that people, perversely, still seem to want to *belong* as well as to buy, and that cultural identities are not just going to wither away under globalisation. But he still places his faith in the rationality of economic interest as the main hope for the world. “Big business will pacify the clash of cultures” is the title of a recent article by him that appeared in the *Sunday Times*. Trust between people, he states, is vital. One form of trust is cultural, based on shared values common to a given community such as family or stable society. This is the “more primitive” form of trust. Another form of trust, which he sees as both more durable and limitlessly extensive is based on self-interest and is the basis of modern economic interdependence: “Globalisation provides the opportunity to expand markets far beyond the limits of one’s own community, requiring development of an impersonal, structured institutional framework by which trust can emerge between complete strangers.” The troubles, of course, that globalisation opens opportunities for much else, such as sheer exploitative greed and injustice which far from creating trust are destructive of it. It is

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<sup>2</sup> F. Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man*, New York: Avon Books 1993.

starkly ironic that the very same issue in which Fukuyama's article appears carries on its front pager a report on how Sir Philip Green's Topshop clothing empire relies on the sweated labour of Sri Lankans, Bangladeshis and Indians in Mauritius, who are paid a pittance of a wage.

At one level, Fukuyama's neo-con vision is a globalised version of Margaret Thatcher's famous (or infamous) dictum that there is no such thing as society, only families and individuals. Therefore there are no real barriers or walls of division between communities because all there is, or will be in the liberal dream, no distinct communities but the one market of individual free choice the world over. At another level, I can't help thinking of it whenever I hear John Lennon's song "Imagine" – imagine a world without any heaven and above us, no hell beneath, just people content to love and let live, doing their own thing, no religion, no countries, nothing to fight or die for . . . and so on. Far from finding that an exciting prospect, I think "What a boring old world that would be." For while there might not be any barriers, there wouldn't be any relationships either; while no tensions or potential conflicts, no friendships either. It's a world based on the rationality of atomised human existence, of safe apartness, not on togetherness in community. It's the peace of the graveyard.

In passing, I should note that in rejecting the neo-con rationalism that denies the significance of communal and cultural identity, we are not thereby committed to buying the notion of the inevitable clash of civilisations as propounded by Samuel Huntington. "Civilisations" are not in my view distinct, solid entities, and in any case is as much conflict, real or potential, within "civilisations" as between them. But too much talk about divisions in the world consists, in effect, of saying that if only people were sensible and would think rationally they would see how stupid these walls of separation are, and they would, with sufficiently loud moral shouting and righteous blowing of trumpets, like the walls of Jericho will come tumbling down. This tendency is found, too, in some religious thinkers. For a long time I've admired the progressive Roman Catholic theologian Hans Küng, not least for giving a lead to the search for what he calls "a New World Ethic" of global responsibility (ref.), and

calling for the major world faiths to participate in this: “No peace without peace between the world’s religions. No peace between the religions without dialogue between the religions.” What seems to be in view here is an attempt to formulate an agreed code of ethics that expresses the points on which all the main faiths, especially the monotheisms of Judaism, Christianity and Islam, can affirm together as their highest common factor. This I think is important and valuable. The problem is, what about those areas where there is *not* agreement, and what happens to those issues? Can they simply be left off the agenda? If I might use a rather crude metaphor, I may not be on speaking terms with my next-door neighbour because he insists on keeping pigs in his back garden. We might find we agree on many things, like supporting the same football team or drinking in the same pub, and having these interests in common might provide a starting point for discussing in a constructive way the issues of noise and smell emanating from his mini pig farm. But that divisive issue itself can’t be evaded indefinitely. I share Duncan Forrester’s appreciative but finally regretful judgment on Kūng’s well-intentioned efforts:

Kūng’s project demonstrates that it is not hard to achieve broad agreement on ethical generalities. But the real problems arise, not so much at the level of general principle, but rather when one is attempting to resolve concrete and complex issues on the ground, where there are various views on what is at stake, conflicting interests involved, and no clear-cut and agreed resolution in sight. In such situations, in the muck and grime of the real world, agreement on general principles often falls apart.<sup>3</sup>

Or, if you prefer to hear it from an even more famous figure than this Scottish professor, here is Dietrich Bonhoeffer writing in his wartime *Ethics* in the context of resistance to Nazism, reflecting on the various failures to measure up to the contemporary forms of evil:

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<sup>3</sup> D. Forrester, *Apocalypse Now? Reflections on Faith in a Time of Terror*, London: Ashgate 2005, p42.

The failure of *reasonable* people is appalling: they cannot manage to see either the abyss of evil or the abyss of holiness. With the best intentions they believe that, with a little reason, they can pull back together a structure that has come apart at the joints. In their defective vision they want to be fair to both sides, and so they are crushed between the colliding forces without having accomplished anything at all. Bitterly disappointed that the world is so unreasonable, they see themselves condemned to ineffectiveness. They withdraw in resignation or fall helplessly captive to the stronger party.<sup>4</sup>

The breaking down of walls cannot appeal just to reason. Quite apart from the fact that some walls may be indeed be necessary for protection, we have to recognise also the profoundly felt need of people to *belong* to a recognisable and supportive community, a felt need which normally goes deeper than rationality. What is really at issue is *how* this belonging is expressed and indeed *which* community is recognised as meriting our belonging. Walls break down when people see that they are no longer necessary to satisfying the need to belong, because new possibilities of meeting that need are now on offer.

What appears as irrationally divisive and perversely persistent, inexplicably so to the detached outside observer, may well be the result of an affectionate attachment to cherished features which in themselves are quite benign in experience and memory – sometimes very long memory. In Scott Fitzgerald's romantic novel *Tender is the Night* there is a passage where a party of Americans are visiting the scarred fields of Flanders where so recently so many thousands had died in the trenches. Some of the group ponder on just what could have made young men fight so bitterly and for so long to so little effect. Dick Diver the main character says: "This took religion and years of plenty and the exact relation between the classes . . . You have to have a whole-souled sentimental equipment going back further than you could

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<sup>4</sup> D. Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, Volume 16 in Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works English Edition, Minneapolis: Fortress Press 2004,, p78



remember. You had to remember Christmas, and portraits of the Crown Prince and his fiancée, and little cafés in the Unter den Linden, and weddings at the mairee, and going to the Derby, and your grandfather's whiskers . . . This kind of battle was invented by Lewis Carroll and Jules Verne and whoever wrote *Undine*, and country deacons bowling and murraines in Versailles and girls seduced in the back lanes of Württemberg and Westphalia. Why, this was a love battle – there was a century of middle-class sport here. This was the last love battle.”

“A whole-souled sentimental equipment going back further than you remember.” That is a fair description of what we are so often up against not just in warfare but in so many of the walls of division and it cannot simply be dismissed because it seems irrational. It's the cement that keeps the stones in place, and if it is to be dissolved it will have to be by no less a sentimental attachment to a wider community in the making. (I have previously explored this in *A Patriotism for Today*). That was the challenge successfully brought by the first Christian communities to the Hellenistic world with its standard divisions between Greek and Jew, Scythian and barbarian, slave and free, man and woman. Any desire to break down walls must reckon with this basal human need.

### **Self-awareness**

We may think that the building and maintaining of barriers is the work of people who are different us enlightened ones, and like the pharisee we pray: “I thank you Lord, that I am not like other people: bigots, racists, nationalists, sexists, or even like this fundamentalist here.” If we are to any use in moving stones, we have to be aware of the stones we may be carrying in our own baggage. So there is a list of questions I suggest each of us needs to ask of ourselves if we are to engage with dismantling barriers in the world today.

#### **1. *Who am I?***

Who am I, in the sense of how would I label myself as to my outlook and beliefs, and in such self-labelling what barriers may I already be placing between myself and other people? I had a telling moment of revelation the

first time I visited South Africa, for so long under apartheid the land of barriers par excellence. It was in 1985 during the state of emergency: a regime ever more intransigent. townships in flames, a brutal police crackdown and fears that we were seeing a downward spiral into uncontrollable violence. The British Council of Churches, as it then was, was invited by the South African Council of Churches (SACC) to send a delegation of solidarity and support to the churches and people in the struggle, and I was a member of that delegation. Although it was a tense and scary situation I eagerly went, not least because I would see and meet at first hand some of the people who were already my heroes, like Desmond Tutu and Beyers Naudé, the great courageous leader of white Christian resistance to apartheid, now secretary of the SACC. I would witness at first hand what prophetic, liberation theology was about. And indeed I did – for while we were there the famous Kairos Document was launched by the radical theologians of the struggle, and I attended the actual meeting in Khotso House where it was released to the world. Now in going like this, I had clearly labelled myself as on the liberal, progressive theological wing, and as such would not have called myself an evangelical, still less a conservative evangelical. I was not a “Billy Graham type.” When choosing hymns for services I did not normally select evangelical favourites like “Blessed assurance, Jesus is mine,” rather it would be Fred Kaan or Pratt Green on God’s kingdom of justice and peace. On our first morning in Johannesburg we met in Khotso House with the staff of the SACC for their weekly worship service. Imagine my surprise, when the hymns and songs we sang could have come straight out of the Billy Graham song book! And there was Beyers Naudé – of all people! – singing away at the top of his voice “Blessed assurance, Jesus is mine!” What was going on? Well, one of the things going on was a radical revision within myself. In a white, middle-class academic context such as I had come from, singing “Blessed assurance, Jesus is mine” could be seen as sentimental, pietist escapism. But I thought, if I was really into the struggle, and as a result really up against it, banned, or under house-arrest for many years, or in a lonely police cell waiting for interrogation and perhaps torture, then maybe “Blessed assurance, Jesus is mine” might well come to mean much more than any verses about justice and righteousness on earth. Or maybe, it was simply that I was

meeting Africa for the first time, where our western self-imposed barriers between what is and what is not acceptable spirituality do not apply. If you are going to be involved in dismantling barriers, you must be prepared for surprises and be ready for some demolition work about your own prejudices and hidden impulses to shut out what may be vital energy for other people.

## **2. *Where am I?***

There are still literal, physical barriers in our world today, still geographical boundaries which in some cases are barriers. But more and more, the barriers are not geographical. In any sizeable town in the UK today, the diversity is present that is potentially or actually a division: between religions, between language-groups, between colours, between rich and poor, between included and excluded. If we are realistic about breaking down barriers we need to be prepared to ask which barrier are we nearest to, which one are we actually up against – in our neighbourhood, our school, or college. It might be nearer than we think. To take one example, the stigmatisation of people with HIV and Aids is one of the toughest barriers in the world today. At the World Council of Churches Assembly in Porto Alegre, Brazil, in February last year there was a striking slogan on a poster: “The Body of Christ has Aids.” Some people might not like that, may think it even blasphemous. But it brings the truth home. Many Christians do have Aids, and they are members of the Body of Christ so that Body has Aids. If one member suffers, all suffer together with it, as Paul says (I Cor. 12.26). But it *really* comes home when it becomes personal, as it did in the college community where I taught 20 years ago when it was made known that one of the students was HIV-positive. The barriers are easy to criticize or sermonize about at a distance. When you are right there it’s another matter.

## **3. *What am I doing?***

For me, one of the most illuminating and thought-provoking studies on communities and society, has been that on Northern Ireland, carried out by Joseph Liechty (a Mennonite) and Cecelia Clegg (a Roman Catholic sister) and published as *Moving Beyond Sectarianism. Religion, Conflict ad*

*Reconciliation in Northern Ireland.*<sup>5</sup> In their study Liechty and Clegg approached the issue of sectarianism in a quite novel way. It should be said right away that they are not dealing with the *origins* of the conflict in its religious and political aspects, but rather how people were seeing themselves in that highly polarised scene during the “troubles” which, we hope, have come to an end. They looked at sectarianism not so much as the attitudes and actions of certain individuals or even certain groups, but as a systemic feature of the Northern Ireland society as a whole. In effect, whether people admitted to being “sectarian” or not, all people were to be located somewhere on the grid or map of sectarianism. The society could be pictured as a kind of pyramid. At the top of the pyramid were the most overtly violent groups and gangs who robbed and murdered at will, the “mad dogs” who were scarcely related to any political group but were usually identified as Protestant or Catholic. Beneath them were the organised paramilitary groups, like the provisional IRA and the Ulster Defence Force who carried out targeted acts of violence for clear political ends. Next layer down came the political and religious leaders on all sides, who generally disowned violence and publicly condemned it but nevertheless on occasion would deliver highly provocative and inflammatory statements or sermons. The broad base of the pyramid comprised the mass of people, the “ordinary, decent, citizens,” Protestant and Catholic, some of whom would be committed members of one political party or another, many not, and nearly all denying any connection with the violence, condemning it and indeed repelled by it, and often critical of the extremist politicians too.

What Liechty and Clegg demonstrated, however, is that all these layers of the pyramid are interconnected, directly or indirectly. Each feeds into the layer above it, and each of the upper three layers justified itself by appeal to the layer beneath. The “mad dogs” at the top would not deny that they’re actually purely out of self-interest, but were saying that if paramilitaries on the layer below are acting out of political self-interest they are entitled to operate for purely economic self-interest (and the troubles have indeed produced a kind

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<sup>5</sup> Dublin: Columba Press 2001.

of Mafioso society in some quarters). The paramilitaries were saying to the political and religious leaders on the level below, “Your words are fine, for a united Ireland or an Ireland free from Rome, but it’s us who are actually delivering. We are simply getting the results you call for while scared of getting your hands dirty.” The leaders say to the broad mass of citizens beneath them, “You say we are too outspoken and extremist in our language – but we are only articulating what you as good Protestants or Catholics deep down feel but daren’t express openly.” Citizens who may consciously and sincerely distance themselves from both extremist rhetoric and actual violence cannot therefore totally extricate themselves from the systemic sectarianism unless they are doing something much more positive to counter any exploitation of their passivity. Liechty and Clegg refer to the “false allure of benign apartheid” as a soft option to actual peacemaking and reconciliation: “simple coexistence of communities, as separate as ever, but living without violence.” Benign apartheid has obvious attractions. It allows one to continue in a detached but still real distaste for “the other side”. “Such people long for the violence to end, but they never cared much for the other community.” Religious communities, it is pointed out, can be very tempted to “benign apartheid”, which at a very basic level can take the apparently innocent form of merely “overlooking” or disregarding the presence of the other community or tradition (as when Catholics talk as if only they took the eucharist seriously, or when Protestants don’t take Catholic study of the Bible into account). In these benign, seemingly innocent ways, there may not be overt hostility but elements are created that can become building blocks in deeper separation and therefore eventually actual division and thus the ultimate possibility of conflict and violence. (From another context, for example, I recall a charming young Serbian Orthodox priest working in Belgrade with whom I became a good friend, who used to lament the undoubtedly terrible sufferings of many Serbs evicted from their homes in the fighting with Croatia and in Bosnia, but who responded with blank incomprehension whenever I spoke to him about Croatian homes I’d seen torched, and desolate Bosnian and Croatian refugees I had met. It wasn’t that he hated Croats and Bosnian Muslims. They just didn’t register on his consciousness as human beings like himself).

I think the implications of the Northern Ireland study can be extended to many other situations in our 21<sup>st</sup> century world. Barriers begin when people start being overlooked. The stones out of which barriers are built are those left lying around by indifference, a mental shutting out of the other.

#### **4. *What are you believing?***

I prefer to ask “What are you believing?” rather than “What do you believe?” In any given moment, how do you relate your view of the world to your faith in God? When you say “I believe in God”, or “I believe that God has shown his love for us in Christ”, how do you see people who are different from you? Or when you pray “Our Father . . . Give us our . . . Forgive us our . . .”, who are the “we” in your mind; whom do you actually *see* and *feel* alongside you? Put another way, what place is there for “the other” in your personal theology, the person of the other colour, the other nationality, the other faith, and how does that other person affect your faith? What is God saying to you through the other person, or are you always wanting God to tell you what to say to him or her or them? Are we using our particular formulation of belief to create a mental barrier in order to shut the other person out of our consciousness?

In 2001 there was a flare-up of intercommunal unrest and violence in the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia. The sizeable Albanian minority population, largely Muslim, was protesting against what it saw as discrimination against them. Churches and Mosques in turn were being attacked. In Geneva we in CEC and WCC invited a representative group of Macedonian religious leaders to a meeting for two days of dialogue. About 12 came – Orthodox, Roman Catholic, Albanian Muslim, Jews and a Methodist. As nearly always happens when such dialogues begin, there was at first from all sides a total disavowal of violence, a distancing of themselves by these leaders from any relationship with violence as inimical to their religion (I could write the script . . .). . Such violent acts as had happened in Macedonia had nothing to do with religion. Complete unanimity, it seemed. Then the discussion moved onto the recent scene and some people dared to ask if the violence had nothing to do with religion, what *did* it have to do with? Well, of course, it had to do with social and political factors and here the discussion

started to get more difficult. For the Muslims could not help starting to speak representatively as Albanians, and the Orthodox and Catholics representatively as the Macedonian majority, and the Jews and the Methodist as representing the tiniest minorities of all. And presently the dialogue got very fraught, with accusation and counter-accusation and denial about civil rights, discrimination, second-class citizenship and so on. The turning point, I believe, came when one of the group said, "We have got to try and put ourselves in one another's position."

For me, that was more than just a helpful statement – which it was, leading to a constructive outcome and an agreed statement on continuing dialogue and future relations. For me, it was the word of Christ spoken into that situation. The fact that it was spoken by one of the *Muslim* leaders does not affect this in the least. To ask what room you have in your theology for the other person is not to demand that you seek agreement in belief where there is none, or try and find some minimal point of common agreement: it is to regard the other as equally part of God's world as yourself, through whom the wisdom of God may be spoken, the wisdom that you recognise to be God's wisdom because of what you know of God in Jesus. The alternative is to reinforce the barrier of silence that believes God is to be heard only through your kith and kin, whether of race or belief or whatever.

## **Conclusion**

Let us in conclusion return to Silvester Horne's appeal of 100 years ago for what he called the fulfilment of the great Christian dream: "[N]o longer each for himself, but each for all . . . This is the law of Christ for us. No man liveth to himself. . . We belong to one another; we need one another." I believe we should still say Amen to that. It is simply that with the experience of the intervening century behind us and the challenges of the present all around us, it will be an Amen laden with the awesomeness of the task. If in our service this morning we had used the gospel reading for the day, we would have heard Jesus warning us "Which of you, intending to build a tower, does not first sit down and estimate the cost, to see whether he has enough to

complete it?” (Luke 14:28). Estimating the cost is no mere figure of speech, for this saying of Jesus is set in one of the passages where he speaks of following him as carrying the cross, of utter self-denial and giving up what we would love to cling to as our own. We have not only to ask who we are, where we are, what we are doing and believing but also what we are prepared to suffer – and all with the memory of how often churches and faith communities have themselves become complicit in erecting barriers rather than removing them. It will be an Amen knowing that it is not just a matter of designing a better world, an open-plan world in the abstract, but of real engagement with the complex and irrational and often cruel impulses of human being, not least in our own selves. So it will be an Amen that trembles knowing how costly is the work of removing barriers, for it was according to Paul “through the blood of his cross” that God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven (Col 1:20). There is also another aspect to it: so often even in our own times when walls have come down they have taken us by surprise. We have worked, struggled and prayed and then when stones did start to move, whether in Eastern Europe or South Africa or Northern Ireland we could scarcely believe it was happening. Knowing that it is truly also the work of the God who was in Christ, and always will be in Christ, reconciling the world to God's self, it will also be an Amen uttered in hope.