The Sixth Tom Memorial Lecture - 4th May 1982 **E Pluribus Unum - The limits of Tolerance**
by The Right Honourable Peter Archer, QC, MP.

I believe that this is the first lecture in this series by one who was not privileged to know Tom Corbishley. It is inevitable as years pass that a generation will arise which knew not Joseph. And that, no doubt, is one reason for seeking to remember him by an annual lecture.

But it is possible without having met him to know his personality. I have spoken with those who knew him. And I have read his own words. I cannot improve on the verse of Richard Crashaw, writing on the picture of Bishop Andrews before his Sermons:

"And now that grave aspect hath deigned to shrink

Into this less appearance; if you think

‘Tis but a dead face, art doth here bequeath,

Look on the following leaves and see him breathe".

And the only fitting theme for a lecture commemorating him is on the relations of Christians with their fellow men, in all their contexts.

Almost since human thought began, the best among us have believed that unity was somehow more real than diversity. In philosophy, Heraclitus insisted: "All things come out of the One, and the One out of all things". But the all things, he went on, have less reality than the One. Parmenides developed the theme. The unity of all things was not just what remained when the differences were pared away.

In science, the greatest minds have sought laws which reconcile and explain the Universe as a whole. In politics the clearest and most far seeing have looked towards the Brotherhood of Man. And in theology, understanding has progressed from polytheism to the concept of One Cod, with the corollary that we are all children of one Father.

Yet we live in a world where differences exist, including differences of belief. It is no use seeking to deal with them simply by declaring that people ought to agree. Democracy is about the existence of different views, and the right of electors to chose between them. But they do not always feel it a privilege. Frequently I am asked: "Why can’t they all agree on what is best?" And whatever the merits of sorting it out behind the backs of the electors, in smoke-filled rooms, it is pointless if people disagree, to declare that they ought to agree.

So the unity for which we hunger must allow for differences. If anything which can meaningfully be called the Brotherhood of Man must await agreement on a series of propositions about forms of worship, or economic policies, or methods of government, the prospects are bleak indeed. The "Unum" must be "e pluribus". These words were said to be the motto of the new Federation of American States, although the purists now doubt whether, historically, they ever adopted them. If they did, they derived them from the Confessions of St Augustine. (For those who wish to look them up, they are in the Fourth Book.) And they achieved Federation one year after even Tom Paine had declared that there were so many differences among them that Federation could never happen.

So the vital question is, how do we set about living with our differences, and where there is a practical necessity to decide between two opinions, can we agree on a procedure for deciding?

If I may offer a topical example, which may at least attract the attention of the secular press, it relates to how we may resolve international differences, before they become the occa8ion for war.

International machinery operated by politicians may be resisted because they themselves are suspected of having axes to grind. International law and order must ultimately depend upon all agreeing to accept arbitration by an impartial tribunal, like the International Court of Justice.

But if a legal system works, it is essentially because each sees the law as partly his own, operating for his benefit, knowing that his conformity will not be abused by others less law abiding, or at least not abused with impunity. In short, like money, the effectiveness of a legal system is in direct proportion to the confidence which people have in its effectiveness.

Our objective should be to ensure, through the United Nations, that decisions of the International Court of Justice will be supported by sanctions, applied by the whole international community.

They may fall far short of war. They may not at first be decisive sanctions; that may come later. But at least some sanctions should follow, and they should be taken without any further decisions of a political body, but simply by direction of the Court.

But that requires a second condition. It can operate only if the decision can be taken quickly. A decision taken four years after a crisis is of little use. What is needed is a procedure for reaching a final decision quickly. And I believe that this can be achieved. In the United Kingdom, judgements involving long and complicated arguments have sometimes been given with great speed, where there was sufficient urgency. But if a final judgement cannot be given quickly, there should be an effective procedure for holding the line, and preventing further damage, like the interim injunction of domestic law.

This would offer at least a chance of preserving world peace through international law without awaiting a perfect world. The perfect world may arrive too late.

Returning to our theological quest, the first question is where we are dominant, that is, in a position to decide on whether to be tolerant, what should be our attitude to those who differ from us? And there can be no absolute expectation of toleration where a belief leads to conduct which is harmful to others. It may be necessary to discourage it, where appropriate by sanctions. Hence our criminal law. Hence, too, the recognition of sanctions under the United Nations Charter. Indeed, the obligations of Christian love may compel us to protect the victims of oppression.

And the most tolerant would not argue that the question of what conduct is harmful can be left to a subjective assessment. Those who are in a position to decide on sanctions must apply their own judgement of what is harmful. If a Christian Scientist is persuaded that it is wrong to summon a doctor to a desperately sick child, we may have to assert our belief over his, and overrule him. Even in a religiously and culturally pluralistic community, the civil authorities must prohibit suttee, however sincerely some people may believe in it. And when we debate whether the Schechita method of slaughtering should be tolerated, the question must be whether it really does cause unnecessary suffering to animals. And the answer is, it depends on how it is done.

But there are no easy answers, because there are no easy questions. It is not always easy to decide where the right to demonstrate in support of an opinion becomes conduct which transcends the bounds of toleration. In the early days of Amnesty International, we argued whether the right to demonstrate included the right to stop traffic, or to block the route of fire engines, or the right to march through an area inhabited by a minority, to the terror of the residents, or the right to withhold income tax where it is used for a purpose against which the tax-payer has a conscientious objection.

Of course, it is easy to invent some imagined harm in order to persecute an innocuous eccentricity. And I believe that because they have tolerated minorities, Britain and the USA have benefited from successive waves of refugees, who have enriched their cultural lives, and contributed to their arts, their science, their government and their commerce.

But all this is but a small part of our enquiry. We are concerned with beliefs, where the beliefs do not lead to pernicious actions, and with how far the beliefs themselves are a barrier to our living together. So we can eliminate from our enquiry the persecution of characteristics which do not rest on belief, and cannot be changed, such as characteristics of race. It is worth noting in passing that there are forms of racial intolerance which include members of a particular race, provided that they do not behave as though they were. They are accepted if they merge into the majority. So the Soviet Union frequently offers statistics as to the number of Jewish citizens who are professors. But that is provided that they do not visit their synagogue, sing Hebrew songs, or ask to visit Israel. Tolerance for racial minorities means tolerating them while they are congregating in their mosques, wearing their means tolerating them while they are congregating in their mosques, wearing their saris, and playing steel bands (at reasonable times, of course).

But our field of enquiry is more difficult. Normally, civil authorities can ignore beliefs which do not lead specifically to action. But in dealing with religious faiths, beliefs are of the essence. Then what of those whose beliefs differ from ours, assuming that we are in the dominant position? It is easy to tolerate if we do not care. With the Flat Earth Society, we can afford to smile and ignore them, chiefly because it would not make much difference even if they transpired to be right.

In the eighteenth century, the Church of England was essentially a tolerant Church. It had seen the consequences of enthusiasm in the seventeenth century. It had seen how these had led to the overturning of its comfortable world. So they mistrusted enthusiasm, largely because it led to intolerance. They looked for a quiet life, and they found it by keeping as many as possible where they could see them, within the Church. Even the deist Middleton could retain his living without objection.

But it was at the cost of ignoring the Church’s mission. There was virtually no evangelism until Wesley shocked the Church out of its lethargy, and showed that the old bottles could not contain the new wine. This is the tolerance of Pilate, asking, "What is truth?", and allowing affairs to take their course because nothing was worth risking your neck for. This is the tolerance, which surveys the evil in the world, and turns away with a sceptical smile. That kind of tolerance is easy, but it is not for the Christian Church, which always recognised a mission to convert. Jesus authorised no such easy tolerance. "I am come," He said, "not to bring peace, but a sword". The way of mission is to set a man at variance against his father. While there is someone yet to be persuaded, the Christian Church cannot leave him alone. So the Church cannot have a sort of Bridlington agreement with other faiths. Poaching members is an essential part of its activity.

And this is true at the secular level. For those who care, peaceful international relations are not achieved by indifference to what is open to criticism in other regimes. There was a time when the way in which a government treated its own subjects was a domestic matter. Those who intervened would be interfering in a family quarrel. But events in the twentieth century have persuaded the world that we cannot silence our conscience by claiming that such matters are not our business.

Of course, we can approach our potential convert with tact, with understanding, with charity, and for preference, with humour. I will return later to methods of persuasion But the argument of the Encyclical Mortalium Animos, which in 1928 slammed the door on the search of the Catholic Church for common ground with other Churches, is not really different in content from warning notes which have some-times been sounded by the greatest ecumenicalists.

"Shall we commit the iniquity of suffering the truth, the truth revealed by Cod, to be made a subject of compromise?" asked the Encyclical.

But compare it with the words of that great ecumenicalist, Richard Baxter: "If I meddle with no Contraversie, I must meddle with no truth". And Canon Herklots, who wrote the SCM study book on Ecumenicalism which was in vogue when I was a student, commented on the words of Baxter:

"If St. Paul had not meddled in the controversy with which his Epistles to the Romans and the Galatians are filled, if for the sake of peace and quietness he had not resisted those who held that Gentile Christians must observe the full Jewish Law, the liberty of modern Christians would never have been won, and it is hard, humanly speaking, to see how Christianity could ever have become a world faith".

We are bound to be concerned with the beliefs of our neighbour where they have important consequences for him. If he believes falsely that his wife is unfaithful, he is likely in consequence to suffer unhappiness from which we should in compassion seek to save him. And the Christian can never be indifferent to the religious beliefs of his fellow humans. For ‘all of us, there is some sense in which our salvation rests on the content of our faith. So it ought to matter to us desperately what our fellow humans believe.

Then what becomes of tolerance? Nye Bevan was concerned with how to generate enthusiasm, like the enthusiasm of the Communist or Fascist rallies, for purposes which were not totalitarian, but which were hedged about with qualifications and conditions. He wrote of the difficulty of achieving "passion in action in the pursuit of qualified objectives". But here we have encountered the converse problem, how to achieve restraint in the pursuit of clear and vital objectives.

Tolerance is about the methods by which we seek to change the beliefs of others. There can be no objection to seeking to persuade them. It is by persuasion that human thought proceeds (though if we expect others to be open to persuasion, we must be open ourselves). So the distinction is clear. Persuasion is legitimate: persecution is not.

Before we proceed, let us pause to remark that if that seems self-evident to us, it was not always obvious to the Church. St. Augustine, after an initial hesitation, took literally the behest of Jesus: "Compel them to come in". He believed that, since their eternal life depended on their beliefs, and since he was speaking of people whom he was commanded to love, he was merely being cruel to be kind. Admittedly, he continued to recognise the problem. He believed that there were limits to persecution which were permissible, though to us they appear somewhat startling. He cited fining, exile, and scourging.

But most persecutors had recognised limits when they began. Once embarked on their path, the limits have been forgotten. The Inquisition was led into torture, lying and trickery. "The most ferocious methods were employed:" said Maycock, "in a spirit of genuine altruism".

So there are two objections to such methods. First, it is not beliefs which are changed by persecution, but only their external expression. When we were discussing interrogation techniques in Northern Ireland, I remember being told by someone who had been a military interrogator that his chief objection to them was that the confessions which they produced were unreliable confessions. But secondly, such methods lose sight of their own purpose. The techniques become ends in themselves. And they change the beliefs, not of the persecuted, but of the persecutors. "And for their jailers, and for their torturers," wrote Salvador de Madriaga, in his Litany for the Day of Human Rights, "a thought, the saddest of all. They are the most maimed".

But there is no need to spend further time on all this. In present company, indeed in virtually any Christian Church, I am pushing at an open door. Yet the distinction between persuasion and persecution is not the end of the problem, but often only the beginning. In between is a wide area of brainwashing. At one extreme are the techniques referred to by Koestler in "Darkness at Noon", and by Orwell in "1984". The evidence is that they are still used more widely than we realise. And what of the mental hospital? If someone’s beliefs are so eccentric that they can be labelled a delusion we license ourselves to eradicate them by mental treatment. If he believes that he is Napoleon, or that green men are dropping in for coffee, that may be justified. But unless there are clear safeguards, it is an easy way to dispose of an argument. In "The Country of the Blind", they believed that the cure for the insanity of the man who could see was by blinding him.

And if the edges of persecution are sometimes blurred, so are the edges of persuasion. So where they meet is doubly blurred. Persuasion can extend beyond a bald statement of facts and arguments. We are entitled to state a case attractively, entitled to use advocacy, and entitled to use visual aids. But at what point do methods of evangelism become brainwashing? What are the limits to emotional appeals for conversion? How far are we entitled to use a position of intellectual dominance, like that of a schoolteacher over a pupil, to teach what we believe to be the truth? How neutral should a television feature programme be? And is there a danger that methods which, when used by us, are dedicated evangelism, become dangerous forms of brainwashing when used by those with whom we do not agree?

"This pretending to extraordinary revelation and gifts of the Holy Ghost," said Bishop Butler, referring to John Wesley, "is a horrid thing, a very horrid thing". History has vindicated Wesley, and I am pleased that Parliament has never legislated against proselytising by the Church of Scientology, nor the Universal Church. Sir John Foster is his Report on Scientology in 1969, recommended forms of consumer protection for those whom the Scientologists purported to treat, but he did not think that we were justified in excluding aliens from entry to this country simply on the ground that they were Scientologists.

And that brings us to the most difficult area of all. We have been discussing how far we are entitled to persuade. But how far are we entitled to prevent others from persuading, that is to prevent opinions from being ventilated? I once believed that there could never be a justification for silencing the expression of an opinion. That was the whole philosophy of Amnesty. But I remember a meeting where I expounded that view, and a good friend, who had left Germany in 1933, remarked: "That is exactly what some people were saying in Germany before the Nazis". So were those who, like me, declined to silence the enemies of freedom of thought, the champions of freedom of thought, or its enemies? Of course, if the expression of an opinion becomes an incitement to action, we all recognise a right t to silence it. Soliciting or inciting someone to commit a crime is itself a criminal offence. But what if it is simply the expression of an opinion? In the past, even the most tolerant have usually had a sticking point. Milton, in his Areopagitica, drew the line at tolerating the spread of Catholicism. And Locke, in his "letter concerning Toleration" excluded Catholics and atheists.

If such limits are based on the hatefulness of the opinions, they are self-condemned. For the test of tolerance is when we meet opinions which we regard as hateful. We can all tolerate opinions with which we agree. We are all in favour of free speech for the Archbishop of Canterbury, and for Tom Corbishley.

"Toleration and liberty," wrote Bernard Shaw in 1909, "have no sense or use except as toleration of opinions that are considered damnable, and liberty to do what seems wrong. Setting Englishmen free to marry their deceased wife’s sister is not tolerated by the people who approve of it, but by the people who regard it as incestuous. Catholic emancipation and the admission of Jews to Parliament needed no toleration from Catholics and Jews; the toleration they needed was that of the people who regarded the one measure as the facilitation of idolatry, and the other as a condemnation of the crucifixion". So the limits of tolerance cannot be drawn in terms of our loathing of the opinions expressed.

But it is not difficult to find other criteria, less self-evidently illogical. Milton justifies his exclusion of Catholics from toleration by pointing out that they owed allegiance to a foreign prince. Locke justified it on the ground that they would themselves persecute if they were not persecuted. And the reason which he gave for excluding atheists is that they were not bound by oaths, which were the cement of all society.

The law against blasphemy in this country is now supported not on the ground that it spreads false doctrine, but that it gives offence, and is likely to provoke Christians to violence (a somewhat uncharitable view of Christians) But if the mischief is the giving of offence, it is not only Christians who are entitled to protection.

"If the law were really impartial,’’ wrote Stephen, ‘’and punished blasphemy only because it offends the feelings of believers, it ought also to punish such preaching as offends the feeling of unbelievers. All the more earnest and enthusiastic forms of religion are extremely offensive to those who do not believe them". A hellfire evangelist prophesying that those who drink are destined, and justly destined, to burn in hell, may cause some offence in the Crown and Cushion.

A criterion based on the giving of offence is a very subjective one. Reading recently of the nonconformists who interrupted the Archbishop of Canterbury in an Anglican Cathedral, in order to protest against his invitation to the Pope, I remarked to a 8aptist pastor, whom I know as a kindly and thoughtful man, that in reading their Bible, they appeared not to have reached the bit about charity. I objected to their conduct on two grounds, first, that the right to free expression cannot extend to the taking over of other people’s platforms, and secondly that it showed no regard for the feelings of those attending the service. I was surprised when he replied that the first failure to pay regard to people’s feelings came from the Archbishop. There were those who found the invitation to the Pope equally offensive. I recollect that I had at first taken an ambivalent attitude to the conduct of some friends who, in order to protest against the treatment of some Jews in the Soviet Union, had interrupted a performance of the Bolshoi Ballet, a proceeding which was no doubt offensive to those who had paid to watch.

So the criterion based on offence to people’s feelings will not be understood by those who do not share the feelings. Shaw, in his "Revolutionist’s Handbook", remarked "Do not do unto others as you would they would do unto you. Their tastes may not be the same". But it is precisely because their tastes may not be the same that we should apply the same standards of tolerance as we would expect to receive ourselves.

In some subsequent lecture, when time permits, I will embark on a discourse on the difficulties arising in the offence of incitement to racial hatred. But before leaving the question of tolerance, may I refer briefly to two other problems which arise.’ First, even if those holding an opinion should be entitled to ventilate it, how far are they entitled to be considered for positions which afford them special opportunities of ventilating it? Would we exclude a fascist from the post of Director General of the BBC, or Editor of The Times? Should a university be totally neutral as to the values which it discusses? Once, when a student, I asked Harold Laski whether the London School of Economics should have a chair of Theology. He replied yes, if an atheist would be eligible to hold it.

That was certainly the view of Sir Walter Moberly, whose book, "The Crisis in the University", created a stir in the academic world of my youth. He asked himself the question:

"No doubt even to mention ‘tests for teachers’ is to touch a raw nerve. But is it not sheer muddle-headedness to assume that, because such things as the maintenance of the Christian faith or of the tenets of the Conservative Party are outside the purpose of the university, it has no coherent purpose at all, or that because it is irrelevant and monstrous that a university teacher should be asked to subscribe to the Thirty Nine Articles or the Westminster Confession, he therefore must not be asked to adhere to anything? Is that not mere liberal sentimentalism? If it were valid, why are Nazi teachers being thrown out of German universities? Such questions are asked with a subdued impatience with which a teacher confronts adults." And he answered his own question: "Accordingly the only irreducible minimum is good faith, the intention to play the game according to the rules. The only irreducible minimum is good faith, the intention to play the game according to the rules. The only outlaw is the cheat, that is, the infiltrator who conceals his full view in order to gain admission, and comes in, not to argue his case and to convert others, if he can, by rational argument, but to ‘collar’ the machine, who in short is a wrecker... Any preacher who is not against sin would be out of place in the pulpit; any teacher who is not against intellectual dishonesty is out of place in the university. The reason for excluding Nazi teachers from the German universities at this moment, so far as it valid, is not to silence honest advocacy of any doctrine however offensive, but to prevent a dishonest manipulation of university machinery for the subversion of everything for which universities stand".

Speaking personally, I would accept that as a fair statement.

The other question which I would like to mention in passing is: how far does the concept of intolerance apply to excluding someone from a Church, or a party? Any group is entitled to define itself. And no one is entitled to insist that a group should re-define itself so as to guarantee him eligibility. A man is entitled to a drink, but not to insist that the Band of Hope should re-write its rules to admit him to membership. So the Christian Church has from time to time denied membership of the Church to heretics.

It was not always a kind or charitable thing to do. It was not always a sensible thing to make a meal of small differences. It was not always a wise thing, if the Church is to be as effective and as strong as possible.

The Church of England is the poorer because it could not contain Wesley, and it has cost a lot people a great deal of time trying to rectify the consequences. The Catholic Church might have undergone the Reformation without excluding the Protestant Churches if it had accommodated Luther. But only the group can decide who is entitled to be included.

I was recently partly instrumental in excluding from full membership from the Fabian Society those who had joined the SDP. I was called intolerant. But I am unrepentant. I do not see how the Fulham supporters can expect to choose the Chelsea team.

Indeed, it is sometimes more tolerant to recognise the right of a group to exist separately. The Clarendon Code was seen at the time as a step towards toleration, because it recognised the right of dissenters to a separate identity. They were no longer just recalcitrant Anglicans.

What I believe a group ought not to do is to claim to monopolise a name. The Church may deny to someone membership of the Church, but not the label "Christian". And there have been those outside the Labour Party who profess themselves Socialists.

May I offer a final observation on tolerance? You may say all this has a faintly unreal air. The Church was in a position to discuss how to deal with a diversity of opinions only when there was no diversity of opinions.

One hundred and fifty years ago, the Church was sure of itself, militant, brave. Where it was unchallenged, it did not even recognise its own intellectual assumptions. "We speak," said Moberly, "of the Whig interpretation of history. But we are only conscious of that because we have outgrown it. Macaulay did not think he was writing Whig history, but only history."

Within the last one hundred and fifty years, the Church has lost something of its confidence, its assurance, and its arrogance. It has been challenged by science, by biblical scholarship, by archaeology, by other faiths which can no longer be dismissed as held only by heathens, and by those who ask why it has acquiesced in political injustice. In the process, it has learned a healthy humility. It is learning a new tolerance, since it is a small step from being in a position to persecute to being persecuted.

Always, there are some who feel threatened, and who seek to fight a rearguard action. There is a disturbing similarity between Hypatia, in the fifth century, a good woman, desperately rallying the supporters of the old pagan morality to stem the rising tide of brash and militant Christianity, and Mary Whitehouse, calling on supporters of the old puritanical forms of Christianity to stem the rising tide of secularism. In a pluralistic society, intolerance is more difficult, and sometimes takes on an air of the ridiculous.

But for those of us reared in the old classical Christian culture, who are still in dominant positions (possibly the last generation to be so) questions still arise as to what practices we should tolerate, applying the criteria which we have already discussed. No one, as I have suggested, would advocate tolerating suttee. But to prohibit Sikh ‘bus conductors from wearing turbans, is just silly. And we have established that Moslems are entitled to their child brides.

I had thought at one stage of cannibalism as an example of a practice which could not be tolerated. But I recollect a story, which I had thought was found in Locke, although I have not been able to trace it. It relates to some travellers to a pacific island, who discovered that the natives had a custom, when their father died, of eating him. The travellers were shocked, and explained how such a degrading practice ought never to be tolerated. The islanders asked how the situation was dealt with in Europe. And when they were told that it was the custom to dig a hole in the ground, and bury him, they were so horrified that they declined to continue the conversation.

When I began to prepare this lecture, I had intended a study of tolerance to be the prolegomena for the main theme, which was to be the Ecumenical Movement, and its lessons for the quest towards the Brotherhood of Man. Now, with my time all but expired, I have just completed the Introduction. It is not the first prelude which outgrew the principal work. Perhaps one day, I shall be asked to deliver another lecture.

But tolerance is not only about the limits of persuading others. It is about our relations with those whom we have been unable either to persuade or to compel. Since none of us is sufficiently persuasive to overcome the mulish obstinacy of our fellows, we must assume that, for the foreseeable future, the world will contain many differing opinions. And I am not sure that I would look forward with much joy to a world which had eliminated them.

In the first intervention by a delegate from the infant greater need lies, to preserve the integrity of a particular faith, or to get on with the practical work of the whole Church. In other periods, when the Church dominated most discussions, the priorities may have been different.

In former, more leisurely days, the Church could contemplate the luxury of resolving all theological differences before embarking on concerted action. But now we have a world which no longer pays lip service to the Fatherhood of God. The Kingdom of Christ appears not only to be coming slowly, but sometimes actually to be receding away from us. There are injustices on which the Church should be speaking with a single voice. The Gospel of Peace is more muted now than it was thirty-five years ago. Individual souls are being swept away in a tide of materialism. And a whole generation of children is growing up without ever entering a church or being shown a Bible.

It is in this context that we have to decide where the greater need lies. "To everything there is a season," said the author of Ecclesiastes, "a time to cast away stones, and a time to gather stones together". And that popular devil of my youth, C.S. Lewis’ Uncle Screwtape, remarked even more succinctly, that the strategy of the Devil was "to have them all running around with fire extinguishers whenever there is a flood".

If we believe that the mission of the whole Church is the most pressing commitment, we can co-operate with all who accord it equal importance, not because we care less about the doctrines which distinguish our own churches, but because we care most about the mission which defines the Church.

It was the practical needs of the mission field which gave rise to the Ecumenical Movement. The Protestant Missionary Conference, in 1888, the Ecumenical Conference in New York in 1900, and above all, Edinburgh in 1910 were concerned primarily with obstacles to the work of the missions through a divided witness. There was a practical job to do, and the question was not on how many propositions they could agree, but how far they could work together. In the arrogance of the Victorian period, each church had sought not only to acquaint its converts with the Christian hope, but also with its view on trans-substantiation, the episcopacy, sabbatarianism, strong liquor, and the wearing of trousers. And it did not distinguish between those elements which were central to the Gospel, which were sectarian, and which were simply cultural.

The twentieth century is a time for humility. If I may quote one of the leaders of my own Church, in the 1930’s, Dr. Gutteridge had this to say to the primitive Methodist Church, contemplating the reunion of Methodism:

"Are the separations of Methodism so sacred that they must be permanent? Are our divisions so divine that they are eternal? Are our differences essential or incidental? Do we reach constituencies that are vitally separate, and do we declare our evangel with accents that cannot harmonise? These questions involve no disloyalty to the past."

If a non-theologian may offer respectful congratulations to the professionals, they seem to have appreciated that the purpose of theory is to explain people’s experience, and to point where to look for further experiences. So any meaningful theory should be about what is happening to men and women.

Perhaps the theology of ecumenicalism should look to what is happening already in the localities, the sharing of missions, the sharing of church buildings, the sharing of seats at the Lord’s Table.

In secular matters, too, affecting the international relations of mankind, the matters which unite us are more urgent than those which divide. Unless the message of Brandt is taken seriously, the living standards of all of us will suffer, and for millions, it will mean complete starvation. Unless we agree on an enforceable fishing convention, we will denude the oceans of fish at the very time when our technology should enable us to maximise our fish stocks. Unless we agree on waste disposal, we will pollute one another’s shores, and one another’s skies, and end by poisoning one another. And unless we agree on disarmament, an untimely flock of geese on a radar screen may lead to our all murdering one another.

If we are prepared to discuss these questions only with those who share our philosophical views, there may soon be no world in which to debate philosophy. Meanwhile, we can continue to disagree, and to try to convert one another. Sometimes, indeed, differences give rise to practical questions. We have had to consider from time to time whether aid should be withheld from countries with a particularly bad record in human rights. And we have secured a measure of agreement that it should be withheld for projects which themselves entail infringements of human rights, for example, where slave labour is used. But we cannot hang up the telephone because we do not like the views at the other end.

So much for pragmatic arguments. But for the Christian, it is not simply a question of how best to get things done. The Ecumenical Movement extends through another dimension. It began as a pragmatic exercise, to ensure co-operation. And frequently God speaks by presenting us with specific tasks. But it also represents a deep hunger to see one another as children of God, and members of a single family. The objections to rending the Seamless Robe are not only pragmatic ones.

When Paul reminded the Corinthians that it was not Paul or Cephas, or Apollos, who had redeemed the World, he was reminding them that however rich their individual insights, they were all insignificant within the great central truth. In the Common Declaration of the Pope and the Archbishop in 1977, they spoke of the aim to restore complete communion in faith and sacramental life. "Our call to this," they said, "is one with the sublime Christian vocation itself, which is a call to communion". Of course, goodwill is not enough. It has to be worked at. But to adopt an expression which is fashionable in politics, style may be as important as content.

Mark Boegner, at the end of his autobiography, "The Long Road to Unity", wrote:

"I speak of the ‘ecumenical movement’. The reader will have noticed how often I use those two words. I greatly prefer them to the word ‘ecumenism’. This latter suggests the idea of an intellectual system, of an ordered body of teaching, like Thomism or Calvinism. It contains no demand for a way of life. When, after ‘my birth into ecumenical life’, I felt my first thrill of excitement at contact with John Mott, Oldham, and others too, it was by a movement that I was swept up and carried along; and it is this same movement that does so today. In the end it will certainly triumph over our denominational pride and self centredness, because the love which produced it gives it its enduring vigour, carries within it the almighty power of Cod". When it does, it may bring with it intercultural and international understanding, and we may not be far from the Kingdom.

An essential part of Tom Corbishley’s contribution was not merely his skill in debate, nor even his capacity for finding common ground, but his ability to recognise all those he met as members of his family.