30 September 1996,

Mr Alwyn Thompson,

E.C.O.N.I.,

12 Wellington Place, BELFAST BT1 6GE.

I am sorry that you have had such a lot of trouble with me, but as you may be aware this summer has been even more busy than I had expected. I enclose an article on the subject, which is probably somewhat controversial in its tone, especially at this time, but I trust is still suitable for you. Do not hesitate to give me a call about it if you wish.

I am faxing it and also sending a fair copy by post.

I look forward to seeing the full publication.

Could I just say in passing how important I believe the work of ECONI has been in the last few years. In the present climate it is however **crucial.** Things are very dangerous and while prophecy is also not without its dangers, a community without vision and without prophecy is on its way to destruction.

PARTY LEADER

For God and Ulster

(Lord Alderdice)

I have always had an enormous problem with the slogan 'For God and Ulster'.

Ulster is home to me, and home is very precious. I travel a good deal these days, and I often remark that when I return to London, or indeed to Dublin, I am glad to be somewhere familiar, but until I return to Belfast, I am not 'home'. This beloved province is very much my home, and I have given a great deal of myself to working for its welfare.

Ulster is of course not just a place. Unfortunately it is also a term which has become redolent of the themes of traditional unionism and orangeism. These are political positions which I do not share. I find them exclusivist, and conservative. The use by republicans like Pearse of the symbols of the Passion to imbue Irish Nationalism with religious overtones is similarly unwelcome. The de Valera vision of a Gaelic Catholic Ireland holds no attraction for someone of my convictions. However it is not my lack of sympathy for the politics of orangeism and nationalism which is at the heart of my unease with the slogan 'For God and Ulster'.

The idea that God should be particularly associated with any political entity and its inhabitants, be it Israel, Britain, Ulster or wherever, is completely alien to my reading of the Gospel and my understanding of God. The belief that the omniscient, omnipresent God-of-all-being should be identified with one political entity and those who support it, seems to me laughable if it were not held with such seriousness. To be committed to defending Ulster is a perfectly laudable position, as long as it is conducted in a legitimate and Christian way. To be committed to God and His ways is however on an entirely different level. I object to the two commitments being spoken about in the same way. This is at the very least primitive, and at worst sacrilegious. I do not mean that politics and religious faith should not mix. My political views are shaped by my faith and my convictions. 1 believe in the dignity of every person. I am certain that we all have both a right and a responsibility to conduct our own lives by our principles. I am convinced that we must strive to ensure that our relationships with others are characterized by generousity of spirit. This is not just my political credo. These principles are a part of the expression of my faith in God as revealed in the life of Christ. One key element of that revelation was a problem for the Church of the time.

The proclamation by Christ that the Gospel was not the property of the Jews, and that He had come for Gentiles too, for men and women, clean and unclean, bond and free, was heresy to those who stood 'For God and Israel', but was the essence of the Gospel of the New Testament. Those who shout 'For God and Ulster' are trying to tie God to one polity, and to bind the Gospel in the chains from which Christ loosed the Church when it transcended Judaism. The most appalling feature of the 'For God and Ulster' mentality however is demonstrated when apparently committed Christians line up with individuals and organizations which are corrupt and menacing in the

extreme. God does not need any of us to defend him, but the behaviour of some of those who claim to be defending Ulster not only fails to promote the cause of Christ, it is actually incompatible with the Christian way. Indeed it so defiles the cause of Christ, that it is an attack on God. Christ, it should be remembered, was not a Zealot. Instead He calls all of us, as He did Simon, to leave the Zealots, and be His disciples in all the world.

*John Alderdice, grew up in Wellington Street Manse in Ballymena. A leader in church youth work, he represented the Presbyterian Church at many national and international committees and conferences. After studies in medicine and psychiatry he was appointed Ireland's first Consultant Psychotherapist. He is also an Honorary Lecturer at Queens University and since 1993 Medical Director of South and East Belfast Health and Social Services Trust. Since 1987, best known publicly as Leader of the Alliance Party, he is a Belfast City Councillor, a Vice-President of Liberal International, Treasurer of the European Liberals, and in October 1996 was raised to the peerage as Lord Alderdice of Knock. He is an Elder in Knock Presbyterian Church in Belfast.*