

*Another response to the AFSC working paper on "borders" is presented by Gerda Bikales, former Executive Director of U.S. English.*

# **BORDERS, WORLD GOVERNMENT, AND THE KINGDOM OF GOD**

By Gerda Bikales

At millennium's end, our world is caught up in two very contradictory ideological revolutions that manifest themselves simultaneously. We are, at one and the same time, living in an ever-widening global village in which injured citizens of Baghdad visit us nightly in our living rooms to reproach us for their war-inflicted suffering, on the same screen that shows us the disintegration of the established nations at the hands of resurgent nationalism.

In the confusion of a world that seems to be growing smaller while yet dividing itself ever more finely and emphatically by nationality, it is good to find the American Friends Service Committee willing to do some systematic thinking about the significance of borders, those political demarcations that mark the confines of the modern nation-state. It should surprise no one that the group ends up equivocating on whether borders serve people well or ill, settling the question after a fashion by deciding that they do little of either. To the extent that borders restrict movement and opportunities and thus impede our further development as a global village, they are deemed to be a negative societal influence. To the extent that borders allow for national self-expression and more manageable administration, they are a net gain.

So far, so good. Yet the Quaker working group on border issues is not content to leave matters quite so inconclusive. It does have some policies to propose, policies which would lead us, as Americans, into far deeper and troubled political waters. These proposals, if taken seriously by the nation-state that is the prime destination of people everywhere seeking a better life, imply a new set of refugee, immigration and assimilation policies. They urge priority admissions for those not only fleeing duress (already a cornerstone of our refugee policy) but also "natural disaster," which is not now a consideration for refugee admissions but could be used to pressure for admission of virtually whole nations: Haiti, for example, suffering tragically from the effects of near-total soil erosion. They urge equal protection for non-citizens with citizens, already a fact in American life thanks to numerous court decisions, but a questionable policy nevertheless in view of the exploding sense of self-conscious ethnic separateness that is gripping Americans, perhaps no less than Yugoslavians. For if citizenship doesn't bind us in special ways through special privileges, what

does?

Finally, the recommendations urge the right to the preservation of the languages and cultures of those who enter our borders. It is impossible to let this well-intentioned admonition go by without asking the Quaker border panel for clarification: at whose expense, and at whose instigation, are these languages to be preserved? If the answer is: "Allow those who are interested the right to establish and maintain institutions for the preservation of immigrant cultures and languages," our response, in keeping with our historic commitment to cultural pluralism, is an enthusiastic "yes". But if the answer implies that America must build greenhouses in which these languages and cultures can be made to artificially flourish through an infusion of public funds, the answer must be decisively "no!"--we do not care to pay for the building of a modern Tower of Babel bound to come crashing down upon us all.

The power of a language shared across borders was dramatically illustrated a year ago in the collapse of one of the world's strongest borders--the Berlin Wall. And in the wake of that collapse we see the power of a common language hard at work in drawing up new borders for a newly united Germany. The happy outcome of that occasion should not blind us to the dangers of language divisions within a sovereign nation nor to the force of language unity across national boundaries.

The Quaker document leaves us with a vision of a better world in the indeterminate future, a terrestrial Kingdom of God in which people no longer need to migrate to improve the conditions of their lives, thus diminishing the importance of borders.

The road to such a better and more peaceful world has been similarly envisioned by the World Federalists. They advocate the establishment of a federal world government. What would happen to borders in such a system? It isn't clear, but supposedly they would cease to be the focus of violence, as conflicts would be resolved by mediation at the supra-national level.

It is easy to be cynical and characterize this plan as naive and removed from the realities of the tangible world, especially in the midst of the Iraq/Kuwait border war sanctioned by the United Nations as just and inevitable. Yet, in a more limited sense, the drafters of the World Federalist Association's much revised "Statement of Goals and Beliefs" are on surer ground now than they had been in the halcyon days of their influence in the immediate post-World War period. New problems require new solutions and new

hand, but a reinvigorated United Nations, and regional supra-national entities such as the Pan-American Union, hold out renewed promise as useful elements in the ever-evolving social contracts between organized societies.

instrumentalities to carry them out. Degrading environmental processes respect no borders, nor do international drug traffickers and terrorist networks.

Not only do problems cross borders more easily than of old, but so do opportunities, especially economic ones. Thus, the voluntary suspension of some aspects of sovereignty in return for mutual cooperation is a most realistic scenario that we are watching unfold in the creation of the European Economic Community and in the ongoing negotiations for a North American free trade area. The Kingdom of God may not be at