

## CAN A CHRISTIAN BE A NATIONALIST?

Texts: Jeremiah 29.1-9; Philippians 3.1-20

Hymns: Jerusalem; O God of Earth and Altar

Twenty-nine years ago I was told by a senior Anglican clergyman that the nation-state was *passé*. He sounded so sure of himself that I was impressed, and, being impressionable, I assumed that he must know what he was talking about. I can't remember why he was so sure; but I do remember that his conviction was a fashionable one. Quite why it was fashionable is not clear to me now. The mid-1980s were too early for globalisation's transfer of power from national governments to free global markets and transnational corporations to have become evident. Perhaps it was the recent entry of an economically ailing and politically strife-torn Britain into the arms of the European Economic Community that made the nation-state's days look so numbered. And, of course, the Cold War, which would not thaw until 1989, made international blocs look like a monolithic fact of global political life.

But twenty-nine years is a long time; and 1985 is a now whole world away. The sudden break-up of Soviet-Union unshackled long-repressed nationalisms and gave birth to a host of new nation-states in the 1990s. Up until the latest financial crisis, the closer integration of the European Union together with the economic boom gave intra-national nationalisms a new lease of life, appearing to confirm the viability of small nation-states under a supra-national umbrella—after all, if Ireland and Iceland, then why not Scotland and Catalonia? And then the world-stage has seen new and powerful national players moving from the wings to the centre: China and India are full of a sense of growing into their own national destinies, and are in no mood either to dissolve into, or to defer to, some larger body.

Here in Britain the thirteen year reign of New Labour from 1997-2010 was marked by intermittent and uncertain tinkering with national identity. First, there was the rebranding exercise known as 'Cool Britannia'. Then there was the 1999 Millennium Lecture in 10 Downing Street where the historian, Linda Colley, explained to Tony Blair and his colleagues the artificiality of 'Britishness', first crafted in Protestant reaction to Catholic threats, and subsequently developed into proud imperial identity—artificial and now, sans Popish plot and empire, obsolete. After the *jihadist* terrorist attacks of 9/11 and 7/7, the deficiency of a *laissez-faire* multiculturalism became apparent to many, as did the correlative need to strengthen new immigrants' identification with their adopted country. Then last year Scotland held its referendum on whether or not to become independent of the United Kingdom, and only narrowly voted to stay in; and the United Kingdom itself is intent on refusing further integration into the European Union, probably to backtrack, if not to withdraw altogether.

Whether or not they were ever on the way out, therefore, it is clear that nations, nationalisms and nation-states are now back, and that they look set to stay for the foreseeable future. So now is an opportune time to consider what a Christian should make of these phenomena. Since time is short, this evening I'll focus on nationalism.

First of all, what is nationalism? Well, it can be several things, but to start off with, let's just say that it's an attitude of affection or loyalty towards a particular nation. Let's assume that it's the same thing as patriotism.

What does Christianity have to say about this? Can we be Christian and nationalist at the same time? On the one hand, it's quite clear that a Christian's affection and loyalty have to go *beyond* the nation. They have to transcend it. Primarily, they have to attach themselves to God and to His coming kingdom or rule. This we heard in our reading this evening from the New Testament, where St Paul first identifies himself strongly with the Jewish nation—"a Hebrew of the Hebrews"—but then firmly subordinates his Jewish identity to his loyalty to

God in Christ: “But whatever were gains to me I now consider loss for the sake of Christ. What is more, I consider everything a loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whose sake I have lost all things. I consider them rubbish, that I may gain Christ” (vv. 7-9). “[O]ur citizenship”, he tells the Christians at Philippi, “is in heaven” (v.20).

Taken at face value, it would seem that Paul is saying that Christian identity must obliterate and completely replace national identity. But Paul is speaking hyperbolically here; he’s exaggerating. In fact, he never entirely repudiated his Jewish identity, but rather sought to understand how his new-found loyalty to God in Christ could actually fulfil his national loyalty.

Notwithstanding that, it is clear that a Christian’s national loyalty must be relative, and governed by his superior loyalty to the coming kingdom of God. He may not divinise the nation. So he may not be a Romantic nationalist. Romantic nationalism, which emerged in Europe in the late 1700s and early 1800s, effectively substitutes the nation for God; and seeks immortality, not in the Next Life, but in the nation’s future. Here’s a classic expression of Romantic nationalism by the early 19<sup>th</sup> century German philosopher, Johann Gottlieb Fichte:

The noble-minded man’s belief in the eternal continuance of his influence even on this earth is ... founded on the hope of the eternal continuance of the people from which he has developed .... In order to save his nation he must be ready even to die that it may live, and that he may live in it the only life for which he has ever wished.<sup>1</sup>

Against such idolatrous nationalism, Christians must refuse the claim that nations have an eternal destiny, and that their survival is an absolute imperative. Nations are in fact contingent, evolving, and transitory phenomena. They come and they go. The United Kingdom did not exist before 1707. The United States could have ceased to exist in the early 1860s. Czechoslovakia did cease to exist in 1993.

So a Christian nationalist cannot be a Romantic nationalist, idolatrously attributing an absolute value to any nation. That’s part of the truth.

But there is another part. This is alluded to by St Paul’s continuing identification with the Jewish people. And it’s made explicit in our first reading from the Old Testament. There we heard the prophet Jeremiah addressing the Jews, who had been carried off into exile in Babylonia, after the sacking of Jerusalem in the year 586BC. Listen again to what he says:

This is what the LORD Almighty, the God of Israel, says to all those I carried into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon: “Build houses and settle down; plant gardens and eat what they produce. Marry and have sons and daughters; find wives for your sons and give your daughters in marriage, so that they too may have sons and daughters. Increase in number there; do not decrease. Also, *seek the welfare of the city to which I have carried you into exile*. Pray to the LORD for it, because if it prospers, you too will prosper (vv. 4-7).

Though they are citizens of another country, though they are currently exiles in Babylon, the people of God should nevertheless “seek the welfare of the city”.

Why is this? The answer lies in our nature as human beings. We are finite, not infinite. We come into being and grow up in a particular time, and if not in one particular place and community, then in a finite number of them. We are normally inducted into particular forms of social life by our family and by other institutions—schools, churches, clubs, workplaces, political parties, public assemblies, laws. These institutions and their customs mediate and embody a certain grasp of the several universal forms of human flourishing—that is to say, basic human goods—that are given in and with the created nature of human being.

[REPEAT]. It is *natural*, therefore, that we should feel special affection for, loyalty toward, and gratitude to those communities, customs, and institutions that have benefited us by inducting us into human goods; and, since beneficiaries ought to be grateful to benefactors, it

is *right* that we should.

Of course, institutions at a national level are not the *only* ones that enable us to flourish as human beings, but they do remain among them; and they are still the most important. This is true, notwithstanding the easy illusion of global identity that today's social media create. While international institutions such as the United Nations have developed since the Second World War, they haven't replaced nation-states and don't seem likely to do so any time soon. Indeed, the UN only has as much power as nation-states choose to give it. So the nation-state is here to stay for the foreseeable future, and it continues to have great power to shape the lives of individual human beings. Insofar as it has shaped our lives for the better, we owe it our gratitude and loyalty; insofar as it has mis-shaped our lives (or other people's) for the worse, we owe it our commitment to reform. Either way, we owe it our attention and our care.

So, in sum, what's the answer to the question, Can a Christian be a nationalist? The answer is this: a Christian cannot be a nationalist who worships the nation; but a Christian should be a nationalist who, while worshipping God, cares for the nation—and seeks its welfare.

*Nigel Biggar*  
*Jesus College, Oxford*  
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<sup>1</sup> J.G. Fichte, *Addresses to the German Nation* (Chicago: Open Court Press, 1922), pp. 135-36.