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The Christian Approach to Expressions of National Consciousness

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'The nation is a historically established stable community of people which is created in the process of the formation by that community of their territories, economic links, literary language and especially culture and spiritual outlook.' This is how S.I. Ozhegov defines 'nation' in his Dictionary.

The process of the formation of nations started in ancient times. Before the Flood there were no national divisions. In Genesis chapter 11 we read: 'And the whole earth was of one language, and of one speech'. The descendants of Noah, Shem, Ham and Japheth became forefathers of new generations and gave birth to tribes. In Genesis chapter 10 we find a description of the beginning of the formation of nations: 'By these were the isles of the Gentiles divided in their lands; everyone after his tongue, after his families, in their nations.'

The Christian understanding of nations is that they are part of a whole, part of the common trunk of humanity. God 'has made of one blood all nations of men for to dwell on all the face of the earth, and has determined the times before appointed, and the bounds of their habitation' (Acts 17:26) All genealogies derive from Adam and Eve. People of all nations are members of one family.

God appointed a time and place for every nation. In all the variety of nations, then, we see God at work. We should note, however, that the division of humanity has its origin in a sinful attempt to build a tower reaching heaven. Humanity continues to move ever further away from its Creator. The world, which was once renewed through the waters of the Flood, is again inclined to sinfulness. The multifold development of humanity is taking place in a sinful atmosphere, and this leads to hatred, strife and the loss of spiritual unity. Humanity has started to venerate the creation instead of the Creator and the resultant pride has inspired men to rise up against each other.

It was from the midst of a pagan people venerating other gods that God chose Abraham in order to make him father of a new people, the People of God through whom all earthly tribes were to be blessed. The people of Israel were chosen not because they were better or more numerous than others, but in order that God's glory should be revealed in them. God's choice of one people from amongst all other peoples was not directed against those others but in order that they might achieve blessing. God wants to bring the nations back into stable unity with Himself. The people of Israel proved unable to achieve this mission, however. They often embraced idolatry and were unfaithful to their Lord. They rejected the Kingdom of God and asked

Samuel to give them a king like the kings of other peoples. Their religious affiliation became external, deprived of inner content. 'This people honours me with their lips,' said Jesus, 'but their heart is far from me' (Matthew 15:8).

Israel accepted God's choice as confirmation of its own superiority above other peoples and not as meaning that Israel should be an example for other peoples, a blessing for the Gentiles. In the eyes of the Jew other peoples were impure and therefore untouchable. Pride and self-exaltation rather than humility became the characteristic of the Israeli people. Their communication with the Gentiles did not consist in revealing God's glory and majesty to them, but in performing sinful actions.

All too often Israel forgot its predestination as a witnessing and missionary people. The coming of Jesus Christ opened a new era and inaugurated a new relationship between God and man and amongst men. The ministry of Christ destroyed the walls separating nation from nation. As St Paul writes,

For he is our peace who has made both one and has broken down the middle wall of partition between us, having abolished in his flesh the enmity, even the law of commandments contained in ordinances; for to make in himself of twain one new man, so making peace; and that he might reconcile both unto God in one body by the cross, having slain the enmity thereby; and came and preached peace to you which were afar off and to them that were nigh. (Ephesians 2:14–17)

At the beginning of his ministry, faithful to the commandment with Israel, Christ went only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel. When sending the Twelve out to preach he instructed them: 'Go not into the way of the Gentiles' (Matthew 10:5). In Christ there was no contradiction between particularity and universality, however. He acted according to the changing situation. At first he looked for the conversion of Israel to make it the messenger of the Kingdom for all nations. The Jews were in opposition to his intentions. The risen Christ therefore gave the Apostles, and through them the whole Church, a universal mission to 'preach the Gospel to every creature' (Mark 16:15), to 'teach all nations' (Matthew 28:19) and to be his witnesses to the ends of the earth (Acts 18). This was a difficult task for the Apostles, however, in view of the nature of the relationship between Israel and the Gentiles. God prepared Peter to enter the house of the Gentile Cornelius and to say there the words necessary for his salvation. It was revealed to St Peter that the Gentiles were not impure. 'God is no respecter of persons; but in every nation he that fears him, and works righteousness, is accepted with him' (Acts 10:34–35).

From the time of the coming of Christ, then, there has been no missionary nation, but a new nation, a Church which consists of 'all nations, and kindreds, and people, and tongues ...' (Revelation 7:9). There are no grounds for claiming that a certain nation has a mission for other nations. The Church has this mission; but the Church does not consist of one nation or of those who belong to one Christian confession.

We lived in a period of national turbulence. Today's conflicts have their roots in recent decades, when whole nations were deprived of their homelands, their national culture and their language. The individual features of each nation and each human being were erased in the name of communist internationalism. The establishment of the dictatorship of the working class was to bring with it the disappearance of the bourgeois nations, and their replacement by socialist nations of a completely new type developed in the USSR. Over the years people were taught to hate their class enemies, who were to be found within one nation and one state. Someone born in a family of a certain class was automatically the enemy of the state, and experienced

all the power of the dictatorship of the proletariat. Ministers of religion and many of the ordinary faithful were in the position of class enemies. The spiritual identity of the old type of nation was not appropriate for the new type. A member of a socialist nation had to be an atheist. The destruction of the nation began with spiritual degradation.

Atheism deprives the nation of its spiritual foundation, and people become vulnerable to the sowing of tares. These are now bearing their evil fruits. A whole country struggles against God, and its churches are destroyed not by foreign barbarians, but by the citizens of that country themselves. We see how many innocent people were killed in the so-called 'class struggle'. Many individuals have repented of their sin before God, but so far there has been no communal act of repentance. The leaders of our countries and the ministers of our churches must appeal for a general repentance, calling on the people to pray to God for pardon for their crimes against God and their nation. This will be a contribution to the elimination of the human hatred.

In order to be a peacemaker one must purify one's own heart. Christ teaches us that 'out of the heart proceed evil thoughts, murders, adulteries, fornications, thefts, false witness, blasphemies' (Matthew 15:19). The people of Israel rejected their Lord and declared to Pilate that they did not want Christ to rule them. They sent him to be crucified. For the past 2000 years they have been experiencing the consequences. They will receive their blessing only when they look again at the one whom they humiliated, when they mourn for him as a man mourns for his only son, and when they are in bitterness for him as one that is in bitterness for his firstborn (see Zechariah 12:10). Are not all our nations today in the same situation?

The Christian faith ensures the dignity of nations in that it lays stress on love of one's neighbour. Christianity appeals to the brotherhood of nations and to the brotherhood of individual people. Christianity does not sow hostility between classes, between the poor and the rich, between those who hold different opinions. In the world today there is a desire to find those guilty for what happened in the past and to punish them. Christ our teacher appeals to us to love our enemies and not to reward evil with evil and curses with curses. We are not to be defeated by evil, but to defeat evil by good.

In the fight for national independence features of nationalism appear which are in contradiction with Christian teaching. While extolling our nation we humiliate others. Each nation has its place on earth, however, and rights which are given by God. The church as a part of its nation cannot avoid responsibility for what happened in the past and what is happening today. God determined that the church should be the light of the world and the salt of the earth. The church protects the world from spiritual degradation. Are we always what we should be? The church has survived the storms of recent decades and many now look to it with hope. But the church itself needs renewal. Man needs not religiosity but a living faith capable of changing his life. A member of the church is a bearer of the light of Christ wherever he is. Ministers of Christ should remember the commandment of the Risen Lord: 'Go therefore and teach all nations' (Matthew 28:19). Christ reproached people when he said: 'You do err not knowing the Scriptures, nor the power of God' (Matthew 22:29). Christians should have good relations among themselves in order to be an example to the world around them. Jesus said: 'By this shall all men know that you are my disciples, if you have love one to another' (John 13:35).

There are politicians who want to make a use of the church in interethnic disputes. Unfortunately church representatives are to be seen at rallies and meetings where nationalism is openly propagated. The voice of the church on national issues should

be heard in the mass media so that everyone has a chance to learn what the church really teaches; and this should not only happen when the conflict has started and people are being killed, but should be a permanent process of educating the nation in the spirit of Christian love.

Oh, Lord, pardon our sins and help us to carry out your commandments in order to become peacemakers among our peoples.