

## Christianity and Nationalism.

**NATIONALISM** the Little Oxford Dictionary defines as patriotic feeling or efforts on behalf of one's country, and in that broader sense, there is nothing new about the phenomenon of nationalism. There can hardly have been a time in recorded history when man has not taken a special pride in his own particular tribe or territory and exerted himself on its behalf.

Perhaps the most moving book inspired by the spirit of nationalism is the Old Testament, with its record of a small and intensely self-conscious nation surrounded by hostile tribes and aggressive empires. Sometimes the nationalist spirit in Israel inspired men to deeds of the most sublime courage and words of the utmost beauty; Sometimes it dragged them down to the basest cruelty and selfishness. But there are just two things which it is important to remember in connection with the nationalism of Israel. Although at the outset God was envisaged as the particular Deity of the tribe and although men frequently reverted to that belief even during later stages of the nation's development, never once do we find the nation identified with God in such a way that the nation or state is itself regarded as God, with the power of life and death over its members. The idea that the nation was itself divine was a refinement of the nationalist spirit which was to come much later in the history of mankind. Secondly, because Israel's discovery of God was a progressive one, certain Jews came gradually to see that their love of their country and their allegiance to their country's God did not necessarily exclude other nations from coming to know the same God. The discovery of the universal sovereignty of God was a momentous event in the religious life of the Jew which set up a tension which the nation as a whole was never able to resolve. The majority clung to the earlier conception of God as their own peculiar Deity known only to His chosen people, and dismissed the rest of mankind as pagans to whom they had no peculiar responsibility. In spite of the pleadings of the Prophets that Israel had been chosen for responsibility and not privilege, to preach to the Gentiles that they too might come to know God, the nation slipped back into its rigid self-centredness, concentrating upon the fulfilment of a legal code in which its conception of religious and patriotic duty had become fossilised. Hence on the one hand, the pathos of the story of Jonah and his reluctance to preach to the people of

Nineveh, and on the other, the tragedy of the rejection of Jesus by His own people. This is the outcome of nationalism gone astray.

The individual identity of smaller nations like Israel was intensified by the threat to their autonomy of successive empires pressing upon them. Assyria, Babylon, Persia, Greece, all constituted a danger to the liberty of smaller states. Especially was this so of Rome which, more than the others, sought not only to subdue new territories but to convert their subjects into Roman citizens, with a consequent ironing out of national differences. When these could contribute something of value to the common pool of resources, they were assimilated; otherwise they were suppressed. And so during the centuries preceding the birth of Christ and during His lifetime, there was one vast civilisation, outwardly unified to an extent previously unknown. True, there continued subterranean currents of nationalist pride and individualism ready to erupt into the seething hatred of revolt, as in the Gaul of Vercingetorix or the Judea of the Zealots. But in contrast to the pride of separate kingdoms and principalities was set the ideal of the single, universal sovereign state which, during the later years of its dominion began, as a result of the breakdown of traditional religion and the failure of the philosophers to influence the lives of the masses, to make claims of divinity for its rulers, thus anticipating the modern expression of nationalism in which State and God are identified, and the head of the State subsequently raised to the godhead.

In spite of its obvious limitations, the Roman Empire was perhaps the first large-scale experiment in international government in human history. The framework provided by the *Pax Romana* was to become the body into which was infused the spirit of early Christianity. From the fusion of the Roman Empire and the Church officially recognised by the State, as it was from the time of Constantine, came the Catholic Church which during the Middle Ages created the second large-scale example of internationalism. Although its authority was only gradually accepted by the various local and national Churches which had been working in Ireland, Britain, France and other parts of Europe, by the Twelfth Century the Roman hierarchy had imposed its pattern, not only upon the religious practices of individual countries but upon the whole course of national life. By their common allegiance to a single super-national ideal and the synthesis of the spiritual and the material in a religion which emphasised the sacramental nature of the whole of life, men were able to rise above differences of nationality, and, ideally, of class.

But the mediaeval synthesis did not last. The hardening of what had been a living organism into a mere organisation pro-

voked the inevitable reaction, resulting in the breakdown of Catholic universality, and the assertion of national and religious independence. For the former ideal of corporate cohesion and solidarity was substituted the new concern with the individual conscience. But the Protestant spirit was not confined to issues of religious principle. It influenced too, the outlook of the nations who before had been bound together within the unity of Catholic Christendom. No longer was each nation answerable to a supernational authority vested in the Pope at Rome; each was responsible for its own destiny. Its members no longer owned a twofold allegiance inspired by St. Augustine's vision of the two cities—the City of Earth in which the natural man dwells and is answerable to the temporal ruler, and the City of God, of which the Christian is by grace a member and of which the Pope is God's representative in the world. They had only one head, the King or Emperor, whose conduct was influenced to a large extent by Machiavelli's *The Prince*. To him the individual state was supreme in its own right, the sole judge of its own ethics, and endowed with complete and final control over the actions of its members.

Thrilled by its new-found liberty and inflated by the sense of its own high destiny, each state now sought to become more powerful than its neighbours. Thus began the modern conception of nationalism which may be called "Militant" nationalism, the pride of Elizabethan England pitted against the might of Spain, the growing naval prestige of Holland, the grandeur of the French monarchy, its imperialist aspirations taking precedence over its allegiance to the Catholic faith. The new self-consciousness of the nation as the unit brought with it a new interest in the national history, a pride in the exploits both of the heroes of old and of the men of their own day who were themselves making history by their courage and love of adventure. The revival of learning and the rediscovery of the literary treasures of the past not only gave men a fresh interest in earlier civilisations, but inspired them to seek to emulate their example in creating for their own times and peoples works of a comparable character. But the pride of national art and literature grew out of the military successes, the expansion of trade, the geographical discoveries of the age, not *vice versa*.

To an age of expansion there succeeded, however, an era of concentration; with the organising of the new scientific resources to which the discoveries and inventions of the previous epoch had introduced men, a more uniform culture began to evolve in the different countries of Europe. The art and literature of the Renaissance had expressed what was peculiar to the life and history of each nation; now the scientist was beginning to ex-

pound laws that were universally valid. Men of learning were being drawn together intellectually, if in no other way, into an international confederation of the sciences and cognate studies. From this issued the Enlightenment, similar in its effects upon the different European countries. In art and literature, the spontaneity of local inspiration yielded to obedience to a code of rigid laws borrowed from antiquity. But with pseudo-classicism, as with Catholicism, the hardening system was the prelude to revolt. Upon a Europe marked by that uniformity of convention which comes from an outward subscription to a common canon burst the strange and wild excesses of the Romantic spirit, exalting the distinctions and idiosyncracies of nations and individuals alike even more than the Renaissance had done. Whereas at the time of the Renaissance, action inspired art, what was done stimulated what was thought and felt and said, at the time of the Romantic Revolt, what was thought and felt and said inspired what was done. The imperialism of a Napoleon had its roots in the dreams of a Rousseau. Indeed the whole movement drew its sustenance from two sources, the Celtic and the Gothic.

The Celtic countries were even then the homes of lost causes, nations which had themselves been conquered by stronger neighbours and had to hand on to mankind only the splendour of their broken hopes and dreams. The very paradox of Celtic sensibility was its sense of triumph in defeat, of pride in despair. Their warriors "went forth to war," said Ossian, "*but they always fell.*" From brooding upon the past with its legends and ancient traditions came the melancholy and introspective emotion of Celtic art, especially of its music and poetry, and the fervour of its religious genius. To people acutely aware that their inheritance was not of this world, it was a natural transference to look for an abiding city in another world, and to hold in derision the merely transient glories of earth. Such an absorption in a future world was hardly likely to fit a man for the practical affairs of the present, hence the apparent justice of Arnold's description of the Celt as ineffectual, "always ready to react against the despotism of fact," defiant of the material conditions of life. As long as the Celt dwelt apart in his remote Highlands, the mountains of Wales or Ireland, the *landes* of Brittany, it was possible for him to nurse his memories in splendid isolation, but with improved systems of transport and communication and the spread of industry, he found himself in danger of becoming involved in the economic machinery of the stronger power which had conquered his country. His language and his way of life, even his religious observances, were threatened. It was no longer possible to react against the despotism of fact. He had to fight

facts with facts. Hence the changing face of Celtic nationalism from what may be called "Mystical Nationalism" to a mood approximating to what we have termed "Militant Nationalism." In Ireland, this mood of Militant nationalism was carried to its logical conclusion in the demand for self-government and the readiness to use those methods of force which were employed by the great sovereign states in the past to establish their own supremacy. The main difference was that Ireland was using them not to gain an empire, but to effect her own emancipation, as has been the case more recently with India and Burma. In these instances, Militant and Mystical nationalism have merged, and such a merging, as we shall see, holds particular dangers.

These dangers can best be seen in the development of the other type of Romantic or Mystical nationalism amongst the Germanic peoples. At the time of the Romantic Revival, Germany was a loose agglomeration of states, as yet unwelded into the unity of nationhood, but here too, an awareness of the legendary past and of the Titanic passions of the Goths, fanned by the wild fervours of Wagnerian music, lent to the various states a sense of their common heritage and their peculiar destiny in the world of nations. One man more than all others served to exalt this mood into an actual philosophy of life, the philosopher Nietzsche, extolling the type of the Superman who repudiates all gentleness in favour of a ruthless self-assertion. The Germany he longed to see emerging from the torpor of the nineteenth century would be a nation of Supermen which would trample underfoot its enemies and irresistably, because of its innate superiority, become master of the world, the *Herren-volken*. Such a philosophy only needed the appearance of a single dynamic leader to spring to life and with diabolic cruelty to unleash upon a Europe sapped by a decadent sentimentality the horrors of total war. In the life and teaching of Hitler we have the most complete identification of the Militant and Mystical phases of nationalism. Not only was the German people superior to other nations by its achievements in history; it was so because it was itself divine. A whole philosophy of biology and ethnology was involved in Nazism making it a form of a yet more primitive cult, Racialism, concerned primarily with the physical rather than the mental and spiritual resources of a people. The cult of blood and soil enters to a certain extent into every expression of Mystical nationalism, but rarely in so fanatical a way. Ironically enough, the narrow and vindictive nationalism of Hitler finds its counterpart in the earlier stages of the development of the one nation the Germans were to persecute most relentlessly, the Jews. There is little to choose between the mood of the Song of Deborah and some of the speeches of Hitler. Nevertheless there is one substantial

difference between the rabid nationalists of Israel and those of modern Germany, and to a lesser degree of Italy and Japan. The former were the more fanatical because they believed themselves the chosen vessels of God, but God, as we have previously seen, was still distinct from and above the nation. By the time of the Nazi and the Fascist, the State itself is envisaged as divine, and God as an active, living Power in human affairs has dropped out all together or evaporated into a mere hazy abstraction. The whole trend of Post-Renaissance thought has been to lessen the influence of religion upon individuals and society, whilst, because man instinctively hungers after gods, he has tended to substitute for the God of Christianity the idea of the nation regarded as divine, as a god to whom its members owe absolute obedience and loyalty. We may well say that nationalism is one of the alternative ways of life offered modern man. Man needs must have an object greater than himself to which to devote his efforts. In nationalism, he finds that object in the service of the nation.

The other alternatives are Communism and Secularism. Whereas the dividing line of nationalism is vertical, cutting off nation from nation, the dividing line of Communism runs horizontally, regardless of national frontiers, linking the workers of the world in a universal brotherhood, but excluding all those who are on the opposite side of the dividing line. How far Russian Communism remains true to this international character or how far it becomes itself infected by a mood of mystical imperialism and ultimately merges with the spirit of nationalism is open to discussion. The other alternative is the creed now prevailing in America and fast becoming the unofficial religion of Europe, which is centred in man in his purely biological context. This vitalism recognises no supernatural Power, nothing peculiarly sacred, and for that reason may be called Secularism; but it has a god, a god made in its own image; in the words of the title of a modern French novel, the God of the Body, to be worshipped in sport, physical culture, Freudian psychology, and the whole of the modern obsession, in films, advertisements, literature, art, with the question of sex. Nationalism, Communism, Secularism seem to be the three alternatives offered by modern life. Now where does Christianity come in? Is it essentially opposed to all three, or are there elements in all three of which it can approve? Christianity has never despised the body as certain other religions of the East have done, nor has it denied the importance of man's physical needs. Neither would a Christ who wept over the impending doom of Jerusalem and who called, among His Disciples one who was a Zealot, condemn the love of country which is the mainspring of nationalism. The trouble is that all these things, the body, the class, the nation,

become ends in themselves, they assume the wrong proportion, they usurp the place which is rightly due to God alone, and because of this, they invariably spoil the very thing they are seeking to attain. The principle laid down by Christ, "He who would save his life must lose it, and he who would lose his life shall save it" is true of classes and nations, as well as of individuals.

"Man," says Edward Shillito in his book, *Nationalism*, "must not make nationalism into a religion if he would keep the glory of patriotism. Nationalism and patriotism are contrary one to the other. If Nationalism becomes a religion it is a false religion. If it remains a passion within the spiritual order, and a man loves his country well because he loves that other order more, then it has a place no less enduring in human life than the love of kindred. Those who set their nation first lose their nation; to them who seek first the kingdom of God this also is added—the love of Fatherland."

To seek first the kingdom of God does not mean to suppress all that is individual in the life of the nation in order to achieve an anaemic and nondescript uniformity. To be international, a society even though it be the kingdom of God, must first be national. Among those who desire unity amongst the nations there are two sections; those who would claim the nation for God and those who, in the name of God, would end the nation as a unit. The first seeks an international, the second, a denationalised, order. The one believes that the nation also can be delivered out of what is false and imperfect in its life into the glorious liberty of the City of God; the other thinks that, whatever purpose it may have served, the nation, if it is prolonged, is only a menace to the true life of humanity. The prophet of the one order is Mazzini, of the other Tolstoi. But just as in the family group, the insipid and spineless individual is no more likely to get on well with the other members than the lively and strong-minded individual who has a definite contribution to make to the corporate life, so, in the comity of nations, the nation which has submerged its own personality into a vague universal dream of humanity viewed as an abstract entity is no more likely to agree with its fellow-nations than the people which brings its various interests and talents to bear upon the common task. The great patriots of the ages, people like Goethe and Madame Roland, Abraham Lincoln and Henry Richard and Edith Cavell, although they realised that patriotism was not enough and built for a posterity beyond the frontiers of their own countries, believed passionately in the role of their own nations in the international brotherhood of man.

To ordinary humanity, the choice seems to lie between a fiery partisanship which so easily degenerates into the "my

country right or wrong" attitude, or a hazy undefined "un-nationalism." But for the Christian there is a third way. He has to love his country, serve her, work for her noblest interests, whilst still recognising that she is the best of this world, tainted with all the imperfections which cling to our mortality, made up of human and finite beings, and therefore fallible in her judgments, sinful in her conduct. Over against his highest hopes, the most courageous actions of the nation, he must set, as his own standard of judgment, the absolute purity, integrity, charity, graciousness, love exemplified in Christ and demanded by Him from everyone who would bear His name. In the light of the eternal and infinite goodness of God, our national life of compromise and convention, however necessary to our survival in the here-and-now, must be judged and will be found wanting. Such an attitude is bound to involve tension. One is drawn, now in one direction, now in another, until in anguish of spirit one longs for a complete and unquestioning absorption in nationalist pride, the infectious, even ecstatic, emotional thrill, impervious to the voice of reason, which comes from an uncritical surrender to nature's primitive urges. But when one pauses to consider what has been the outcome, even in recent years, of such a nationalism, one is prepared to pay the price in mental energy and spiritual costliness of bringing to bear upon one's love of country the vision of a greater love, one's personal love for God and the love of God for the world. And it is only the Christian who has at his command those spiritual resources in the corporate wisdom of the ages which enable him to hold this vision in his imagination without seeing it fade into the mere vapours of a false cosmopolitanism, for he will know himself to be one of a vast company of those who throughout the centuries have recognised man's double citizenship, of the City of Earth in which he owes allegiance to Caesar, and of the City of God in which he owes allegiance to God alone. The danger of Protestantism has been its repudiation of this twofold duty: too often it has denied man's allegiance to Caesar, and by refusing to be concerned with the City of Earth, has brought about a state of affairs where it has been possible for men to run to the other extreme and repudiate all allegiance to God. The need of our times is to get back to a vital and impelling sense of man's double inheritance; the one finite and ephemeral, limited by conditions of time and place, the other, eternal in the heavens.

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