

# Nationalism

Sir Frederick Catherwood

---

**Nationalism is the religion of the twentieth century, more potent and therefore more dangerous than Marxism, because it is a religion of the heart and not of the head.**

---

When is national loyalty a virtue and when is it a vice? Is race part of the natural order and is the mixing of races against the divine purpose? Are peoples right to seek independence in ethnic nationhood or are the wars of independence a waste of human life? Are people right to feel a special loyalty to the soil of their forefathers? Should the Jews go back to Israel, the Ulster Scot to the mainland? Should the Germans be reunited?

These are not theoretical questions, they are burning issues. People live for them and die for them. Nationalism is the religion of the twentieth century, more potent and therefore more dangerous than Marxism, because it is a religion of the heart and not of the head. When, in 1941, Britain had to choose to fight with the Marxists or the Nationalists, we sided unhesitatingly with the Marxists. Almost all the wars we have fought in this century have had nationalism at their root, the Boer War, the two German wars, Kenya, Cyprus, Aden, Ulster have all been about nationalism. Only the Malayan and Korean campaigns have had a different ingredient. Imperialism is dead, nationhood is the popular cause.

But is it a cause to which the Christian can commit himself whole-heartedly? Is there Christian teaching on nationalism? What would our Lord do today?

---

**If ever there was a case for nationalism, surely it was the case of God's chosen people. Yet Jesus turned His back on that case. He was not interested in Jewish nationalism.**

---

Perhaps it is best to start with our Lord's actions in His own day. There was an intense nationalism among the Jews. They were God's very own people. He had promised a Deliverer. Yet they were a subject race of the Roman Empire and surely God would give them their independence again. They searched the prophets and were convinced that the imperial rule would be ended and that the Gentiles would cease to desecrate the Holy City. If ever there was a case for nationalism,

surely it was the case of God's chosen people. Yet Jesus turned His back on that case. He was not interested in Jewish nationalism. He paid tribute to the Empire and told the Jews to do the same. He refused to speak against the Roman rule. He refused to take up arms. He told Peter to sheath his sword: 'All who take the sword will perish by the sword.' He told Pilate, 'My kingdom is not of this world; if my kingdom were of this world, then would my servants fight.' Pilate could find no case against Him on opposition to the Empire. He saw through the trumped-up charges of the Jews, their attempts to make Jesus into a nationalist rebel. He said, 'I find no fault in him.' Jesus was innocent of nationalism.

So were the apostles whom He appointed. They had the full measure of natural feeling. Peter needed a vision before he preached to the Gentiles. Paul longed for the conversion of the Jews, yet he was obedient to the command to preach to the Gentiles and laid it down (Epistle to Colossians) that in Christ Jesus there was neither Jew nor Gentile, Barbarian nor Scythian. The Christian church broke down all the barriers of nationalism.

The first millennium of the Christian faith saw the development of 'Christendom' out of the ruins of the Roman Empire and the invasion of the savage northern tribes. The Christians had a mission to the barbarian also. They tried to win the northern races and what eventually emerged was the common bond of 'Christendom' transcending their fierce tribal loyalties. The eventual institutions embodying this concept, the Roman Empire and the mediaeval papacy, were often far from Christian, but the spirit of Christianity was a unifying force and, insofar as it had any influence over the principalities and powers which took its name, it was to make them realize that there was more to life than tribal loyalty. The idea of Christendom, though abused, was a real political force.

In the Europe of the Reformation, John Knox ministered in England, Germany and Switzerland as well as in Scotland. Erasmus was as much at home in one country as in another. The English channel was a high road and not a barrier.

As Christianity declined, nationalism increased. The cross gave way to the flag and, in one country after

another, the nation demanded an emotional commitment and loyalty which had previously been reserved for the faith. Yet at the very time when nationalism was growing most vigorously, so was the Christian missionary movement. As the nation state grew, so did the outreach of the gospel. Christianity spread to Africa and Asia and the church encircled the globe transcending, for the first time, every barrier of nationality and culture. The Christian church and the new nationalism were going in different directions.

---

**As the nation state grew, so did the outreach of the gospel. Christianity spread to Africa and Asia and the church encircled the globe transcending, for the first time, every barrier of nationality and culture.**

---

But in the twentieth century, nationalism has grown stronger and the church has grown weaker. In Germany the latter was almost overwhelmed. In the studies of the relations between church and state in Germany between the wars, it is apparent that the reason for the church's lack of resistance to National Socialism was the tremendous appeal of German nationalism to the German Christians. It was only when the logical outworking of this nationalism began to appear that a few of the church leaders began to see where their true loyalty lay. But no nation has escaped the influence of nationalism. Even today the remembrance-day services are an odd mixture of religion and nationalism and the sentiments of some of the most popular remembrance-day hymns are very far from Christian.

The 'powers that be' are, of course, ordained of God and we owe them the duty of obedience as the Christians did in the days when Paul wrote to the Romans and Peter wrote his General Epistles. But when the 'powers that be' demand the allegiance which can be given only to God, then we say with Peter, 'Whether it is better to obey God or men, judge ye.' The problem of government is to command allegiance. The less they can command it by appeal to Christian duty, the more they search for some other basis of loyalty. Nationalism is such a basis. But the transfer of the grounds of obedience from Christian duty to national loyalty is a dangerous transfer. Christian duty commands us to love our neighbour too and the neighbour of the Jew was the Samaritan, not just other Jews. Duty to the 'powers that be' is not an exclusive duty, it is not totalitarian. Obedience to that duty does not excuse us from all other duties.

Of course, not all national feeling divides us from our fellowmen. There is much that is good in loyalty and national feeling. In a world made uncertain and dangerous through sin and mistrust, it is natural that groups of people should band together for self-defence. It is much easier to govern those who have a common interest than those whose interests seem to conflict, to get consent from those who are close to

their rulers than from those who are distant. The less the degree of duty felt by the citizen, the more difficult the role of government. Dr Johnson may have said, 'Patriotism is the last refuge of a scoundrel,' but it is surely right that citizens should take a pride in their collective achievements. It is when patriotism is used to divert men's minds from the truth that it becomes dangerous.

And there is a very positive side to nationalism. Each

---

**There is much that is good in loyalty and national feeling. In a world made uncertain and dangerous through sin and mistrust, it is natural that groups of people should band together for self-defence.**

---

group of people has developed its own culture, its own peculiar contribution to the life of mankind. The culture of a nation is surely a divine gift. God has not made the universe in a dull monochrome. He has made every kind of plant and animal in a profuse and fascinating variety and mankind in the most fascinating variety of all. Within God's church we are all parts of the same spiritual body, but with different and complementary gifts. God surely formed His natural creation on the same basis. Language, poetry, literature, art, music, architecture and style of life differ from nation to nation and surely the world would be a duller place if this were not so. When we travel we resent the trend to uniformity and delight in the distinctive culture of the nations we visit. If you mix all the colours, they come out grey and we want to keep them bright and distinct. If Florence is overrun by strangers it is no longer Florence. Peking is to build a skyscraper hotel and we feel that the flavour of the 'forbidden city' will never be the same again. Translators' English is not the same as Shakespeare's mother tongue. If the Scot lost his ruggedness, the Chinese his courtesy, the German his orderliness, the Spaniard his pride and the Welshman his eloquence, the world would be the poorer. But to try to retain the Welsh language against the pervasive influence of BBC English is not the same as demanding self-government with threats of violence.

### **Multi-racial states**

It is perfectly possible to have a multi-racial state in which the various nations are protected and their identity preserved. The United Kingdom has long been a state of four races, English, Irish, Scots and Welsh. Although the English have been numerically the largest race, all the other races have contributed more than their fair share to the life of the country. Indeed, the union has now lasted so long that the four original races are now strongly intertwined by marriage, friendship and cross-residence, so that separatism seems not only absurd, but also impracticable. On top of the four original races, we have received exiles over the years from all kinds of countries. The Jewish com-

munity dates from Cromwell, the French Huguenots from the early eighteenth century. In this century we have had West Indians, Pakistanis and Indians all with their separate cultures.

There are two ways of treating a multi-racial community. One is the American idea of the melting-pot, where all the races become one American people and an 'American way of life' supersedes the national culture. The other is the Canadian — and British — way which accepts the cultural distinction within the multi-racial state. Toronto is a multi-racial community, yet neither the Jews nor the Scots have lost their national culture; they are all Canadian citizens with equal rights and duties, but they can still make their own distinctive contribution to their country's life.

Another country which has been immensely successful in bringing different races under federal rule is Switzerland. It has, including Romance, four different languages. Yet it is one of the best-ruled countries in the world.

Carving empires up into ethnic sub-divisions, the process known as Balkanization, may seem the easy way out in a restless world which is unable to compromise or accommodate with neighbours who are genetically different. But 'little fleas have smaller fleas upon their backs to bite 'em'. The southern Slavs always opposed the separation of Hungary from Austria because they reckoned they got a better deal out of Vienna than they would out of Budapest. They ended up in Yugoslavia and brought with them the new problem of Croatian nationalism. Another piece of the Austrian Empire, Czechoslovakia, itself came to grief on the problem of the German minority in Sudatenland, and eventually all of the Austrian Empire except for the metropolitan territory escaped from a shambling Hapsburg autocracy only to find themselves under a much tighter Communist autocracy. So it is not possible to argue a pragmatic approach to nationalism on the grounds of self-evident success.

---

**The most controversial issue for the Christian is Jewish nationalism.**

---

### **Jewish nationalism**

The most controversial issue for the Christian is Jewish nationalism. We are bound to believe that God will keep the Jews a separate people until the end of time because He has, through Paul, promised that 'all Israel shall be saved'. But until the arrival of dispensational theories there was no question of the revival of a territorial nation. Apart from anything else, is not the whole teaching of Christ and the apostles against it? The Pharisees and Sadducees understood the prophetic promises in a nationalistic sense, but Christ and His apostles surely interpreted them in a spiritual

sense. Any interpretation in a nationalistic sense would seem to go straight back to the errors of our Lord's opponents, to undermine the position which He took and for which they hated Him so bitterly. Those who argue that the Jews are now back in Palestine, and therefore the dispensationalists are vindicated, overlook the influence of dispensationalism in the countries which made the decision, the United States and the United Kingdom at the time of the 1917 Balfour Declaration. The prophecy was made to come true by force of arms of those who believed it. Macbeth did become king of Scotland.

This is not to be unsympathetic to the Jews. At a time when multi-racial empires were suspect and every race was closing ranks, the temptation for the Jews to found their own territorial nation state must have been considerable. After the loss of five million Jews in the Nazi terror, the pressure must have been overwhelming. But despite our sympathy to the Jews, which stems from their persecuted past, we can still ask whether Zionism was right, even for the Jew.

Not every Jew is a Zionist. Many Jews feel that the establishment of a Jewish state which can hold only a fraction of the total Jewish race makes life much more difficult for Jews who are citizens of other countries and are thoroughly integrated in the life of those countries. While there was no Jewish homeland no-one could talk of 'sending all the Jews back to where they belong'. They are accepted as British, Canadian, American, Brazilian or Dutch citizens of a particular religion or race. Nationalism bred anti-semitism and anti-semitism bred Jewish nationalism. It seems to be a vicious circle which can be broken only by wholehearted advocacy of the multi-racial state.

There is an inevitable connection between nationalism and racialism. How can we condemn South Africa's separate development on the one hand and at the same time support the separate development of races in nation states self-contained in ethnic boundaries? All we can logically do is to condemn the administration of apartheid and not the principle. It may be true that it is human sin which creates the mistrust and that in a sinful world multi-racial states are much more difficult to govern. But for the Christian who prays 'Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven' we must surely try to have countries in which different races can live together. There will always be limits to the size of nation which can be ruled by one government — though India has 400 million — and government may have to be decentralized into federal assemblies — as are the US, Germany, Canada, Australia, Switzerland and India. But let the multi-racial community be the Christian aim and not the ethnic purity of the nationalist.

In 1969 I shared a sleeper across Germany with a Coventry schoolmaster on his way to Czechoslovakia.

On his previous visit he had met an old veteran who had been mobilized in 1914 to fight for the Austrian Empire against the Russians. He was captured and then put in the Czech national brigade to fight for the Russians against the Austrians. When, after the Revolution, the Czech brigade finally got home he found that the Versailles ethnic division had made him a Pole and he was called up to fight for the Poles against the Russians. In 1939 he was again called up into the Polish army to fight the Germans. His home town was then annexed, on ethnic grounds, by the puppet state of Slovakia and he was called up by the Germans to fight the Russians. He was once more

captured and once more formed again into a Czech national brigade to fight the Germans. He rode home with the Czech brigade and had lived in peace ever since.

Empires have their faults, but the Balkanization of Versailles and the ethnic nationalism of our age can be pretty stupid too — and have a divisiveness which is far from Christian.

**Sir Frederick Catherwood is Group Managing Director, John Laing and Son Ltd. He was formerly Director-General of the National Economic Development Office and a past chairman of the GF.**

## Elijah

When Elijah came to Horeb's hardness,  
He found dry rest, not peace; clung to the cave  
But not to God. He taunted, tweaked no hosts  
Of Baal now, for his sarcasm turned  
Fluid in self-pity. 'They seek to take  
My life.' Even so his shrunk soul poured itself  
Out in peevish prayer, that nonetheless  
Lapped against God's footstool. God's laughter turned  
Itself to a great wind, toppling the hills  
Almost from their stony base; then God's jest  
Became an earthquake, cracking, crinkling the rocks,  
Stirring the sand to a dry whirlpool.  
But God was not in this, nor in the fire  
That followed, fire that made ripe wood  
Of surly soil. Elijah's soul was stunned  
Now, still and ready to receive God's stillness.  
'Go forth,' the Voice said, and Elijah went,  
His fate fast in God's fullness, the wicker  
Woven, even now, in which the chariot  
Cast him upon the fresh green shores of Heaven.

RAYNE MCKINNON