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IS A CHRISTIAN VISION OF SCOTTISH IDENTITY VIABLE IN THE EARLY 21ST CENTURY?

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This paper draws on a book in preparation, currently titled 'Honey From The Lion: Christian Theology and the Ethics of Nationalism'. Many of us grew up with a green and gold honey tin in our kitchen cupboards, bearing a picture on the front of bees emerging from a lion's carcass. 'Out of the strong came forth sweetness' is Tate & Lyle's take on (and from) Judges 14. I have stuck to it, if you'll excuse the pun, because I am interested in how sweetness comes forth from strength, and also because the wider Samson narratives themselves raise troubling questions about relationships between Israelites and Philistines.

It is the Lord's will and promise that the people of God should take possession of a land flowing with milk and honey. In the song of the Psalmist, in the 19th Psalm, we hear a celebration of a politics in which the righteous judgments and ordinances of God are like the drippings of the honeycomb, but even sweeter. When the Lion is of the Tribe of Judah and the Root of David, we may imagine with C.S. Lewis that even though his roar is deafening, his breath is honeyed. And yet even this Lion, when we look for him in Revelation 5, morphs into the form of the slain lamb. How much more then, when the Lion *rampant* or Lions *passant* represent the power of an earthly state, might they be in need of a breaking open in order to release sweetness? We are talking of course about the problem in political theology of the relationship between power and goodness, between power and virtue.

In Chapter 2 of the Westminster Confession, we are reminded: 'God has all life, glory, goodness, blessedness, in and of Himself... He alone is the fountain of all being, of whom, through whom, and to whom are all things; and has most sovereign dominion over them.' While power and goodness are indivisibly united in the life and work of the Holy Trinity and by extension in the City of God, the same is not true in the Earthly City, where the possibility of a godly commonwealth is constantly threatened by the love of power—Augustine's *libido dominandi*—by its effects and consequences. In this paper I want to try to redeem the term 'nationalism' as part of a viable vision of Scottish identity. I argue that to redeem

it we will need to break it open, in the hope that a broken and contrite nationalism, God will not despise, but will bless.

DEFINING NATIONALISM

Nationalism, not only but primarily Scottish Nationalism, is now centre stage in British politics and seems likely to remain so until the independence referendum is held in 2013 or 2014, depending whose will prevails.¹ I want to begin with a bit of what Stanley Hauerwas calls swamp clearing—there is a degree of wilful stupidity which afflicts debates around nationalism—yes there are nationalists in power in Holyrood, but there are also nationalists in power in Westminster. Critics of explicit nationalism such as that of the SNP or Plaid, very often struggle to acknowledge their own British nationalism. When this is not just partisan dissembling, it is usually an example of what political theorist Michael Billig calls ‘banal nationalism’; a kind of nationalism which people simply assume and therefore become blind to, because they have become habituated to its constructions and conventions in their daily lives. We need to stop pretending that nationalism is like an accent, something other people have and we don’t. Instead, as the young people say, we need to ‘fess up to our own nationalisms. This confession needs to be both an admission and a repentance, but it also needs to be effective at a theoretical level.

Among the best recent books on theories of nationalism is Jonathan Hearn’s 2006 volume, *Rethinking Nationalism*.² Hearn is an American academic, an anthropologist who works at Edinburgh University, whose earlier book *Claiming Scotland* also has interesting things to say about the covenanting tradition and the Disruption in relation to Scottish political theology.³ I want to draw attention to some key arguments in Hearn book. He suggests that we should look at the politics of stable democratic regimes as ‘the routinization, rather than the overcoming of nationalism’, and that the ‘process of nationalism is very deeply embedded in civil society and electoral systems and not simply an elite- or state-led process. It is part of the normal functioning of democratic regimes’.⁴ If we accept this normalized understanding, Hearn argues we will see that:

¹ At the time of the lecture, unionist parties were pressing for an early referendum date.

² Jonathan Hearn, *Rethinking Nationalism* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006).

³ Jonathan Hearn, *Claiming Scotland: National Identity and Liberal Culture* (Edinburgh: Polygon at Edinburgh, 2000).

⁴ Hearn, *Rethinking Nationalism*, pp. 145, 165.

Liberal democracies do not so much transcend nationalism as domesticate it, routinizing its dynamic by channeling it through core political institutions. On the one hand, nationalism is seriously altered by this context, de-fanged for the most part and rendered less dangerous. But on the other hand it is an indispensable aspect of the state's ongoing need for legitimacy and inevitable competition between social groups to define the wider society of which they are members. Nationalism is a basic part of how relatively stable democracies legitimate and re-legitimate themselves.⁵

Drawing on the work of Beetham,⁶ Hearn argues that processes of legitimation are constantly at work in modern states, through voting, conformity to laws and justification of rules and laws in terms of shared beliefs and norms. He adds 'what is at stake is contending visions of how a population within a given territory should be governed, and such visions are normally underwritten by a certain conception of the population's common *identity*, embodied in shared beliefs and values, what Rogers Smith (2003) has called "stories of peoplehood".⁷ Recognising civil society as the key space of 'delegitimation and re-legitimation'⁸ where political parties compete to win votes by making claims to represent the entire national population, Hearn claims that:

far from transcending nationalism, normal democratic party politics keeps national identity on a constant 'slow boil'. Nationalism is an essential resource for the maintenance of legitimacy in democratic regimes, which harness and contain its frequently dangerous energies, while also utilizing them. So just as Ernest Gellner argued that nationalism is the demand to be ruled by those co-ethnic with oneself, I am suggesting that it is also at work in the demand to be ruled by people who share one's moral values and beliefs.⁹

Echoing and concurring with Billig's work on banal nationalism, Hearn insists that 'Nationalism is not just residual background noise in democratic regimes, it is a key legitimizing resource that can be activated and

⁵ Ibid., p. 166.

⁶ D. Beetham, *The Legitimation of Power* (Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 1991).

⁷ Hearn, pp. 166-7; cf. Rogers M. Smith, *Stories of Peoplehood: The Politics and Morals of Political Membership* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003).

⁸ N. Bobbio, *Democracy and Dictatorship* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989), p. 26, cited by Hearn, p. 167.

⁹ Ibid., p. 168.

brought into the foreground, for example, during times of war and other social crises'.¹⁰

To summarize: nationalism, for Hearn, while it may be a beast with fangs,¹¹ is not a strange and exotic creature. It is part of the normal functioning of democratic regimes. Above all, and here is where we get back to power and virtue, it is a key part of how they legitimize themselves.

BIBLICAL AND THEOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVES

With that idea of legitimacy, we are brought firmly into the territory of theology, of dogmatics and ethics. Taking a metaphor from card games, for Christians there are certain key stories which must always trump all other stories. The narratives of Creation and Redemption are always trumps within Christian political theology; they always lead or even force the conclusions that we should only ever make a singular use of the language of race. We are all as Hamish Henderson says, the Bairns O' Adam and as C.S. Lewis says, the Daughters of Eve. The *imago dei* given in creation undercuts and overcomes all other distinctions. This image, as it is restored and renewed in redemption, leads also to an insistence on the other great singular of *one church*, entry into which is by virtue of one baptism; so that for Christian theology, water is always thicker than blood.

Here we have to do with some of what has recently been engaging the interest of some (post) Marxist critical theorists in their readings of Paul; the capacity of these particular narrative traditions of Judaism and Christianity to fund and fashion universal claims, claims of common humanity and of liberating election, which trump all attempts to place one class, gender or ethnicity above others. I want to claim that this same capacity to fund universal claims can be read out of the detail of the Genesis narratives. In the early chapters of Genesis we are faced with two great sendings: on the one hand the one human race is sent by God to fill the earth, we are sent into Eden to fill it. After the fall, human beings are sent out of the garden to make their home East of Eden. These two sendings suggest two truths about how we belong in the world; the first sending forth to fill the world affirms the value of every place within creation. As the Puritans used to say, every place is immediate unto God. There are no parts of the world which are in principle God forsaken (not even England).

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ See his comment above about it being 'de-fanged', n. 5 above; cf. my Judges 'lion' metaphor.

The second sending, the sending out of the garden, when humans are forced to improvise home East of Eden and away from the presence of God, is a sending out into a world marked by death and violence and insecurity. Every place in this scenario is equally alienated from the presence of God. The poet Edwin Muir spoke of humans living 'since Eden shut the gate that's everywhere and nowhere'. There are no parts of the world which will in Genesis terms, escape the flood, or which are in principle closer to God than others (not even Scotland).

We have then a double theological verdict applied to every place on earth where people make their homes which is another universal claim: that every society is both affirmed and judged, every place is a place of both vocation and alienation.

If we stay within Genesis, we come to the pivotal story for nationalism of Babel and its Tower in Genesis 11. Conventionally read in terms of a divine curse and a fall from unity, in *The Meaning of the City* the French theologian Jaques Ellul suggests an alternative reading, in which what is cursed is the imperialistic, even fascistic project of *ein Volk, eine Sprache*. God's way of frustrating and resisting this demonic form of unity is through the blessings of Babel, the gifts of linguistic and cultural diversity. In Ellul's reading, these become resources which enable resistance to imperialism. Implied here is a new mandate of stewardship, a stewardship of cultural diversity. This is a mandate affirmed by the Holy Spirit at Pentecost, who is revealed as the Spirit of *translation*, giving birth to a church whose catholicity transcends cultural difference without abolishing it. It is a providential mandate whose value within history is dramatized and celebrated by the great vision of Revelation, in which heaven itself displays every tribe and language and people.¹²

Here I think we are beginning to edge closer to the potential for some kind of nationalism to be a legitimate and even necessary part of the human vocation. We approach this if we begin to think the idea of cultural diversity all over the world as something which God sees and about which God says 'it is good'. Its goodness echoes the goodness of the whole creation but it also represents a form of providential goodness; something which is provided by God, given into the human historical future, in the face of human evil, to defend human flourishing. It is given, in particular, to protect the weak and those who are most likely to become the victims of empire. Such a narrative dogmatics, implies a narrative ethics. If we follow this trajectory of reading scripture, the universal scope of

¹² See Jacques Ellul, *The Meaning of the City* (Grand Rapids MI: Eerdmans, 1970); also a discussion influenced by this in Ch. 11 of J.A. Walter, *A Long Way From Home* (Exeter: Paternoster, 1979).

this blessing implies an ethic of equal regard. It summons us to an ethic of neighbourliness which binds us into loving our neighbour's culture, language and place as we love our own. There is a pluralism here which is saved from being relativistic by the earlier double judgment I spoke of, the sense that all cultures take their place on the earth in relation to both a divine affirmation and a divine judgment. In the words of Lamin Sanneh:

Christianity is first and foremost a pluralist religion... As Paul affirmed, there is no respect of persons with God (Rom 2:11) and nothing in itself is unclean (Rom 14:14). The positive sides of these statements are equally valid: all persons are precious in God's sight (1 Pet 2:4) and all things indeed are pure (Rom 14:20). In the same fashion, no one is the exclusive or normative pattern for anyone else and no one culture can be God's favourite.¹³

My stewardship of my culture involves both celebration and penitence and I should also expect that from you in your stewardship of your culture. Furthermore, I am my brother's and my sister's keeper. I am charged not to do violence to your culture, just because it is different from mine. As Dewi Hughes might put it, I am charged to keep, not to castrate your culture.

CONTEMPORARY CONTEXTS

So far then, I have been trying to explore and sketch out a broad Christian perspective on human cultural diversity and I have been trying to do this using the resources of a biblical imagination. The difficulties come when we try to exercise this biblical imagination within particular contexts. In particular, things get more difficult when we have to move from these rather fuzzy ideas about cultural identity and bring them into dialogue with modern ideas of the nation and the state. Here we must confront the toxic history of nationalism and the role of a renegade biblical imaginary in constructing this. Adrian Hastings, in his important study *The Construction of Nationhood: Ethnicity, Religion and Nationalism*,¹⁴ highlights the crucial role played by the Bible in the emergence of European national identities. In particular he points to the OT stories of Israel as a single nation, existing within a land, with a particular capital, religion, and monarchy. A common thread across many early nationalisms is the way in which nations imagined themselves to have inherited Israel's elec-

¹³ Lamin Sanneh, *Translating the Message: The Missionary Impact on Culture* (New York: Orbis, 1989), p. 30.

¹⁴ Adrian Hastings, *The Construction of Nationhood: Ethnicity, Religion and Nationalism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997).

tion as the chosen people. The form this took would often be laughable, if its effects had not proved so lethal in constructing myths of national superiority which could be harnessed to imperial ambitions.

The most profound dilemma and problem associated with nationalism has to do with the fundamental political question of how to relate government and territory; with questions, therefore, of sovereignty and borders. The idea of the nation-state has emerged in the modern era as the dominant global model for organising political life. Stanley Hauerwas has argued that this is where we find a profound deficit at the heart of liberal political theory. Liberal political theory, based in universalist notions of human rights and voluntarist understandings of social contract, has, he says, particular problems in accounting for borders, in positing land and territory as organizing principles—in giving, therefore, an adequate account of the nation-state.¹⁵

In the aftermath of World War I, the American president Woodrow Wilson famously tried to set out an account of liberal democracy, which balanced the right to national self-determination with safeguards to individual liberties within sovereign independent states. Wilson's vision which called nation-states to work together peacefully in a 'League of Nations' was desperately over optimistic and it foundered in the face of a new wave of fascistic and imperialistic nationalisms which led the world within a generation into a Second World War. The battle against these nationalisms, in particular the versions developed in Germany, Italy, Spain and Japan, had a profound effect on the reputation of nationalism. Out of a generation sickened by the carnage and division of a second world war, many people and not least many Christian people, emerged with a deep conviction that nationalism was the root of a great evil and needed to be opposed root and branch. That position is still very common today.

There are three major problems with that distaste. The first is that when it came to facing the task of post-war reconstruction, the idea of the nation-state remained the only game in town and the only plausible candidate on which patterns of governance could be based. The new international organization was of course christened the UN, the United Nations. Its charter embodied the principle of national self-determination in Article 1.¹⁶

¹⁵ Stanley Hauerwas, *After Christendom? How the Church is to Behave if Freedom, Justice, and a Christian Nation are Bad Ideas* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1999), pp. 33-4.

¹⁶ 'To develop friendly relations among nations based on respect for the principle of equal rights and self-determination of peoples...' (Article 1, para 2).

The second key development which has challenged the distaste for nationalism in the post-war period is that nationalism became a crucial vehicle for those arguing and working for decolonisation. Here we see some instantiation of the Babel argument we made earlier. Nationalism was an ideology which could be used to oppose imperialism and assert the rights of those who had been colonised to throw off the yoke of the oppressor. It also became a vehicle for validating and re-asserting the value of languages, cultures and traditions which had been despised and suppressed under imperial rule. Nationalism therefore became a crucial part of the struggle for freedom, first for the countries of the global South and later, in the years before and after 1989, for the peoples of Eastern Europe.

The third problem with western liberal and leftist disdain for nationalism harks back to Michael Billig's idea, mentioned at the beginning, of 'banal nationalism', which is to say that much of the time critics of nationalism were and are deeply hypocritical. They often assumed and ignored their own 'banal nationalism' and indeed, which is the point, failed to recognise it as nationalism at all, while condemning the 'bad nationalism' of others who were aspiring to the same kind of political settlements they already enjoyed.

The question we face, though, is whether Christian theology can approve this rehabilitation of nationalism and on what terms? In *The Desire of Nations*, Oliver O'Donovan, (unlike Hauerwas who gives up on this task) does try to help us think theologically about the state. In his chapter on 'The Obedience of Rulers', he argues that the provisional character of the state is revealed in a Christological understanding of trumps/triumphs:

The most truly Christian state understands itself most thoroughly as 'secular'. It makes the confession of Christ's victory and accepts the relegation of its own authority. The only corresponding service the church can render to this passing authority is to help it make this act of self-denying recognition. It may urge this recognition upon it, and share with it the tasks of practical deliberation and policy which seek to embody and implement it. ... The church has to instruct it in the ways of the humble state.¹⁷

¹⁷ Oliver O'Donovan, *The Desire of Nations: Rediscovering the Roots of Political Theology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), p. 219 (italics added).

CONCLUSIONS

I want to draw these thoughts to a conclusion, by reflecting on what this might mean for a viable Christian vision of national identity. Following O'Donovan here, and in the spirit of the sixth of the Kirk's articles declaratory, can we see what the kirking of a parliament ceremonially must imply theologically? The church, as it confesses its own brokenness, must call for a breaking of the nationalism by which the state seeks to legitimate itself. In making its own confession, it must also call for a national *metanoia*. For the power of nationalism to be sweetened, there must be a turning from the three great evils of absolutism, imperialism and essentialism. That means the nation must be, in the language of Barmen, under God; it must renounce domination and practice recognition; and it must renounce a biological nationalism based on the *ius sanguinis* or law of the blood in favour of a habitat based nationalism, based solely on the *ius solis*, on the law of territory.

Even when it has done that, O'Donovan's tasks of 'practical deliberation and policy' still remain. Should the goal be a re-covenanted parliamentary Union which seeks to give fuller recognition and respect to its constituent nations or should it be a social union made up of a confederation between those parts of the UK which wish to be independent?

Judgments as to which of these is a viable Christian vision of Scottish identity will involve attending to the tests Jamie Grant set for us in his lecture which began this conference, asking what best reflects the Kingdom of God and serves the Mission of God. It will involve considering the sober reassessment of church and state urged on us by David Fergusson in his paper. It will involve us in weighing how we can hear Dewi's call to resist the Babel syndrome which has characterized English nationalism and to do justice to the stewardship of Scottish national identity which has been entrusted to us.

For my part, I am convinced that independence for Scotland within a reworked Social Union of the Isles and within the European Union, offers the most promising way forward. The version of the nationalist project currently represented by the SNP is already broken in most of the right places. It does turn away from these three great evils and it offers compelling opportunities to turn towards a number of great goods. Here, finally, are seven civic virtues and public goods which I hope independence could help us to move towards:

- Humility – finding our place in the world. I think of Feargas MacFionnlaigh's wonderful poem *The Midge*: 'I am small and like small things—the buried seed that splits the stone, the little country, the little language...';

- Peace – we have a once in a generation opportunity to reject and perhaps fatally undermine the Trident programme of weapons of mass destruction;
- Equity – building upon the social justice tradition in Scotland and working to embrace a social democratic project of reducing inequality;
- Hospitality – the freedom to develop a new and humane approach to asylum seekers and refugees;
- Mutuality – rethinking the whole concept of the national interest in an interdependent world, beginning with ‘independence within Europe’. The only kind of nationalism worth having is the internationalist kind, which is predicated on recognition of the other;
- Subsidiarity – independence and the changes it can drive for our democracy: completing, reform of the voting system, abolition of the House of Lords, a new empowerment of civil society, drive for participative democracy;
- Ecology/Responsibility – warming to a reformed theme of stewardship of creation. We have a once in a generation chance to end nuclear power in Scotland and to rethink our energy policy. We can be good stewards of the gifts God has given us: of wind, sea, rain and sun and of land to grow timber.

My claim then, is that a theological construal of nationalism along the lines I have suggested can lead a case for independence as a liberating option for Scotland (and England). One in which Scotland’s lion rampant is not a predatory and devouring beast, but a nationalism in which we, like Samson, can get honey from the lion; and about which we can tell this theo-political riddle:

*“Out of the strong came something sweet
Out of the eater, came something to eat.”*
Judges 14:14