

Introduction

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 cannot 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 globalization'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 now a 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 present 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, India, and Brazil 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.

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

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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 *jihadi* 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 there were Gordon Brown’s early, banal attempts to talk up British identity against a resurgent Scottish National Party (S.N.P.).¹ Most recently in September 2014 Scotland held a referendum on whether or not to become independent of the United Kingdom.² In the years to come the United Kingdom itself seems certain to refuse further integration into the European Union, probably moving 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. This, therefore, seems an opportune time to stand back and reflect on them, with a view to discerning in them what is good and deserves our affirmation and support, and what is not good and deserves our contradiction and opposition.

Before we embark on our reflections, however, we need to gain some clarity on the focus of our attention, which is in fact complex. Sometimes we will consider the nation, sometimes nationalism, sometimes the nationstate, and sometimes more than one together. These are all closely related, indeed interrelated, of course, but they are each relatively distinct. First of all, take the nation. What is it, exactly? The essence of nation is almost as elusive as the essence of religion, and trying to capture and define it is almost as frustrating. I can see no hard and fast distinction between what we might call a “people” and what we might call a “nation.” A definite people exists insofar as its members acknowledge that they have certain things in common and own or participate in them together. Usually these things include language, religion, and traditions of history, poetry, and music, and perhaps of literature. Invariably they include an association with a particular territory. They need not include—and probably do not—racial purity. Given this definition, then,

1 In the US edition of this book, which was published in July 2014, I referred too unkindly to Mr Brown’s “pitifully banal attempts” to talk up British identity. My esteem for his views on this matter has since risen through reading his latest book, *My Scotland, our Britain: A Future Worth Sharing*.

2 Held on 18 September 2014, the referendum resulted in 55.3% of voters opting to remain in the UK against 44.7% opting to leave it.

how does a people differ from a nation? It seems to me that the word “nation” connotes a people that has a considerable measure of autonomy, and whose autonomy is viable.³ According to this definition, in the early thirteenth century the inhabitants of the island of Ireland—the “Irish”—were a people, but not a nation. They shared a defined territory, a language, a religion, and much culture besides. However, it was only when they acquired a viable instrument of island-wide self-government in 1297, through the creation of a parliament in Dublin, that they could be said to have achieved nationhood.

If being a nation is distinctively about a culturally definite people possessing a significant degree of autonomy, then nationalism is about the aspiration to acquire autonomy, increase it, or defend it. Nationalism need not be committed to secession or separation from some larger empire or nation-state. Thus, from the Union of the Scottish and English parliaments in 1707 until the 1970s, Scottish nationalism was largely about asserting and securing Scotland’s equal status *within* the United Kingdom and the British empire, not about withdrawing from them.⁴

If a people acquires a viable measure of autonomy, that, by my definition, makes them a nation. But does it make them a nation-state? A state is a set of institutions of self-government, but self-government comes in different degrees. Where autonomy is limited to the operation of cultural institutions such as native language schools, we might have a nation, but not yet, I think, a nation-state. Where autonomy extends to territory-wide legal and education systems and to a church, which also operates as a conduit of public welfare provision, there we have major elements of a state, but still not a state. Such was the position of Scotland in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. When, however, Scotland reacquired its parliament in 1999, we can say that it became a nation-state again. But different nation-states enjoy different *de iure* degrees of sovereignty; and the new Scottish state has only limited sovereignty over fiscal policy, and none at all over foreign policy. It is a nation-state, but it is not fully sovereign.

That is as much clarity as I can offer on the basic elements of the complex subject matter of the reflections that follow. In those reflections I will express a particular point of view. I am a Christian ethicist and what I have to say will give voice to a Christian, and therefore theological,

3 According to David Miller (*On Nationality*, esp. chapter 2, “National Identity”), a nation is an ethnic community that enjoys or aspires to a measure of autonomy in the organization of its public life through institutions of its own—whether religious, educational, legal, or political.

4 See Kidd, *Union and Unionisms: Political Thought in Scotland, 1500–2000*.

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point of view. There are only ever particular viewpoints; there is no view from nowhere. But that is not to say that different outlooks share nothing in common and do not overlap at significant points. A Christian is also a human being, inhabits the same world as others, and seeks to wrestle sense out of more-or-less shared experience. In what follows, therefore, I am confident that there is plenty that non-theologians, and non-Christians, will understand; and I would be very surprised indeed, if they found nothing with which to agree.

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