

Christian Memory and National Consciousness

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My original title for this paper asked a question: The Church—Focus for European Integration? Of course there is a great deal that the Church, whether we mean those of us in communion with Rome or include Christians of the Reformed and Orthodox Churches, is able and likely to do to focus integration in Europe. But as I come now to write it I find that the emphasis in what I want to say suggests a fairly modest proposal for some work at national level which would necessarily be ecumenical in character.

Christians, in Europe at least, are perhaps more of an obstacle in the way rather than any kind of focus of integration. True, not all the ancient and venomous conflicts that you see almost wherever you look in 'Europe' have religious or if you like ecclesiastical origins or dimensions. The problem of Basque separatism in Spain doesn't have any religious dimension. But whether it is Protestants and Catholics in Northern Ireland, or Croatian Catholics and Orthodox Serbs, or Christians and Muslims in Cyprus, to mention only the three bitterest conflicts (and religion is not the only factor in any of these cases), it is tempting to suggest that if there were a lot less religion around it would be easier to see how Europeans might be united in peace and prosperity. There are ancient Christian countries in Europe where anti-semitism isn't totally absent and it may be wondered whether Christians in Europe are any better placed to cope with Islam than our ancestors were at the gates of Vienna in 1683.

May I make my point by discussing an example? One country in Europe in which there are longstanding divisions between Christians of different traditions but no longer any likelihood of violence or persecution or even of serious economic or political discrimination is where I come from—Scotland. Returning home after thirty years in England, I have been interested to see how religion and politics can be brought together in what, for the purposes of this conference, I might describe, polemically no doubt, as a *mythology which may articulate a national consciousness*, or aspire to do so, but only by discounting large sections of the population, or appearing to do so.

In 1979 in a national referendum the Scots voted by a very narrow majority in favour of setting up a Scottish Assembly, a limited sort of parliament in Edinburgh, but the United Kingdom government, then of course a Labour administration, required that at least 40% of Scottish voters

should favour such an assembly before the referendum result was implemented—a requirement which was not fulfilled: 32.9% voted in favour in a 63.9% turn out. As a direct result, the Callaghan administration failed by one vote to survive a vote of confidence when some Scottish members of parliament withdrew their support and this led to Mrs Thatcher's first election victory. Of course it is a much more complicated story than that - but in 1988, after Mrs Thatcher's third election victory, with only ten Conservative M.P.s returned from Scotland to Westminster, a group of trade unionists, academics and prominent persons (including one Catholic bishop in the early stages although he soon resigned through pressure of other commitments) produced a report entitled *A Claim of Right for Scotland*.¹ This document argues that there is something distinctive about Scottish national identity (not such a controversial thought) and, secondly, that this distinctiveness has been preserved down the centuries through the existence of specific institutions such as the separate legal system (so different in its procedures that Irish charges about 'British justice' sound very hollow in Scotland) and also a separate established Church—the Church of Scotland. The document itself is represented as emerging from a distinctively Scottish theory of the State articulated in two earlier protests against misgovernment, in 1689 and in 1842, as well as in the better known Declaration of Arbroath of 1320. These are the emblematic dates, all of great religious significance, which best express and legitimate the Scottish sense of national consciousness.

In 1842 the General Assembly of the (established) Church of Scotland meeting in Edinburgh drew up its 'claim of right', insisting on the complete spiritual independence of the Church from lay patrons' power to install ministers against congregations' wishes, a claim rejected by the then Tory administration. This led in 1843 to the *Disruption*: a third of the ministers left the Church of Scotland with their congregations (losing their churches and manse in the process) and created the Free Church of Scotland—reunited with the Church of Scotland only in 1929 (more or less). In 1689, the second significant date, the Convention of Estates in Edinburgh declared that James VII of Scotland (and II of England) had forfeited the Scottish crown and should be replaced by his elder daughter Mary and her husband William of Orange. It laid down that the royal prerogative is prohibited from overriding the law, that parliament's consent is required for the raising of supply, and that parliament is to meet frequently and with freedom of debate. (It is not clear whether, in accepting the crown, William and Mary did so on these terms.) Thirdly and finally, in the Declaration of Arbroath of 1320, the nobility and clergy of Scotland affirmed their determination to maintain the independence of Scotland, even if the king voluntarily submitted to become a vassal of the English sovereign.

Now what is so interesting in the context of this conference about these three symbol-laden dates is that, first, while of course the Disruption within the Church of Scotland in 1843 demonstrated that the Church should be independent of lay patrons (and in its own way ran parallel with the anti-

Erastianism of the Tractarians in England and the anti-Gallicanism at the Vatican Council in 1870), it is not an event that could ever mean much to Catholics in Scotland, whether immigrants from Ireland already numerous in the 1840s or people from traditionally Catholic areas. Thus, if the Disruption is one major ecclesiastical event which emblemizes and even constitutes something distinctive about Scottish nationhood, then it is also an event which seems on the face of it to make Scottish Catholics (among others) effectively non-Scottish.

If the deposition of King James in 1689 demonstrated a distinctively Scottish conception of how the king must finally bow to the will of the nation (which is the claim), that is fine, but for Catholics 1689 means primarily that no papist could ever be sovereign or bear office in the United Kingdom (and it is in Ireland that 1689 has had the most fateful significance). What one might well want to celebrate as an epoch-making event in the development of constitutional theory (and Catholics were never all Jacobites), is also a source of continuing anti-Catholic virulence. As an emblem of Scottish political consciousness 1689 is, for Catholics, necessarily somewhat ambivalent.

The religious values of the Declaration of Arbroath are even more ambiguous if not outright contradictory. This is the founding event in the distinctively Scottish understanding of the sovereignty of the people over the monarch. It takes the form of a letter to Pope John XXII (second of the Avignon popes) and is 'the most eloquent statement of the case for national independence to be produced anywhere in medieval Europe'.² Basically, it is an appeal to the successor of St Peter for further 'favours and privileges on the Scottish realm and people' on the ground that he is the successor of St Andrew's brother. The main 'argument' in the text is the legend that the Picts (and presumably also the Scots, as Barrow says, 'through slight verbal similarity') came from Scythia (the country between the Carpathians and the Don) and St Andrew (according to Eusebius) took the Gospel to the Scythians. Besides the appeal to the authority of the Holy See, then, the Declaration also exploits the legend that St Rule (supposedly a fourth-century native of Patras) carried relics of St Andrew ever further westward until an angel told him to build a shrine for them in Fife at a place now called St Andrews. Of course Scots the world over celebrate their national patron saint, but it is a long way theologically from St Andrew's night dinners in Singapore to novenas in the Metropolitan Cathedral in Edinburgh. Once again, the amalgam in which the political theory emerged is religiously deeply ambivalent.

Now let me make it clear that I think there is a constitutional crisis in the United Kingdom, even if much less dramatic than in some other nation-states in Europe; and I think that the Church in Scotland, before the Reformation and since, has indeed played an important part not just in generating and maintaining a sense of Scottish identity but also in developing a distinctively Scottish understanding of power. The secretary of the Scottish Churches Council puts it this way:

From the Declaration of Arbroath in 1320, through the Claim of Right in 1689 against the Monarch, the Church helped give shape to an understanding of power as limited, dispersed and ultimately rooted in the people. This was expressed even more clearly in the second Claim of Right of 1842 by the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland.³

Fine—and so far as the constitutional question is concerned this ‘Scottish’ theory is of course polemicizing against the ‘English’ notion of the sovereignty of the crown in parliament which allegedly has in effect become, in Lord Hailsham’s phrase, ‘elective dictatorship’.⁴ I am content to say that this is all a worthwhile contribution to discussion of the British constitutional crisis. What interests me here, however, is the role assigned in this story to the Church—a much less complicated or bloodstained role than the Church might have had in some other emblematic histories of nascent national political consciousness.

There are obviously many other ways of maintaining a sense of national identity. Perhaps, for most people, it requires little or no specific historical backing, let alone significant events in which the Church has played a central part. In a population of over 5 million there are said to be about 750,000 active members of the established Church of Scotland and about the same number of Catholics. My thesis is, then, that the most significant movement in Scotland which has recognized the constitutional crisis of the British state, more significant in this respect than any movement in England and Wales,⁵ owes a great deal to the Church—to church leaders like Kenyon Wright at the level of organisation but above all to church history as a source of symbols in this articulation (if not creation) of a certain national consciousness. But it is an appeal to symbolic events in church history which, while they may help to express a sense of national consciousness for some people, have little or even negative significance for most people in the country. Church history, that suggests to me, is just too confused and confusing a source for emblems of national identity, at least without a good deal of deeper analysis.

As I said, this is only an example. But I suspect that we might go right round Europe and we should have little difficulty in showing, in one country after another, that the ‘identity’, the ‘integrity’, the ‘spirit’ of that ‘nation’ would owe a great deal to the Church. Only across the border, think of David Martin’s beautiful claims about the Church of England as the church of the English people (with country churchyards, cathedral choirs, George Herbert, the Prayer Book and so on). Think of how church history and national consciousness are interwoven in France, Germany, Poland, Russia, Croatia, Serbia and so on. In each case it would not only be a different story, it would be a differently composed story. There would be dates, places, anniversaries, shrines, executions, persecutions, martyrdoms, exiles, always something of immense significance which, at least in selective retrospect, have become a focus of the nation’s identity, in its resistance against some oppressor or whatever. It would take days to

recount all the different national stories. I suspect that, every time, what comes from the Church, far from opening us up to anything that crosses national frontiers let alone anything 'European', always re-immerses us—some of us—in a national memory selectively assembled from deeply ambivalent elements that isolates us as much as it 'identifies' us even within our own national culture. Thus, if the Church has such an ambiguous or even confusing a role in any single nation in Europe in what way could she ever be a focus of integration in Europe itself—in a Europe that stretches from Ballymena to Balaclava?

In his letter to his episcopal colleagues sent from Fatima on 13 May this year Pope John Paul II speaks of the special assembly for Europe of the Synod of Bishops due to take place at the Vatican from 28 November to 14 December. This meeting will be

particularly important in the context of the changes which are actively favouring a closer relationship between the nations and states of the continent . . . since the new situation which resulted from the events of the last months of the year 1989.

There are many ways in which preparations for the Synod are going ahead, as the Pope notes. He goes on to say something which seems particularly significant for my thesis in this paper:

Europe possesses a great heritage of cultures linked to each other in various ways by the leaven of the one Gospel in which they are rooted. In order to deepen our awareness of this fact and to draw from it helpful elements for the Synod there is to be a symposium in the Vatican on 28–31 October organised by the Pontifical Council for Culture together with the Secretariat of the Synod. Its theme will be '*Christianity and Culture in Europe: Memory, Awareness and Planning*'. Experts from Europe's different cultural traditions will reflect together for those four days and it is hoped that something of substance will go into the Synod's thinking.

It seems from the Pope's letter that these experts will all be Catholics. In his next paragraph the Pope says that

we need to give special attention to ecumenical cooperation (for) Sizable Christian communities in Europe belong of course to the Orthodox and Protestant traditions (so) Representatives of these groups have been invited . . . with the special status of Delegates of Communities united to us by the fraternal bond which exists between all Christians.

The Pope concludes by saying that

We are confident that they will be able to make a suitable contribution to the process of reaching decisions helpful for evangelization, making good use of the results of ecumenical dialogue already achieved. We also trust that their cooperation in the Synod will assist in the quest for the paths which we must now take in order to draw nearer to the fullness of unity willed by Christ.

Almost every phrase I have quoted would require interpretation; my point, here, is just that, while I rejoice that delegates will be taking part in the deliberations of the bishops come November, isn't it precisely at this preliminary stage of deepening Christian awareness of the extremely complicated ways in which Europe's great heritage of cultures has roots in the leaven of the one Gospel that serious ecumenical dialogue needs to take place? In fact what I am suggesting is really that, however important ecumenical dialogue is at the level of doctrine, ministry and so forth, what is also required, indeed even more urgently, I think, is ecumenical exploration of the religio-cultural emblems which divide Christians in the confusing sort of ways I have sought to illustrate with my discussion of Scotland.

Everywhere in Europe, I suggest, we suffer not only from a lack of awareness of our past but also from a lack of awareness of how selective our memories are. What taking Scotland as an example is meant to suggest is precisely that 'the nation is an eminently cultural fact whose roots plunge deeply into history'.⁶ In every country in Europe the national culture, the political consciousness, is already deeply affected by church history, a church history selectively remembered. Whether it is Fulda, Lourdes or Compostella, whether it is Patrick, Boniface, Benedict or Maximilian Kolbe, whether it is pilgrimages, commemorations, apparitions or whatever, these are the crucial and sometimes untouchable elements which, together with much else of course, have provided and sustained some kind of identity, consciousness and sensibility. These tapestries of national memory, fabrics which I do not want to say are simply fabrications or ideological constructions, are always, understandably, slanted. At worst they repress certain memories, excluding some minority's memories, even generating hatred (unintentionally or unconsciously) against this or that subgroup or immigrant community or whatever. Even at their best they tend towards nostalgia, anachronism and selective amnesia.

Before we can sensibly talk about the Church as any kind of focus of European integration we need, I suggest, much more awareness, much more analysis of the extremely heterogenous not to say conflict-laden memory Christians have, in one country after another, always differently. I think the Church, even taking that as meaning simply those of us in full communion with the Roman Church, cannot be a focus of unity in Europe except at the level of exhortation to remember human rights, moral standards and so forth (and I am not saying that that is unimportant) until we Christians, country by country, from Portugal to Georgia, from Finland to Greece sit down together to remember how each of our unique national cultures has been shaped by the Gospel, by ecclesiastical institutions, upheavals and interventions of one kind or another. In fact, not surprisingly, Christianity has such deep roots in every nation in Europe, is so deeply and so variously and often so divisively embedded in, interwoven with and constitutive of each unique national culture, that it is difficult to see, at this level, that European Christianity has enough self-awareness and repentant memory (so

to speak) to be a focus of integration for Europe unless (and this is where I shall stop) we think of European Christianity over against African Christianity, Latin American Christianity, Islam, or (nearer home) that agnostic liberal-democratic hedonistic utilitarian consumerism which (as the Pope keeps reminding us) is the most widespread system of values operating in western Europe—the system of values which most people in the liberated countries of eastern Europe are desperately eager to try for themselves. And that is a much wider problem, a much deeper temptation: it is all too easy, is it not, to define Europe over against Africa or the Middle East or wherever. Europeans have to remember their history and is that not the stage we are at, in one country after another: often ready to be ‘in Europe’ but not so sure, whether it’s cheeses or dialects or rules of the road or the social charter or whatever, just quite how and indeed whether what we in our local cultures value so much fits in, will survive, should survive in a uniting Europe? All I am saying is that, as Christians, in this uniting Europe, of course we do have much to contribute, we do after all have something to say, something to stand for, the Gospel if you like—but before we can get much further, it seems to me, we have to remember who we are, where we are, where we have come from, in this nation and that, and we can only do so ecumenically, even if it will sometimes be embarrassing, even shameful and often ludicrous. But with deepening common awareness of our divided Christian memory we should be better placed to challenge the likeliest form of ‘integration’ we shall see in Europe, which is, as the Pope clearly expects, ‘a neo-pagan culture of power and force’.

- 1 The document is most easily accessible in Owen Dudley Edwards (ed), *A Claim of Right for Scotland*, Edinburgh (Polygon) 1989.
- 2 G.W.S. Barrow, *Robert Bruce and the Community of the Realm of Scotland*, 3rd revd ed, Edinburgh (Edinburgh University Press) 1987, 308.
- 3 Kenyon Wright, in Jock Stein (ed), *Scottish Self-Government: Some Christian Viewpoints*, Edinburgh (The Handsell Press), 1989, 5.
- 4 See his 1976 Dimpleby Lecture.
- 5 Of course the crisis is on an entirely different plane in Northern Ireland.
- 6 Preparatory Document addressed to the 23 European episcopal conferences, *L'Osservatore Romano*, 17 April 1991.