

BREXIT & A GODLY NATIONALISM

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The Brexit vote recalls a prescient editorial from Reinhold Niebuhr’s journal *Christianity & Crisis* (a model for this magazine!) in January 1946 warning that “the movement toward centralized authority on a world scale contains a threat of world tyranny, particularly if the authority within the world is conceived merely in terms of police power in world government.”



A View of London with St. Paul's Cathedral from the Thames by John Gendall, 19th century. Held in private collection. Source: Wikimedia Commons.

In the aftermath of WWII's murderous horrors, this editorial supported the emerging United Nations and some abridgments of national sovereignty. Though perhaps excessive and overly optimistic, his article was at least still aware of the accompanying dangers to liberty and self-government.

The United Nations, once touted as humanity's last best hope, has long since receded as a cause of hope or, by its critics, fear, having become mainly a conversation forum and an occasionally somewhat useful instrument for humanitarian relief and peacekeeping operations. Other international accords that empower unelected global elites at the expense of self-governing local peoples have raised alarms about national sovereignty, particularly related to global warming.

Europe's ongoing subordination of nation-states to largely appointed managers and bureaucrats of the European Union in Brussels has been historically understandable after the cancerous nationalisms that ignited two world wars, killed tens of millions, and unleashed totalitarian ideologies that refined tyranny and torture to satanic levels.

But the EU project has seemed particularly unwieldy if not destructive when managing, or failing to manage, the weaker economies of southern Europe, especially Greece, and the ongoing Mideast migrant crisis, in which EU elites try to mandate open doors for unrestricted numbers of mostly young Muslim men. In the former, the Greeks and other Southern Europeans have resented Teutonic imposed economic stringency, tacitly admitting that their own vulnerable

economies cannot function competently under a common currency with wealthier northern Europe. In the latter much, if not most, of European opinion rejects the automatic acceptance of unlimited immigration, most spectacularly showcased by Angela Merkel's quick induction of over 1 million Muslim migrants without sufficient consideration of demographic and social impact. Subsequent increases in crimes like rape in Germany and Sweden, accompanied by mass murders from radicalized Muslims in France, have further and justifiably inflamed opinion.

Britain's somewhat surprising, at least to some, vote to quit the EU was not so directly tied to recent Mideast migration. Some commentators, typically pro-EU, highlighted the resentment of the British working class in depressed industrial areas over the impact of increased immigration from other EU nations, especially Eastern Europe. This focus has portrayed pro-Brexit voters as chauvinistic. Such critique demonizes Brexit while largely ignoring widespread British distress over the increasing loss of national decision-making to EU bureaucrats.

Much of Europe embraced or surrendered to gross nationalisms during the last century, and its elites with popular acquiescence sought atonement and protection under a new post-national identity through the EU. Britain stands nearly alone among European nations in having fairly consistently and often courageously resisted continental totalitarianism and aggressions. It emerged from WWII economically and politically depleted but at least with its virtue relatively intact.

Historically, of course, Britain's self-understanding has always set itself apart from continental Europe, as a global power tied to empire and later to the broader Anglosphere. It has also gloried in its traditionally Protestant and constitutional identity as a defiant defender of individual liberties against European statism, whether absolute monarchy or violent egalitarian revolutionary ideologies. The more outspoken Brexit advocates wondered why Britain should surrender to presumptuous EU clerks in Brussels claiming authority over Britain's Parliament and people that Napoleon and other continental tyrants were forcefully refused, thanks to the illustrious sacrifice of the British nation.

Britain maintains a more globally capable armed forces, including nuclear weapons, than do nearly all other European nations. It also arguably sustains a more vigorously defined spiritual sense of nationhood and distinct national purpose. This self-identity is hard to quantify but almost certainly facilitated Brexit at least as much as, if not more than, any resentment aimed at east European immigrants. Many British elites are discomfited by this ongoing British nationalism, as are of course European and global elites, including some Americans, who share continental European notions of post-nationhood and dismiss champions of nationhood, whether British or American, as reactionary.

As British Christian thinker Nigel Biggar has noted, traditionally Catholic cultures are historically familiar with transnational federations under a distant authority invested with spiritual purpose, while Protestantism was more

conducive to and helped construct nation-states, including some national churches which claimed their own distinct spiritual mandates. Britain obviously falls in the latter category, as does the United States. Polls indicate that British Christians were likelier to support Brexit than more secular voters, who seem more comfortable with a post-national reality.

Increasing numbers of American Christians, especially Evangelicals, originally more on the left but now increasingly on the right, have become outspoken against nationalism, which is ostensibly idolatrous and at odds with the Gospel. There is of course much truth in their analysis, as many nationalisms in recent memory have calamitously claimed lordship for themselves that belongs only to God.

Christian critics of nationalism typically offer little to no political alternative to nationalism other than a vaguely global humanitarianism. Conservative Christians rightly prioritize the primary loyalty owed the church as the universal Body of Christ, without considering the subordinate but still very important role of nations in providing for essential human needs from a Christian perspective of justice, dignity, and compassion. If nations are ordained by God as ongoing providential tools, then Christians cannot be dismissive of them.

Although ostensibly post-Christian in many ways, even with a state church headed by the crown, Britain, or at least the

majority of Britain that voted for Brexit, retains a sense of its nation's unique and even providential destiny. Such an appreciation is essential for any nation's public order, morale, and survival.

Extreme and dangerous nationalisms have incited wars and genocides, though there are relatively fewer such cases of excessive nationalism today. Post-communist Russia and sort-of post-communist China offer the greatest exceptions. Absent persuasive ideology or religion (though Putin exploits Russian Orthodoxy in a nation with few active religious practitioners), Russia's and China's regimes corral their peoples and exert themselves internationally based on nationalism. Most other threats to the global order are not mainly nationalist but partly religious or ethnic, especially relating to forms of political Islam, as Joshua Craddock's article in this issue asserts is the case with Iran.

Nationalism for many troubled nations would be a political salvation. Syria, Iraq, Afghanistan, Somalia, the Sudans, Libya, the DRC, Chad, and countless other countries are war torn by religious, ethnic, and tribal divisions. Surely it is godly to pray that their peoples discover a national purpose, a harmonious nationalism, for living and prospering together in relative peace, united in national loyalty if not in religion or tribal identification.

The unique British sense of nationhood—reasserted at least for

now by Brexit, and constructed over 1,000 years of shared experiences and political developments that have benefited all humanity, especially the United States—is surely a model for many in our world too often rent by tribe and tongue. Anglican Protestantism was both created by the British experience and an instrument in refining Britain's special identity.

What can that Anglican legacy teach all of us, Christian or not, about building just and sustainable societies and nations? Very likely a great deal. Rather than critiquing nationalism, more of Christianity needs a theology of just and godly nationalism.

As the January 1946 *Christianity & Crisis* editorial counseled, "Though we do not claim to have a simple Christian solution for each problem, we do believe that there are in the Christian faith sources of insight concerning the conditions of a solution, and that solutions become easier when sought with courage and the spirit of humility." As that editorial also reminded, nations who prosper and endure must not forget the "majesty of the Lord under whose ultimate judgment all our judgments stand." P

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