

## On Nationalism

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Patriotism, as political philosophers have often noted,<sup>1</sup> is not the same as nationalism. Patriotism, on the one hand, is an ancient emotion, the love of the *patria*, or one's country, a perfectly natural instinct, and one of the virtues of a loyal citizen from time immemorial. Nationalism, on the other hand, is a modern phenomenon, "a product of European thought in the last 150 years,"<sup>2</sup> which found its first great expression in the French Revolution of 1789.<sup>3</sup> The birth of this new consciousness — a consciousness obsessed with the collective identity and mystical unity of a single people — had, as the British parliamentarian Edmund Burke immediately realized, momentous consequences for the world; indeed, in his eyes, the sequence of events in contemporary France was the most "astonishing" that had ever occurred anywhere.<sup>4</sup> A new promethean force had entered history altering it forever. Kings and kingdoms would be swept away, and loyalties utterly transformed. Tyranny, moreover, would raise its head in a manner far more arbitrary than anything experienced in the past, and moderation and reason would fail.<sup>5</sup> Burke did not misread the signs of the times or the extent of the transformation. National flags (*le tricolore*), anthems (*La Marseillaise*) and altars with their sacred flames replaced the fallen dynastic symbols, as the cult of the nation took root.

What constitutes a nation? Language, for one thing, and race for another, although racism, strictly speaking, did not arise until the publication of Robert Knox's *The Races of Men* (1850) and Arthur de Gobineau's *Essai sur l'inégalité des races humaines* (1853-55). Geography is a third factor — has not nature assigned each nation its proper geographical bounds? — and religion a fourth.

Language, however, is paramount: without a common tongue a common identity is difficult to forge; language arises from life, from the primordial roots of our social existence. It is no coincidence that most of the modern nationalisms have been inspired by linguistic and literary revivals beginning with folklore: the spiritual nation, or the nation created by writers and artists, always precedes the political nation, or the nation-state (every nation, according to nationalist ideology, has a right to its own state). Since language implies kinship, and kinship implies race, it is usually not long before the notion of the nation as a single race becomes part of the nationalist ethos, although liberal nationalists resist this conclusion. Homogeneity deepens unity, and the body cannot be separated from the soul. The soul too must be homogeneous; consequently, religion is often tightly interwoven with nationalism, even when its rites are not observed. There are many examples of this alliance: the role of Catholicism as the bearer of Quebec nationalism in Canadian history is only the most apparent.

The rise of nationalism had many antecedents of which patriotism was one. Even the word "patriot," according to Hans Kohn, changed its meaning in the late-eighteenth century, acquiring a "new and graver implication," that of a "corporate personality, endowed with common thoughts, sentiments and purposes."<sup>6</sup> In other words, the patriot had become a nationalist, a representative of the new age. The concept of the nation (*natio*) was not invented in the eighteenth century; its modern meaning was bestowed both by the Age of Reason and the romantic reaction against rationalism. Peoples (and races) were classified in terms of their distinctive characteristics by the progenitors of the Enlightenment, and turned into collective individuals by the romantics. If the English historian of ideas Michael Biddiss is correct,<sup>7</sup> the modern understanding of the nation was a result of the general fragmentation of western thought following its secularization. Certain group ideas, including the notions

of class and race, which were usually submerged in older (religious) modes of social speculation, suddenly rose to the surface as independent obsessions. For certain nineteenth-century writers, each major idea — class, race and nation — became in due course the key to history itself. Karl Marx elevated the concept of class in this fashion; Arthur de Gobineau (whom Biddiss calls the Karl Marx of racism) did the same with the concept of race; an older German, Johann-Gottlieb Fichte, who lived in the time of Napoleon, did more or less the same with the nation.

Fichte was not the only founder of modern nationalism, but he was certainly one of its greatest apostles. His *Addresses to the German Nation* (*Reden an die deutsche Nation*), delivered in French-occupied Berlin in 1807, dwelt on the unique spiritual qualities possessed by the Germans, and their special mission — in American terms, “manifest destiny” — to chart the future course of western civilization. Europe was in crisis; a soulless modernity, personified by the “neo-Latin” French, was overrunning the higher and nobler values of its original founding peoples, to wit, the Germanic tribes and their latter-day descendants. (Fichte was thinking of Napoleonic imperialism, which was cultural as well as military.) Among modern Europeans, in his scheme of things, only the Germans were still attached to the deepest roots of their own spiritual and racial natures; they were the *Urvolk*, and, as a primordial people, they spoke the *Ursprache*, the only original (i.e., authentic) European language. Language — so the romantics believed — is a medium of spirit, since speech arises out of nature, and nature is the realm of divinity which forms and shapes the nations in a variety of preordained moulds. Languages are either living or dead, either in communion with nature and spirit, or severed from their depths (a dead language can still be spoken). French, on the one hand, was dead; its beauty, like French culture itself, was only the beauty of dried flowers; German, on the other hand, was living; the Germans still knew the ground of their being — in other words, God.

Germany, therefore, was the last authentic culture in Europe, the bearer of spirit, the particular in which, for the moment, the universal was enshrined, the elect nation. The German genius, according to Fichte, had the wings of an eagle, and alone could soar into the empyrean.<sup>8</sup> The other nations were mere sylphs!

These proud sentiments arose out of alienation: the conquered Germans, or at least the conquered German intellectuals, humiliated by their enemies, consoled themselves with claims of superiority and visions of glory. To the German nationalists after Fichte, the "fatherland" became both a value *sans pareil* and a political goal; in 1871, after Prussia revenged itself on France at Sedan, the dream of unification became a reality. But the spiritual nation had to be conceived first, and Fichte, the defender of the last bastion of true culture on a decadent continent, was its most important architect.

On another continent in a different century a newer nationalism, inspired by another conquest and another alienation, has conceived of another nation in terms of another struggle, of another "authentic" culture against another tide of soulless modernity that allegedly threatens its very survival. No Canadian can fail to recognize the analogy. Will the spiritual nation once again be followed by the political nation, or nation-state? Such is the power of the nationalist *Zeitgeist* that the answer seems almost self-evident, although history can never be counted on to repeat itself exactly. If Quebec has a Fichte, it is probably the late Lionel Groulx who, according to Norman F. Cornett, equated the French Canadian nation with the people of God charged with a special mission in North America.<sup>9</sup> Hence, *la survivance* is a religious duty.

Because nationalism strives for homogeneity, it must exclude from the nation those elements that, in the final analysis, cannot be rendered homogeneous, although perfect homogeneity is never attainable. This is its dark side, and the reason why every nationalism contains the

seeds of racism, even if these seeds do not always come to full bloom. If there are insiders — *un pays réel* — there are also outsiders, and the latter, by virtue of their presence alone, mar the harmony and beauty of the imagined whole. In the case of modern Germany, the Jews, however assimilated, were defined as non-Germans, and anti-semitism became the evil consort of German nationalism. The same was true of France during the Dreyfus era, when Maurice Barrès and Charles Maurras founded the super-nationalistic and antisemitic *Action Française*, a movement whose legacy has been reactivated by politicians such as Jean Le Pen. This process of exclusion is assisted by the fact that each nationalism requires a myth of national origin, and such myths establish sacred histories that invariably separate the elect from the non-elect. To be sure, national myths and sacred histories help to consolidate the identity of shaky new nation-states, as, for example, in contemporary Africa. However, while older tribalisms and parochial loyalties may be diminished in this fashion, the result only too often is the creation of a higher, more transcendent tribalism or pan-nationalism with greater power to impose its will on weaker neighbours. To the great German Protestant theologian Paul Tillich, who had ample opportunity to witness its ravages, nationalism was one of the major manifestations of the demonic in the twentieth century — a creative and destructive movement (the demonic always combines both elements) of inordinate proportions.<sup>10</sup> It is creative insofar as it embodies the drive toward community, but it is destructive insofar as it corrupts this drive by feeding collective pride until the latter swells to superhuman size with inhuman consequences. Since the demonic is a distortion of the holy, nationalism has a religious dimension.

This dimension can be described in various ways, but its most significant expression lies in the nationalistic tendency to endow the nation with supreme value and meaning in the eyes of its citizens. Once attention had

been drawn to this Fichtean and romantic concept, it soon acquired a kind of glory of its own, replacing the glory of older visions of the cosmos, in which, for example, the monarch was seen as God's appointee whose authority was the authority of God's rule. Now, however, the nation, so to speak, was sacred, not the sovereign; indeed, the more sacred the nation became, the less kings and queens became necessary. Nationalism has a republican bias, although it can subsist in monarchies as well. Whether republican or otherwise, the new nation-state of the nineteenth century and its successor in the twentieth century has made itself the object of most of the communal affections and passions of humanity, and only the exceptional person is immune to its allure. Witness the nationalistic crowds who tumble into the streets in the cities of the world whenever an occasion arises for public ecstasy. Post-Meech Lake Montreal on St. Jean Baptiste day in 1990 is only one recent instance. The idea has become an ideology, and ideologies are unavoidably religious because they lay claim to truth and ultimacy. This does not mean that nationalism and the other "isms" of our time (including racism) are actual religions, although they are sometimes described as "secular" or "ersatz" religions; it only means that they mimic the great religions and usurp some of their functions. They have also contaminated the great universal religions by sometimes reducing the God of biblical monotheism (in the case of Jewish, Christian and Muslim nationalism) to the status of a tribal deity.

Perhaps Christianity is particularly susceptible to nationalistic and racist distortions since it is never difficult to recast its central figure in assorted national and racial moulds. The "divinized Jesus," according to Eberhard Bethge, is readily "transformed into a Greco-Roman, mythical, imperialist, Germanic or American God-figure fitted to our socio-cultural needs."<sup>11</sup> The Aryan Christ of the German Third Reich is only the most notorious case of this metamorphosis, but other more

subtle examples abound. Jesus, at different times, has served as a French, Anglo-Saxon, Afrikaner and even a black nationalist race symbol.<sup>12</sup> Sometimes this is accomplished in the name of contextualization, but such contextualists tend to forget that the Christ of faith stands in judgement over against the peoples, nations and cultures of the earth, as well as in solidarity with them. They also forget that he cannot be dislodged from his Jewish matrix without uprooting Christianity itself from its intrinsic Jewishness, a procedure that immediately paves the way for anti-Judaism and antisemitism. Nationalism tends to lay claim to Christ and Christian symbolism, domesticating and even secularizing the latter in order to serve its own ends. It also tends (if it belongs to the western tradition) to adopt biblical history as its own history, fusing the modern nation with Israel of old, thereby endowing the one with the attributes of the other — special election, providential protection and messianic significance. Is not America really Israel, and is not “God’s American Israel” the “darling of divine providence?”<sup>13</sup> Did not God place the whites on the southern tip of Africa in the first place and establish a covenant at Blood River with the Afrikaner nation?<sup>14</sup> However, to appropriate sacred history in this manner and to link such exalted notions to the military and political power of modern nation-states, is to indulge in dangerous illusions. A nemesis awaits, and it is likely to be painful.

The religious rhetoric of nationalism, and the affinity between nationalism and religion — both, after all, entail the deepest of feelings, and both invoke dedication and sacrifice in the name of transcendent ideals — suggest that this particular demon will not be exorcized from the modern consciousness for an extremely long time. Clearly, it meets a need of the human condition. We want our nations and races, our flags and drums, our motherlands and fatherlands. We are no longer content with mere patriotism; we crave our family trees and myths of origin. Such is the frequently “atomized” nature of our social life

in the twentieth century; as Hannah Arendt once observed, our self-respect can only be restored by some form of propagandistic mass movement in which principles of exclusion are no less important than principles of inclusion.<sup>15</sup> This is the problem with nationalism and its irredeemable aspect. Even the so-called "integral nationalism" invented by the French in the last century, a nationalism that emphasizes the psychic rather than the racial foundations of nationhood, suffers from this defect. Its founder, Maurice Barrès, who, incidentally, was influenced by Fichte, soon made the transition from psychic (i.e., cultural) to physical rootedness in his worship of the "earth and the dead" (*la terre et les morts*), or the soil and martyrs of a nation.<sup>16</sup> Consequently, a merely cultural or linguistic nationalism, or a nationalism willing to baptize anyone willing to embrace the culture and the language into the nation, is no guarantee against exclusivism. Sooner or later, in one form or another, the dark spirit rears its ugly head.

I am a patriot, not a nationalist, Canadian or otherwise. I love my country in the old fashioned sense, but I do not embrace a mystique of Canadianism, nor any of its geographical (e.g., "northness") and literary (e.g., the popular "Canlit" cult) trappings. I certainly do not think that Canada possesses a special soul or a providential mission or a unique destiny. I do not think that Canadians are called by God to occupy the seats of power in history, or that this or any century "belongs to Canada." There is no Canadian "race," and I am glad of the fact. Canada is not, and cannot be homogeneous, and therefore cannot be a nation-state as nationalists usually understand the term. This is not a weakness but a strength. The so-called Canadian nationalists (I am not thinking of Quebec) are only half-hearted in their nationalism; patriotism, not nationalism, prompted the opposition to free trade with the United States, although a kind of "maple leaf" superiority-complex echoed throughout the debate, especially in the editorial pages of the *Toronto Star*. If, however, the



logic of nationalism prevails in Quebec, and a Quebec nation-state arises on ex-Canadian soil, this situation could change. A counter-nationalism, fed by anger and alienation on the part of a rejected and humiliated Canada — the rupture, contrary to some Quebec opinions, would not be harmonious — could conceivably devour patriotism but with unfortunate consequences, e.g., the suppression of bilingualism and a militant new Anglo-Canadianism. Extremist political parties, now insignificant in size, would certainly attract unprecedented support. Unlike some Canadians, I would consider this a monumental tragedy.

### Notes

1. Elie Kedourie, *Nationalism* (New York: Frederick A. Praeger, 1961), pp. 73-74.
2. *Ibid.*, p. 74.
3. Hans Kohn, *The Idea of Nationalism: A Study in its Origins and Background* (Toronto: Collier Books, 1967), p. 3.
4. Edmund Burke, *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1969), p. 92.
5. *Ibid.*, p. 301.
6. Kohn, *The Idea of Nationalism*, p. 457.
7. Michael Biddiss, *Father of Racist Ideology: The Social and Political Thought of Count Gobineau* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1970), p. 104.

8. Johann-Gottlieb Fichte, *Addresses to the German Nation*, trans. R.F. Jones and G.H. Turnbull, ed. George Armstrong Kelly (New York: Harper & Row, 1968), pp. 73-74.
9. Norman F. Cornett, "Lionel Groulx's Rationale for French-Canadian Nationalism," *Studies in Religion/Sciences Religieuses* 18, No. 4 (1989): 42.
10. Paul Tillich, "The Demonic," in *The Interpretation of History*, trans. N.A. Rasetzki and Elsa L. Talmey (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1936), pp. 120-121; see also Ronald H. Stone, *Paul Tillich's Radical Social Thought* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1980), pp. 58-61.
11. Eberhard Bethge, "Christology and the First Commandment," in *Remembering for the Future: Jews and Christians During and After the Holocaust*, Papers presented at an International Scholars' Conference, Oxford, July 10-13, 1988 (Pergamon Press, 1988), p. 691.
12. See my book, *Infected Christianity: A Study of Modern Racism* (Kingston and Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1988).
13. Reinhold Niebuhr, *The Irony of American History* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1952), pp. 25, 70.
14. *Verwoerd Speaks: Speeches, 1948-1966*, ed. A.N. Pelzer (Johannesburg: APB, 1966), pp. 208-209.
15. Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (Cleveland and New York: Meridian Books 1958), p. 356.
16. See Robert Soucy, *Fascism in France: The Case of Maurice Barrès* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1972), p. 39.