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Identity

Christians have a precarious belonging in the world. They are members of a particular community with unique cultural, historical and political experiences that have shaped its sense of identity. Christians are also citizens of another reality – the Kingdom of God.

The New Testament describes this latter identity in transcendent and eternal terms. Christians are 'the people of God', they are 'a holy nation', they are 'citizens of the household of God', they are 'aliens and strangers in the world'. Christians are those who seek a 'city whose builder and maker is God'. Clearly the early church understood its identity from the perspective of God's claims on their lives, and they shaped their citizenship by the eternal perspective of life expressed in the risen and ascended Lord.

Although the primary identity of the first church communities was 'in Christ', paradoxically this did not obliterate a particular ethnic identity (the result of an accident of birth) but fulfilled it. By judging and affirming the values of each culture and by relativising the claims of allegiance made by every ethnic group, the gospel places our cultural identity in the realm of redemption and offers us a new beginning. Christian identity is therefore incarnational. It is rooted in the time, place and people with whom we live and share our social and cultural life, but its values and social ethics are shaped by the life of Christ.

This is our precarious identity, expressed in the Biblical wisdom that we are to be 'in the world but not of it'. And this is the challenge for Christians in a society that has idolised our nationalist ideologies and sectarianised our cultural differences. How do we affirm our particular community's identity without reinforcing a negative identity that defines itself over and against another? How do we identify with the legitimate and unique characteristics of our community yet maintain a prophetic distance that allows us to speak of God's inclusive love for all peoples?

Derek Poole

Editor

comment

Janet Morris

What's in a name?

Have you ever sat in a group, had to give your name and say one thing about yourself? Despite the cringe factor, it's interesting to hear what people say. Even the most flippant remarks reveal something because they are, in small or sometimes larger ways, about identity.

In one such group I was recently confronted with an aspect of my own identity or, more properly, lack of it! In this particular context it was appropriate to identify oneself by denomination and people around me promptly did so. However, when it came to my turn, there was a strangled silence. As I attempted to say I was Presbyterian, which as a fully paid-up 'card-carrying' member of a congregation I actually am, the words just would not come out. To the considerable entertainment of those present, the most I could admit to on my first attempt was that I went to a Presbyterian Church. The second time around I gave up the struggle altogether and surprised myself by saying that I was post-denominational.

What does this mean - and does it matter? I'm currently in the process of finding out. Does it mean that I hate Presbyterianism in all its forms, that I've lost my faith or that I've suffered an irretrievable breakdown in my relationship with John Calvin (the mind boggles!)? Or is it that I want to throw all of the past away and join a new 'non-traditional' grouping? The answer to all of the above is a resounding 'No'! I have **not** lost my faith and, while Calvin and I may not be bosom buddies, there are things about him that I respect and appreciate. Also, surveying the perniciously divisive nature of Protestantism, the last thing I want is to start another church. [Nor is this specific to Presbyterianism - it is denominationalism - rather than any particular manifestation of it that I am increasingly unable to identify with.]

Why is this? I turned to the Internet for help and discovered that I was not alone. Indeed, it seems that post-denominationalism is rampant in the US, although it means different things to different people. For many it has meant leaving the 'traditional' church and joining one either of the charismatic new churches or being affiliated to the Cell Church movement - and there is overlap

between those two. For others such as myself it means a questioning of priorities and identity within a mainline denomination. Space does not permit an analysis here of the wider societal and theological contexts which have spawned post-denominationalism, but it seems that more and more of us are impatient with the old denominational boundaries. It's not that we want to destroy them or cease to value the good aspects of the heritage they represent, it's more about seeing a bigger picture, having a larger vision which relativises denominational importance. That picture is, I think, the Kingdom of God, which crosses all of our boundaries and woos and shocks us into larger concerns than our own. In the context of that Kingdom, what it means to be committed to Jesus Christ is more important than the particular label we wear.

This issue of **Lion and Lamb** is about identity. As Christians in Northern Ireland we need richer, freer identities. We need not so much to destroy all our boundaries as to see beyond them to the Household of God where all of us belong in the extravagant embrace of the Trinity. If such a vision were stronger in us, perhaps those currently outside the front door would find it easier to come in.

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from the director

The helicopter has become one of the potent symbols of conflict in today's world. I can remember being told that its rise was predicted in scripture by references to giant flying insects with a vicious sting. This gave them an apocalyptic significance, an image enhanced by scenes in Vietnam War movies, most famously in 'Apocalypse Now'.

It has certainly been a central image of the conflict in Northern Ireland, the constant presence of a hovering eye in the sky with the monotonous hum of its whirring blades. For those of us brought up in the relative calm of East Belfast 'The helicopter's up!' became a byword indicating there was trouble somewhere on the other side of the city.

On occasions we too had our hovering presence, and I remember the street being swept by a searchlight several times in the early seventies. But most of our choppers were on their way somewhere else, to be a watchful presence, monitoring tense situations and deterring the threat of terrorists.

Helicopters have stood guard over some of the most horrific incidents, recording events, guiding the response. Without them the security forces were unable to move in many areas and they became their major means of transport, moving people and stores and deploying patrols.

In their own way they have also become a key image of our peace. I remember watching a flight of three helicopters circle the Stormont estate in the last moments of the negotiations for the Belfast Agreement. Their final descent was a more accurate indication that the process had reached a conclusion than the predictions on television.

Over the last two years, as the process has staggered through each impasse, we have been treated to helicopter diplomacy. British and Irish leaders, landing on the lawn at Stormont to rescue the peace, eventually became a symbol of frustration rather than hope. But this time, as the crisis in the process deepens, no rescue helicopter is coming.

There is of course another image of the helicopter in our world, the image of rescue. Get into difficulty on a mountain and helicopters are sent to your aid. Yet I write this in a week in which first three and then five helicopters were all that were available to rescue some 10,000 people stranded in trees as a result of the floods in Mozambique.

Have you ever noticed the number of helicopters sitting on the ground at RAF Aldergrove? What unlimited resources would be deployed in the event of our peace collapsing? To protect us from what? Simply put - ourselves.

The gospel confronts us all about self-centred absorption with our crisis and ourselves. We cannot ignore the global context in which we struggle with our peace process. Not that the issues we face are unimportant. But the equivalent of the population of Northern Ireland have just lost their homes in floods at the other end of the world, and they have only five helicopters!

What do we think God's perspective is on this? On God's scale of justice where do we as resource rich Europeans self-righteously defending the justice of our cause in Northern Ireland sit on the Mozambique issue? Do we in fact share responsibility through bad stewardship of God's creation?

Natural disasters on such a scale confront us with our common humanity. That humanity is frail and fractured, for the tribes of Africa are no more at peace with themselves than the tribes of Ireland. But it begs the question as to what the real crisis is for our society in a global context that increasingly threatens us all. Does it really matter if a piece of road is in a unionist or nationalist area? Is this a Protestant or Catholic tree?

David Porter

THE END GAME OF THE END TIMES

(GOD, LAND AND NATION)

David Porter

The part played by national identity in the history of the twentieth century stands only to be surpassed by its role in shaping the affairs of the first decade of the next. Ideas of nationhood and ethnicity have been potent in human affairs since ancient times. Yet never have they coalesced around issues of politics, power, territory, religion and military might to such effect as in the modern world.

Notions of national self-determination and territorial integrity determine how all of us understand the world in which we live and how we relate as peoples to one another. So dominant are these ideas that it is easy to forget it has not always been so. Nor is it necessarily the case that this ordering of the world is fixed for all time.

National Identity

Ideas of national identity are in a constant state of transition, consequently impacting politics, culture and society. Communities sense this and at different points in their history respond either with great energy and confidence or with profound fear for their future. The insecurity and threat this generates results in conflict, commonly called ethnic conflicts, but increasingly referred to as identity conflicts. The vast majority of wars in our world are the violent attempt at resolving such conflicts.

The strong sense of belonging to a people and a place is an inherent part of how God created humanity. We are communal beings who experience wholeness in the context of community. But we are also fallen creatures who feel threat and in turn threaten, turning the legitimate boundaries of belonging into barriers. Rather than being the interface through which we experience the diversity and creativity of God's human family such boundaries become the fracture lines of difference and division. In place of celebration we have conflict, domination of the other through the misuse of power rather than the powerful discovery of the rich interdependence of God's creation.

So the legacy of these forces in human affairs is deeply ambiguous. Love of people and place inspires greatness. Great music, scientific discovery, visionary leadership, often have their roots in love of nation but are truly great when they have the capacity to transcend such barriers. Yet in the name of people, place and tribal potentates we have the capacity for such violence and horror. Our capacity to cross the barrier to kill what we do not understand, or simply choose to hate, constantly supersedes our worst expectations.

New World Order

Understanding the potency of these issues and the Christian response to them is crucial to the witness of the church around the world. Central to our understanding of all world events is the life and ministry of Jesus. This is the pivotal point of human history. Jesus, what he said, how he lived, was a profound point of transition in the culture and traditions of an ancient people, in a promised land, worshipping a God who had chosen them to be his people.

The core of his message was a call to repentance, to turn to God and be transformed. Key to this transformation was a new world order, the kingdom of God. This was what his people had been longing for. They had been brought to this place to be a witness to the nations of the world, but had experienced failure and exile. Now was a new start, a new era, the 'day of the Lord' in which the world would see the salvation of God, and the hopes of Israel would be fulfilled.

To seek first the kingdom of God becomes the primary duty of the people of God. At the heart of our relationship with God is the prayer 'your will be done on earth as it is in heaven'. This is a prayer for the kingdom, the rule of God, to be evident in the life of the Christian, in the community of the church and in the wider world of human affairs.

But there is a cost. God's people are in every nation, God's land is the new heaven and earth and God is also the God of the Samaritan and the Gentile. To worship God is to belong to a new humanity whose homeland is not in this world. To serve God is to be part of his plan for the redemption of the whole world. To follow him is to declare a new allegiance to Jesus as Lord and to engage in a struggle against all that is in conflict with the kingdom.

For Paul, an early follower, this struggle was personal. It was against the forces of the world, the flesh and the devil that seek to destroy the work of God's spirit in our lives. Yet the struggle was at the same time profoundly communal. After all, his zeal in persecuting the followers of Jesus had been pure, driven by love of his nation, his land and his God, ancestral voices that spoke only of betrayal in the teachings of Jesus.

The cherished rituals, traditions and national aspirations of his people were seemingly being threatened from within. Yet his encounter with Jesus brought about a transformation in how he understood the proud heritage of his past. Though nurtured as part of the ruling class to which he still belonged, the claim of his people on his energy and loyalty was as

nothing compared to the claim of Christ. Now Paul saw no one through human eyes but through the eyes of the love and grace of God.

It is this capacity more than any other which is a test of our grasp of the radical conversion at the heart of Christianity. As people of the end times do we pass the test of the end times? Captured by the love and grace of the living God have we destroyed the dead idol of god, land and nation that continually competes for our allegiance?

Faithful Choices

This test is laid bare in the prophecy of Revelation. The revelation comes to John in a context where the state has become all-powerful. The power and virtues of the Roman Empire had become embodied in its emperor god. The state, in his person, claimed the total allegiance and worship of the people it ruled. In a series of cosmic dramas God warns of the struggle of his people against such forces. They are antichrist, the opposite of all that Christ is and stands for as the lamb who was slain for the salvation of the world. For his followers the end times present choices, and the consequences of making faithful choices are not always pleasant.

We consider ourselves so removed from these ancient worlds, whether the world of ethnic nationalism in Israel or the totalitarian state of the Roman imperial system, that it is easy for us to assume we are immune from the dynamic of their powerful lure. Yet in modern history, totalitarian state fascism and communism, and the ethnic convulsions that grip many parts of our world demonstrate that these issues remain a test of faith for many. And when presented with the need to act in the name of **our** people, in defence of **our** land and ultimately in obedience to **our** tribal god it remains all too easy for Christians to succumb to the temptation.

As we seek to be faithful witnesses in a world that rips itself apart we need consistently to apply biblical tests as to how our belief shapes our belonging. As in all aspects of Christian behaviour we need to begin by removing the beam of our 'acceptable' patriotism before focusing on the mote of others' 'unacceptable' nationalism. In this task three questions serve to unmask our conspiracy to collude with the ancestral voices of our tribe.

God's Side

Whose side is God on? Whose Promised Land? Who are the people? The quest for legitimacy for **our** side is inherent in

any conflict. To claim the blessing of God for **our** cause is the ultimate sanction for a crusade to defend **our** territory and to overcome the enemy. Claims to the exclusive sanction of the divine; investing the land of our birth with mystical status that binds us to its cause; the proud declaration that **we** are the people ... all are founded on and fuelled by a sinful distortion of God's good gifts of faith, place and community.

We therefore need to be careful in facing this temptation. The sovereign God is involved in and concerned with human affairs, including the destiny of states and nations. They rise and fall within the operation of his sovereign power and judgement. Sometimes the enemy is actually the agent of God in the judgement of a nation. We have been given the stewardship of the earth as a trust from God, a stewardship that binds us in relationship to a sense of place. God has set each person in a network of relationships in family and community that reflect the cultural diversity of his creation.

But to presume God's special favour for a particular place or people is a prerogative that is not ours. Unfortunately for fifteen hundred years since the conversion of Constantine the church has on too many occasions conspired in this deception. In different contexts it declared the community within which it was placed to be the people of God and so presumed that to belong to Christ who is for us implies that he is also for our nation and against other nations.

In this way Christianity has consistently aligned itself with the state, with political power, with the territorial ambitions of rulers, and in effect reduced God to a tribal deity who fights on behalf of a particular people. The spiritual consequences of falling to the temptation of God, land and nation is an idolatry that has often blinded God's people to the demands of the way of Christ.

The real question we must answer is, "Who is on God's side?" The answer depends on the extent to which we understand that the redemption of God with its profound consequences for how we now live, is ultimately not of this world. It is demonstrated by love of our people, and best expressed by introducing them to a living relationship with Christ rather than giving them the false gospel of national salvation. For God so loved the world, every people in every place, that he sent his Son, good news of great joy to all. To be on the side of this God means we too are committed to every human being, whatever their national identity, for God loves them and their people as much as he loves our people and us. That's God's grace in action for you.

For God and ...

In Ireland Christians of all traditions have a long history of flirting with the temptation to listen to ancestral voices. The idols of holy Ireland and holy Ulster have long found their place in our hearts. Is it possible for the Christian to be for God and Ulster, or Ireland, or any homeland? Can it be that the sovereign God, a jealous God, has acted in history to break our idols? The god of Eire (united, Catholic, nationalist Ireland) is demolished on the back of Ulster Protestant resistance. The god of Ulidia (righteous, Protestant, unionist Ulster) is brought to ruin on the rock of Republican rebellion.

'Christ for Ulster' begs the question 'Is Ulster for Christ?' The hatred vented in the demonisation, verbal abuse and sectarian violence of the last thirty years suggests not. 'Faith of our Fathers' becomes meaningless ritual without a true conversion expressed in faithfulness to the law of Christ. The bitterness, anger, violence and terror vented by those who seek to evade any moral responsibility for the course of events confirms the emptiness of religious labels.

It has often been said that the real division in Ireland is in the hearts and minds of the Irish people: hearts and minds that have been seduced by the worship of false gods, whispered by ancestral voices. But Jesus is in the business of transforming hearts and renewing minds, calling people to repent for the kingdom of God is near. Such repentance will not necessarily lead to the healing of the land or the nation, for we must not replace destructive idols simply with a baptised model, the flaw of the Constantinian settlement.

The future of Christianity in the coming century needs a more authentically New Testament model, a radical gospel of hope, declaring in word and deed the coming of the kingdom of God in our midst. This is the end game of the end times.

David Porter is ECONI's Director.

THE END

we will not have home rule

Alwyn Thomson

Most of us would accept that there is some connection between our views of God, land and nation. After all, the Old Testament has the relationship between these three at its core, while the New Testament presupposes that relationship and develops it in the light of the coming of Jesus.

Through the centuries Christians have continued to reflect on - and struggle with - the relationship between these three, not least in Ireland. Few of us would dispute that understanding this relationship is important in understanding Ireland's past and, perhaps, its present.

This article explores how one understanding of the relationship between God, land and nation shaped Protestant responses and objections to Home Rule in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

The Threat of Home Rule

The first Home Rule Bill was introduced in 1886, provoking an overwhelmingly hostile reaction from all sections of Irish Protestantism - not least the churches. The Church of Ireland called a special synod and the Presbyterians a special meeting of the General Assembly. Both bodies produced a series of resolutions strongly critical of the proposals. The denominational paper of the Methodists proclaimed: "Home Rule for Ireland means not only war against the crown rights of England, but against the crown rights of Christ...its inspiration is religious antipathy, its methods plunder, its object Protestant annihilation"¹

Protestant hostility was not only channelled through denominational structures. Mass rallies, which cut across divisions of denomination, class and politics, were organised in opposition to Home Rule. In 1892, 12,000 delegates met in Belfast for a great Convention. The meeting began with prayer from the Anglican Archbishop of Armagh, Scripture reading from a former Presbyterian moderator and the singing of a Psalm. Two resolutions were proposed, one opposing Home Rule and one expressing sympathy and support for Unionists outside Ulster. Among those proposing or speaking in support of the motions were leading clergy from all the main Protestant denominations.

The demonstration of 1892 also revealed the breadth of Unionist opposition to Home Rule. Liberals and conservatives in both politics and religion stood side by side. The Orange Order was present, but only as one strand among the Unionist community. The organisers of the Convention, fearful that their opposition could be misrepresented as nothing more than sectarian prejudice, were well aware of the need to demonstrate the breadth and coherence of the Unionist position.

Renewal of the threat of Home Rule in 1912 provoked another series of rallies and public meetings. On Easter Tuesday 1912, 100,000 gathered in Belfast to hear Andrew Bonar Law, leader of the Conservative Party, pledge his support to the unionist cause. Again, at this ostensibly political event the meeting began with prayer, scripture readings and hymn singing, with the Anglican Primate and Presbyterian Moderator leading.

1912 also witnessed a more overtly religious demonstration against Home Rule. The Presbyterian Convention, held in Belfast in February, attracted an estimated 50,000 Presbyterian men - half the male Presbyterian population of Ulster. The arguments used were by now familiar, though there was a distinctive appeal to their fellow Presbyterians in Scotland and a declaration entrusting their cause to God.

Ulster Covenant

Ulster unionism delivered its definitive response to Home Rule on Saturday, 28 September 1912 with the signing of Ulster's Solemn League and Covenant. Across Ulster Protestant men and women attended services in their local churches before gathering to sign the Covenant. In Belfast, the leaders of Irish unionism held their service in the Ulster Hall before moving to the City Hall for the signing.

At the Ulster Hall Dr William McKean, former Moderator of the Irish Presbyterian Church, addressed the congregation. He told them:

*"The Irish Question is at bottom a war against Protestantism; it is an attempt to establish a Roman Catholic ascendancy in Ireland to begin the disintegration of the Empire by securing a second parliament in Dublin."*²

At the City Hall Carson was the first to put his name to the Covenant, followed by Lord Londonderry. Behind the political leaders of Irish Unionism came its religious leaders as the Church of Ireland Primate, the Presbyterian Moderator and the Methodist President signed up. By the end of the day the Covenant and the similar Declaration (signed by women) contained 471,414 signatures.

Clearly the Ulster Covenant drew on the older Scottish tradition of covenanting. However, despite some initial attempts to model the Ulster Covenant on these early Scottish Covenants what was published in the end bore little resemblance. It read:

Being convinced in our consciences that Home Rule would be disastrous to the material well-being of Ulster as well as the whole of Ireland, subversive of our civil and religious freedom, destructive of our citizenship, and perilous to the unity of the Empire, we, whose names are underwritten, men of Ulster, loyal subjects of His Gracious Majesty King George V, humbly relying on the God whom our fathers in days of stress and trial confidently trusted, do hereby pledge ourselves in solemn Covenant throughout this our time of threatened calamity to stand by one another in defending for ourselves and our children our cherished position of equal citizenship in the United Kingdom, and in using all means which may be found necessary to defeat the present conspiracy to set up a Home Rule Parliament in Ireland. And in the event of such a Parliament being forced upon us we further solemnly and mutually pledge ourselves to refuse to recognise its authority. In sure confidence that God will defend the right we hereto subscribe our names. And further, we individually declare that we have not already signed this Covenant. God save the King.

On the surface this Covenant is a political tract with little theological substance. This might create the impression that the religious significance of the events was not central. However, that overlooks the context in which the Covenant was drawn up. Ulster Protestants did not need the

significance of religious belief for political life explained to them, they understood it perfectly well. Nor must the Covenant be detached from the wider events of the day. Ulster Day was a religious event. The leaders of Irish Protestantism and the ordinary men and women in the pews signed the Covenant together. Those of a liberal religious disposition stood side by side with those of a conservative religious disposition and sang 'O God our help in ages past'. On Ulster Day, Protestant Churches and the Protestant community were indistinguishable. The cause of true religion and the cause of Ulster unionism ran in perfect harmony.

Home Rule - The Issues

Arguments against Home Rule were repeated from public platforms, in parliament, in books, pamphlets and newspapers throughout the years of crisis. What is noticeable is the consistency of these arguments. While there may have been differences of emphasis and nuance depending on the speaker and the audience, the overall thrust of unionist objections comes across clearly.

First, Home Rule posed a religious threat. Against a background of Catholic renewal in Ireland, Catholic involvement in the Home Rule movement and a more conservative move in Catholicism generally, Protestants could see nothing but harm arising from an arrangement that left Catholicism as the dominant power in the land. Catholicism was held to be fundamentally anti-Protestant. Catholicism was also viewed as essentially illiberal in its social and educational values. Protestants feared a new ascendancy of Catholicism, which would impose this religious and social illiberalism on the whole of Ireland. Thus, when Protestants said Home Rule is Rome Rule, they believed it.

Nor was concern over the role of Catholicism restricted to those on the more conservative edges of Protestantism. Presbyterian liberals, having only recently been freed from the illiberalism of one established church, had no desire to return to a new form of establishment under Catholicism. This was an issue that united the unionist community across the religious and political spectrums.

So, argued former Presbyterian moderator Rev Samuel Prentice, "The contention of the Irish Protestants is that neither their will nor their religious liberties would be safe in the custody of Rome. In an Irish parliament civil allegiance to the Holy See would be the test of membership, and would make every Roman Catholic member a civil servant of the Vatican. That parliament would be compelled to carry out the behests of the Church. The Church...claims to be above Civil Law, and the right to enforce Canon Law wherever she is able."³

Second, unionists argued then - as now - that they were not part of the Irish nation but that they were part of the British nation:

"[Ulster Protestant] ideals are the ideals of the whole British nation. They are not Irish in that sense and England and Scotland form part of their ideals. Their ideals are Imperial ideals...[We] regard the term Briton as the emblem of liberty. We have prospered under it and we will take nothing less. And instead of the sentimental humbug about Ireland's well-being...we maintain our own ideals because we are connected with Britain by ties of blood...religion and history; and we object to being swallowed

*up in the claim that...we should come into [Redmond's] fold because we live in Ireland."*⁴

But more than this, Ulster Protestant identity was bound up, not just with Britishness, but with Empire - the greatest, wealthiest Empire the world had ever known. Ulster Protestants had helped to build this Empire and had benefited from it, not least in the industrialisation of the North East and the Lagan Valley in particular:

*"We hear a great deal of the false sentiment of Ireland a nation... We Ulstermen also have a sentiment, but it is a pride in the greatness of British Imperial citizenship - pride in the share we have taken in peace and war, in science and art, in Government and colonisation, in everything that went to the building of this Empire - pride in the memory of great deeds done by our forefathers."*⁵

A third line of argument concerned the threat posed by Home Rule to the economic well being of Ulster, and Belfast in particular. The difference between industrialised and progressive Belfast and the agrarian and backward state of the rest of Ireland was marked, and Ulster Protestants knew why:

*"Under the Union every industry in Ulster and Belfast especially is flourishing; but what industry has flourished in the South and West of Ireland, unless it be moonlighting, boycotting, agitation, resisting the law and crime?"*⁶

Home Rule, it was believed, would lead to the running of this great industrial city being placed in the hands of farmers and economic incompetents. Belfast's wealth would be used to prop up a rotten economy. Separated from the wealth and stability of Empire, Belfast's industries would never be able to raise capital to maintain their progress. Finally, Ulster Protestants also argued against Home Rule on the basis of their understanding of the constitution. No government, they argued, had the authority to forcibly expel citizens against their will:

*"Unionists hold...that their claim to remain under...the Imperial Parliament is an inalienable right of their citizenship which no Government of any time has the right to deprive them of. There need be no mistake about this, it is the position which Ulster has taken up all along; it is the heart and the essence of what has come to be called the Ulster Question."*⁷

Nor was this considered an obscure or unusual argument. Bonar Law, leader of the Conservative Party, Lord McNaghten, Lord of Appeal, and AV Dicey, the greatest constitutional theorist of that time, all advanced this argument.

The objections to Home Rule, then, were multiple in nature. It is mistaken to adopt a reductionist approach. Such approaches were not uncommon either then or now. For some, Unionist objections could be reduced to religious bigotry - and, therefore, not to be discussed but to be faced down. Thus the liberal politician, the Earl of Crewe, asserted that the only sentiment involved in Ulster unionism was 'that of hatred to the Church of Rome'.⁸ And Augustine Birrell, the Liberal Chief Secretary for Ireland, claimed in 1913 that 'the pulse of the [Ulster unionist] machine is religious bigotry'.⁹

On the other hand some Home Rulers reduced unionist objections to economic concerns alone, believing that guarantees could be provided that would ease their fears. Such an approach failed to recognise the reality of unionist religious concerns and the strength of the sense of British and Imperial identity among unionists.

This failure to appreciate the strength of religious convictions in the unionist position was doubly mistaken. For as well as recognising the multi-causal nature of unionist opposition to Home Rule, it is important to recognise the interrelationship between these causes. These were not separate and discrete arguments; they were intimately connected, though in some cases the connection is more obvious than in others.

One of the less obvious connections is the way that a religious worldview informs all of the arguments listed above. Historically, Britain's sense of its Imperial power and economic success was intimately linked to Britain's sense of itself as a Protestant nation. And Britain's constitution and the liberties and freedoms deriving from it were held to be a political manifestation of Protestantism.¹⁰

Hence, the construction of Britishness with which Ulster unionists identified had, at its core, a religious - more specifically a Protestant-worldview, which interpreted both its past and its present in religious terms.

This is not to reduce all opposition to Home Rule to religious matters only. It is to insist on the pervasive influence of a religiously informed view of political and social reality underpinning and informing the multi-causal objections to Home Rule. It is to insist that religious belief cannot be pushed to the margins, cannot be reduced to a mere set of private beliefs and practices which do not impinge on 'real' issues of politics, social order and economics.

This multi-causal nature of Unionist opposition to Home Rule, and the role that religion played in it, can be brought into sharper focus through looking at the life and work of one of Unionism's key thinkers and organisers, Thomas Sinclair.

Thomas Sinclair

Sinclair embodied evangelical religion and liberal politics. In this he was perhaps truer to his non-conformist tradition, for in British political life non-conformists tended to see liberal politics as a progressive force compatible with their own agenda.

However, Sinclair's liberalism did not make him any the less hostile to Home Rule - far from it. For Sinclair's opposition to Home Rule was driven precisely by his liberal convictions. Sinclair was strongly and consistently opposed to the establishment of religion in any form by the state. Hence his opposition to what he viewed as a potential Catholic ascendancy under a Home Rule parliament. Even before Home Rule became the key issue in Irish politics Sinclair was campaigning against state endowment of Catholic education. Once Home Rule took centre stage Sinclair's considerable energies and abilities were channelled into its defeat.

It was Sinclair who played a leading role in organising the Great Convention of 1892, which brought together all strands of Unionism to declare their opposition to Home Rule. And it was Sinclair who organised the Presbyterian anti-Home Rule rally in 1912. It was Sinclair who wrote newspaper articles,

addressed rallies in Ireland and Scotland, organised businessmen and politicians against Home Rule, made representations to business and political leaders in England, and shaped debates in the Presbyterian General Assembly.

Sinclair was no religious extremist, no sectarian fanatic. Yet he as much as anyone argued that Home Rule was Rome Rule. For Sinclair, the Empire and Britain stood for all that was progressive, enlightened and liberating; Catholicism stood for social control, impoverishment and religious establishment.

Sinclair could not see how a Home Rule parliament with a majority of Catholic members could escape the pressure to reshape Irish society in the image of a Catholic state - even if they had wanted to. Ulster's wealth, Ulster's freedom, Ulster's liberties could not survive under such a regime. Thus for Sinclair, '...it was his belief that he was being steadfast in his liberal principles which often occasioned his most strident warnings about Home Rule and Catholic power'.¹¹

Yet, seen in the wider British context, this did not make Sinclair unique or even unusual. Rather, it simply demonstrated the extent to which Sinclair was one with nonconformist liberalism throughout Britain in the late nineteenth century. Sinclair was a British liberal as much as an Ulster unionist.

Conclusion

That belief in God mattered to those who opposed Home Rule is clear. More specifically, it was a belief in God that was filtered through Protestant churchmanship and British historical experience. As for the land, there was less of a direct emphasis on the land as God's gift or on its sacral nature. However, there was a sense that the land was more fruitful and generated greater economic wealth in those parts where unionism flourished, in contrast to the impoverishment of the rest of the island. As for nation, there was a strong sense of distinctiveness and difference from Irish nationalists. But this was much less a case of seeing themselves as a distinctive Ulster nation than seeing themselves as an integral part of the British nation. And so Ulster unionists could sing the patriotic songs of Britain with the same enthusiasm as any other citizen:

Land of Hope and Glory, Mother of the Free,
How shall we extol thee, who are born of thee?
Wider still and wider shall thy bounds be set;
God, who made thee mighty, make thee mightier yet.

Born as citizens of the same land of hope and glory as their fellow citizens in the rest of the United Kingdom, they too proclaimed the God who had made the nation mighty. That was then. We can argue about the legitimacy or otherwise of the understanding of the relationship between God, land and nation among earlier generations. The challenge to us today is to look at our own understanding of these things and ask ourselves the hard questions.¹²

¹ The *Christian Advocate* 8 January 1886 cited in David Hempton and Myrtle Hill, *Evangelical Protestantism in Ulster Society 1740-1890* (London, Routledge 1992) p 175

² Cited in Jonathan Bardon, *A History of Ulster* (Blackstaff, Belfast 1992) p 437

³ Cited in Thomas Hennessey, *Dividing Ireland: World War I and Partition* (Routledge, London 1998) p 18

⁴ William Moore MP cited in Hennessey, *Dividing Ireland* p 10

⁵ Andrew Horner MP cited in Hennessey, *Dividing Ireland* p 12

⁶ Belfast industrialist Frank Johnston cited in Gordon Lucy, *The Great Convention: The Ulster Unionist Convention of 1892* (Ulster Society, Lurgan 1995) p 31

⁷ *Newsletter* 19/9/12 cited in Hennessey, *Dividing Ireland* p 16

⁸ Cited in Paul Bew, *Ideology and the Irish Question: Ulster Unionism and Irish Nationalism 1912-1916* (Oxford University Press, Oxford 1994) p 29

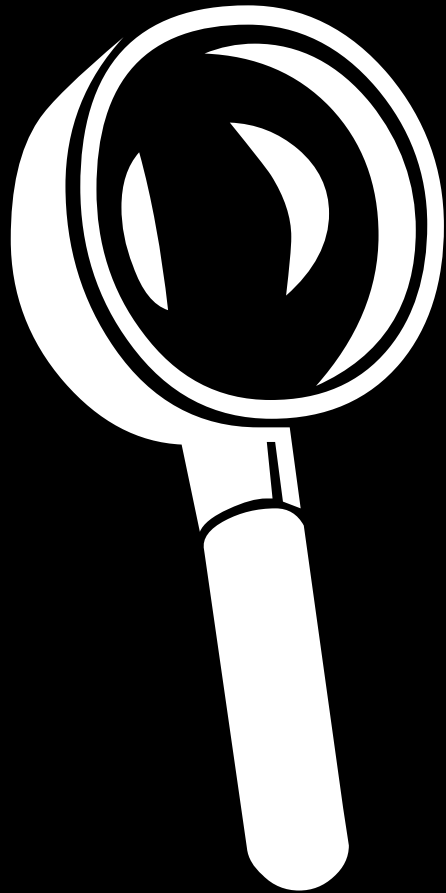
⁹ Cited in Bew, *Ideology* p 27

¹⁰ See for example Linda Colley, *Britons: Forging the Nation 1707-1837* (Vintage, London 1996) and John Wolfe, *God and Greater Britain: Religion and National Life in Britain and Ireland 1843-1945* (Routledge, London 1994)

¹¹ Graham Walker, 'Thomas Sinclair: Presbyterian Unionist', pp 19-40 in Graham Walker and Richard English (eds) *Unionism in Modern Ireland: New Perspectives on Politics and Culture* (Gill & Macmillan, Dublin 1996) p 32

¹² This article is adapted from a forthcoming publication on God, Land and Nation

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the lost field

Tony Davidson

One of my favourite movies is 'The Field' based on JB Keane's play. Richard Harris plays the part of the central character, the Bull McCabe. The film describes his evolving relationship with a field. He clears the field of stones so that it becomes green and fertile. However the field is leased from a widow who chooses to sell it to an American. The Bull McCabe is incensed and tragedy follows.

Richard Harris's portrayal of the Bull McCabe in one sense reminded me of Abram with his white flowing beard. Yet his behaviour is the very opposite to Abram's. Whereas the Bull is prepared to kill to keep his field, Abram is prepared to give away his best field. Whereas for the Bull the land belongs to him and his family, for Abram the land belongs to God. For the Bull the land is paramount, for Abram relationships are paramount.

The story in Genesis 13 is about tension, land and conflict but also about reconciliation, generosity and good relationships. God wanted a friend. He chose this pagan Iraqi, Abram. He led him out of his home city Ur through Haran and into the promised land, Canaan. Abram had a disastrous flirtation in Egypt, where he nearly lost his faith and his wife but acquired increased livestock and riches. He returned to Bethel, realising that he must share the land with the Canaanites and the Perizzites who were still living there.

Lot, Abram's nephew, was part of Team Abram. Due to increased prosperity separate work forces had emerged. More animals required more pastures and more water. The two groups had to share their resources. Soon Abram's servants and Lot's servants were bickering about their supplies.

Abram recognised the problem

In Northern Ireland we have a centuries old relational problem concerning the land. The peace process has been the catalyst for more and more people to acknowledge the problem. However, trying to sort it out has brought into the public domain the pain hidden for years beneath the surface. The emotions involved in dealing with conflict are so strong that to deny the problem is always a temptation. However, that was not Abram's approach. He recognised the problem and he tried to talk it out. Jesus encouraged his followers to sort out conflict quickly:

Therefore if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there in front of the altar. First go and be reconciled to your brother; then come and offer your gift. (Matt 5.23-24)

Abram established a relationship

When Abram talked to Lot his first words were ... 'We are brothers' (Gen 13.8b). They were neither accusatory nor patronising. The first words in a conflict situation are vital, as is tone of voice. In conflict situations instead of focusing on the problem we need to establish the relationship. In Northern Ireland there is much that divides our communities but there is also much that we have in common. I have lived for a few years in Scotland and for eight years in Irish Republic. I have ministered for the last five years in Mid-Ulster near where I grew up. I admit my identity is confused. Nevertheless I know this - I am Northern Ire(land)ish.

A few years ago after paying a pastoral visit to a farmhouse on top of a hill near where I grew up, I looked down over the area. It was a beautiful, bright, January day. I looked at the rolling hills and the good farmland and I realised I belong here. I am part of this. Some of the farms belonged to Protestants, some to Roman Catholics. As I stood there I realised 'we are brothers'. We share this small part of God's world together. For generations we have lived side by side. Our ancestors went to the Moy Fair together to buy horses. When it rained, it rained on us both. When it was frosty, it was frosty on us both. When BSE crisis struck it affected us both. The frost, rain, snow and disease did not discriminate between Protestant and Roman Catholic fields. We can fight together and leave it to the few who are left to share the spoils, or we can learn to live together. We are relatives.

Abram recognised diversity

We might have expected Abram to say, "We must stick together". But Abram said, "Let's separate". He realised that in this situation of conflict the one hope for the relationship was that they should separate. They needed what the Americans call 'time out'. In N Ireland we have to recognise that we have our differences. We need to avoid solutions to problems that

impose a banal sameness on our people and on our churches. We have to learn to appreciate instead of fearing difference, to celebrate difference instead of hating it. The result of the conflict for Abram and Lot was not ideal, but it did work.

Abram made a generous offer

Abram's offer is really quite stunning. In a patriarchic society where age took precedence we would have expected Abram to say to Lot, "I am taking this good land here and you go that way." Instead Abram forfeits his rights and says, "If you go to the left, I'll go the right. If you go to the right I'll go to the left." He lets the younger man choose.

Abram was really God's friend. As we spend time with our friends we become like them. So Abram was becoming like God. It is in God's nature to be generous. Remember how Jesus Christ gave up his home in heaven and came to earth. Paul, in his letter to the Philippians, wrote this:

...who being in very nature God did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, but made himself nothing taking the very nature of a servant. (Phil 2.6-7a)

In Northern Ireland we can create an atmosphere of generosity. In our homes, churches and streets we need to learn the vocabulary of Abram, 'you first'. In this act Abram learned something else important. He gave up his rights to the land because he realised relationships are more important than land. The land belonged not to Abram, not to Lot, nor Sodom nor Gomorrah. No, the land belonged to God. Later the children of Israel were reminded how the land is a gift from Yahweh as they stood on the boundary of the promised land:

When the Lord your God brings you into the land he swore to your fathers, to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob to give you - a land with large flourishing cities you did not build, houses filled with all kinds of good things you did not provide, wells you did not dig and vineyards and olive trees you did not plant - then when you eat and are satisfied, be careful that you do not forget the Lord ... (Deut 6.10 – 11)

The land we live in does not belong to Britain or Ireland. It belongs to God. When, I wonder, will we learn that relationships are more important than land? When we realise that everything we have, everything we earn comes from God, then we are set free from fear, anxiety and hoarding tendencies. We are set free to be generous and say 'you first'.

In Luke 12 v13-21 Jesus addresses the issue of land rights. Someone in the crowd said to Jesus, "Teacher, tell my brother to divide the inheritance with me". Inheritances in those days were generally not cash inheritances but land inheritances. This was a question about fields, land and identity. Jesus replied, "Man, who appointed me a judge or an arbiter between you?" Jesus refused to take sides. He pointed out how the man's question betrayed his values. So, instead of answering it, Jesus tells a story about ultimate concerns. It is commonly called the parable of the rich fool.

In the story a farmer has a bumper harvest. In verse 17 Jesus tells us 'he thought to himself'. Ken Bailey in his book **Through Peasant Eye** (p64) points out that this was an extraordinary phrase for that culture. It was not customary for farmers or business people to talk 'to themselves'. Such a decision to buy new land or build new barns was normally discussed in the community. At the city gate hours would be spent looking at the arguments for and against such a decision. That very night he dies alone in his field. What is the point of owning all this land and having bad relationships? Such a person is a fool, for he has forgotten that the fields are a gift. Isaiah warns:

Woe to you who add house to house and join field to field till no space is left and you live alone in the land. (Isa 5.8)

In giving Abram lost nothing

Abram must have had a lump in his throat and a tear in his eye as he watched Lot disappear into the Jordan valley. Though they separated he continued to have contact with his nephew. In chapter 14 when Lot was a prisoner of war Abram rescued him. Abram did not lose a nephew; their relationship just took another form. Abram must also have been concerned about the land. After all God had promised it to him but now

he felt weak and vulnerable, in need of reassurance. So God came to him again. He told him to look around him, *'to walk the length and breadth of the land for I am giving it to you* (13.17). When Abram was prepared to share the land then God gave it to him.

Isn't it true what Jesus said: "Blessed are the meek for they shall inherit the land" (Matt 5 v5)? At the end of the film **The Field** we discover that the Bull McCabe did not own the field. The field owned him. He was its slave. He was prepared to murder for that field. The hero of the film has mutated into its villain. If Abram was to inherit the land he had to learn as God's friend that there were more important things than fields. As he gave up his right to the land he was set free. The promise of the land would not be a burden to him. He was waiting for a greater land. He was set free to serve God.

In this poem written during July 1998 I reflect on my own identity and attachment to fields.

THIS PLACE IS HOME

Lord I belong here among the hills, the hedges, the seoughs and oaks,
There is a cosy familiarity with the lanes, the grass, the trees, the folks.
"Your Granny taught me at school in Salter's Grange,"
"Your Dad sold me a motor car; it was top of the range."
Grandfathers and great grannies lived bred and died in this place,
They fixed a recurring pattern for each succeeding race.
They tamed the land; they tilled it; they put down roots;
They planted seeds; they watered; and enjoyed its fruits.
Their blood still runs deep in granddaughters and great grandsons.
Their footprints still traced in hovels, bungalows and mansions;
The words, the movements, the phrases are easily decoded.
Yes, this place is home and I'm not easily deroaded.

Lord what am I doing, living, pastoring and preaching here?
The hills, the hedges, seoughs, lanes and oaks I fear.
They know who you are, there's no fig leaf to cover your family tree
It's bare, exposed for every Billy and Paddy to see.
The hedges have matured and become a maze in which we are lost.
The seoughs have become a dark hole into which our memories are tossed.
The lanes go round and round in circles leading a merry march to nowhere.
The hills and fields have mutated into territory we refuse to share.
They hem me in, I cannot breathe, I suffocate
I wonder what to say; how to pray. Is it too late?
The words, the movements, the phrases are too easily decoded.
Yes, this place is home but it's become dangerously outmoded.

But this is your place, you live here, Lord.
You made the flower and thorn, the river and the ford.
You hear the march and the dance, the flute and the didleedee;
You taste the cakes, the tray bakes and wee cups of tea.
You see the flags, the bowls, the Gaelic games and rugby.
You are watching the Seiner, the PUP and the RUC;
It's a mess; it's untidy, but you are in the midst of it.
One day you will reach down and lift us out of the pit.
You are in the chaos of history inhabiting this place,
I can see your footprints, the marks of your grace.
At your nimble, graceful feet we bow,
Lord this place is yours, redeem it now.

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divine

assumption

alan wilson

He introduced the topic in a strange and somewhat surprising way, like a bolt out of the blue. There was no forewarning, no introduction, no indication of what was going to come, just an incredible assumption, an unbelievable presumption that would shock and bewilder any discerning hearer. He was half way through a talk on prayer when he said the words: *“Forgive us our debts as we have forgiven our debtors.”*

These familiar words are taken from what is commonly known as the ‘The Lord’s Prayer’. They are words known by Christians and non-Christians alike all over the world. However, because they have become so common we have lost the impact of what Jesus was saying. Jesus was not commanding us to forgive others, or encouraging us to forgive others, he wasn’t even teaching on how we go about forgiving others. No. He was simply assuming that we would. He assumed that we would forgive others just as he assumed we would need God’s forgiveness. As we read on, we discovered that Jesus not only assumes that we **will** forgive, but he continues by spelling out the consequences if his assumption is wrong, He says:

“For if you forgive men when they sin against you, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive men their sins your father will not forgive your sins.”

(Matt 6.14-15)

We need to stand back and think about this. Surely there is nothing more difficult in the entire world than to forgive someone who has caused us a bitter blow and deep pain. How do you forgive someone who has wrecked your life, or your family? How do you forgive the person who has inflicted life-crushing consequences from which you will never fully recover? Was Jesus being unrealistic? Were his expectations of mankind too high? Was he just young, enthusiastic and a bit

idealistic? Was this the naivety of innocence speaking? The answer to all these suggestions is no. Being able to forgive others, as Jesus assumed we would, is the result of:

Knowing God as your father	<i>Our Father in heaven</i>
Of honouring his name	<i>Hallowed be your name</i>
Submitting to his rule	<i>Your kingdom come</i>
Doing his will	<i>Your will be done</i>
Depending on Him	<i>Give us today our daily bread</i>
Recognising our own sin	<i>Forgive us our debts</i>

To have a forgiving heart is to have a heart that is submitted to the reign and rule of our father. A forgiving heart is a heart that is being transformed by the gracious rule of God. Forgiving others is more than a matter of the will, “I must forgive.” It is a matter of transformation. Maybe our unwillingness to forgive others is an indication that we have not experienced the spiritual and life-changing dynamics Jesus refers to in this prayer. As we go into a new century we will need more than strong resolution if we are going to become a forgiving community.

We will **need** to know God as our father.
 We will **need** to hallow his name.
 We will **need** to experience his kingdom.
 We will **need** to do his will.
 We will **need** to live a life of dependence.
 We will **need** to be honest about our own sins.

Then we will have a heart that can say:

“Forgive us our debts, as we have also forgiven our debtors.”

Alan Wilson is a member of Hamilton Road Baptist Church. Throughout this year he will be filling the spot previously filled by Graham Cheesman, who is taking a rest from the column.

walking the

"Don't walk the high wire of nationalism," concerned friends in England say to those of us in Scotland or Wales who speak of our distinct nationhood and our democratic right to political self-determination. Look at Sarajevo, they add. It will be Edinburgh next!

Look at England, we are tempted to reply, and come to terms with the most successful and militant nationalism in the history of the Western world, now unmasked with the end of empire and the emergence of Europe. While even Scottish and Welsh nationalists speak with equanimity of pooling their sovereignty within the European Union, English nationalism betrays a 'Little Englander' mentality which the rest of us would find embarrassing if it were not such a threat to the future of Britain.

For Christians, a balanced judgement on issues of nation and nationalism must come from a biblical perspective. We must ask the question: How do the human communities we call nations look from the biblical perspective of a humanity made in the image of God?

Humanity was not created within certain given nations or races, as religious nationalists such as the Calvinist founders of apartheid or the German Christian movement under the Nazis have argued. Nations are the contingent products of human culture, rising out of the muddy course of our rebel history. Although large sections of humankind now identify with and value a sense of nationhood, and virtually all human beings now live within some form of nation-state, this is the result of circumstances, not the unfolding of some eternal or natural law.

Fallen Glory

Those communities called nations in the New Testament exist within the bounds of God's creation, providence and redemption, under his sovereignty. So, Paul can say: *'From one ancestor he made all nations to inhabit the whole earth, and he allotted the times for their existence and*

the boundaries of the places where they should live, so that they would search for God ...' (Acts 17.26f) His emphasis is on the theological conviction that all nations are made out of one humanity and we are utterly dependent on God.

In fact, they are called to seek him, *'though indeed he is not far from each one of us'*. Few nations do so. Nationhood and nationalism throughout history bear the marks of human rebellion against God, though in this they are no different from any other form of human community, thought or action. All aspects of created reality and all human ideologies - including triumphant capitalism and liberal democracy - are distorted and marred by human sin.

The term 'nation' has been applied to a multitude of different kinds of human community, from the ethnic tribes and peoples of ancient times to the modern members and aspiring members of the United Nations. All alike are under divine judgement; but they also draw on significant themes in the original creation and the continuing mercy of God towards a humanity created in his image.

This is their true glory. It can be argued that nations and their cultures have been one of the richest expressions in a fallen world of the original and continuing 'cultural mandate' given in Genesis 1.28 and 2.15-25, and reaffirmed to Noah in Genesis 9. This mandate calls on the one human race to name and develop the rich diversity of God's one creation in cultivation and the sciences, and to celebrate the riches of human companionship in culture and the arts, in glad and peaceful obedience to God's authority.

Unity and Diversity

Thus, nations are not without significance in the economy of God. The nations of the Bible, the 'goyim' and 'ethne' of the Old and New Testaments, are constantly judged and contrasted with elect Israel and the true Church for their idolatry.¹ The 'holy nation' of God's people is not to be like the surrounding pagan, gentile nations (Ex 19.6; 1Pet 2.9). And yet the election of Israel and the Church is for the blessing and

tightrope

William Storrar

salvation of the nations (Gen 18.18). There is a recognition too that pagan nations may be both the instrument of God's purposes and the object of his mercy.²

We also find in Isaiah 60 a universal vision of the nations streaming to Israel with their wealth, as an offering to worship the true and living God. In the Gospels, Jesus warns to those earnest Gentiles who put their faith in him and humbly accept that salvation comes from the Jews (Matt 8.5-13; Mk 7 24-30). The disciples are called to make disciples of all nations, and the coming of the Spirit at Pentecost affirms cultural and linguistic diversity as people of many nations understand the message in their own tongue (Matt 28.19; Acts 2.6,11). And the Bible concludes with a vision of the cultural riches and identities of all nations entering the new Jerusalem, and the nations finding healing there (Rev 21.22 – 22.3).

The one new humanity in Christ is a community of unity in diversity, a holy nation made up of people of all nations who, in embracing their new identity in Christ, retain their social and cultural identities as Gentiles and lose only the oppressive, distorting effect of sin and their separation from God's covenant people (Eph 2f).

The Bible affirms both equality and difference. In both Testaments, God's people are called to welcome the stranger and to show love (in Karl Barth's phrase) to all neighbours, near and distant. There is also a fundamental equality of all God's people in Christ (Gal 3.26-29). And yet that does not efface our identities as Jew or Greek.

Collective Faith

The fact that the nations themselves always walk a tightrope above the abyss of idolatry, and frequently fall into sin, induces in many Christians an indiscriminating and sometimes irrational fear of nationalism and national identity. Yet if we examine nations in the light of God's image in Christ, rather than in the shadow of certain kinds of idolatrous nationalism, we may begin to discern their place in the divine economy.

First, we must set nations within their contemporary context and consider the related phenomenon of nationalism. By nationalism, we mean those ideologies and movements which foster national consciousness and advocate the right of nations to self-determination. Many different nationalist ideologies and movements are found in all parts of the world today, some arguing for statehood as the natural right of nations while others offer utilitarian reasons for self-government on the grounds of its substantive benefits.

Nationalism and nationhood in all their diversity will remain a major political force and social reality for the foreseeable future. Quoting a leading scholar, the sociologist David McCrone notes:

National identity is probably the most powerful force in the modern age 'to provide a strong community of history and collective faith'.³

Given the religious language used here to describe the function of national identity in the contemporary world, we must consider how the Christian understanding of history, destiny, salvation and faith must reject any possible idolatrous nationalist alternative. But we must also consider in what ways Christians may embrace and show critical solidarity with a national identity which helps to sustain and enrich the frail fabric of community.

Imagined Communities

The historian Benedict Anderson has helpfully called nations 'imagined communities', in that they are constituted by shared images of identity (linguistic, cultural, religious, geographical, political or social) among people who may never meet or know one another face-to-face.⁴ There have been other ways of imagining social identity, such as the tribe, the empire or the 'universal' community of Christendom. A nation transcends horizontal social divisions such as class because it shares certain vertical images of a community with a common but limited membership and some measure of sovereignty over its own affairs.

This use of the word 'image', with its biblical resonances, opens up the moral and theological ambiguity of nationhood and nationalism. The Christian must ask whether nations are one valid cultural expression of humanity created in God's image, and, therefore, if nationalism may be on occasion a legitimate defence of that identity. But we must also ask whether nationalism may not also, on occasion, become the idolatry of an absolute loyalty.

The biblical insight that 'nations' are an ancient historical phenomenon and yet not the original condition of the one human race has some significance for the world today. It is only in the course of rebellious human history, not in the creation, that the different tribes, peoples and nations of the earth emerge, with a dual theological meaning.⁵

After Babel, the nations become the bearers of divine judgement on sinful humanity, in its divisions and mutual incomprehensions. But the diversity of nations within history is also seen as restraining human evil or hubris on a global scale, and offering one historical context for humanity's rich cultural and linguistic diversity. Indeed, distinctive cultural, geographical and linguistic 'nations' are described as existing before Babel.⁶

The threat in the Genesis story comes not from the diverse nations of the earth but from the hubris of sinful humanity's design to build a world empire, speaking only one language, in rebellion against God.

Judgement and Justice

A Christian approach must hold in tension these two biblical insights, that the nations are both historical vehicles of divine restraint and judgement on human sin and also one historical medium of the continuing cultural mandate given by God to the one human race.

In practice, this may mean arguing in one context that a xenophobic or imperialist nationalism, where one nation seeks to exclude or dominate other nations or ethnic communities, stands under God's judgement. It may equally well mean arguing in another context that a democratic, non-violent nationalism may legitimately pursue its cause within a framework of law and a recognition of the equal rights of all people and nations.

Both responses are shaped by a common biblical concern for justice, solidarity and subsidiarity. This is the basis for the fundamental moral and theological distinction between the 'ethnic cleansing' policies found in Bosnia and the non-ethnic, civic democratic aspirations of parties such as Plaid Cymru and the Scottish National Party.

Secondly, we must also distinguish different eras in the development of nations and nationalism, and their different attitudes to Christ. This historical character of nationhood is explicit and affirmed in the Bible, where nations are seen to rise and fall within the flow of human history and God's sovereign purposes.

While many scholars link nationalism with the rise of modernity and the sovereign nation-state in the 18th century, pre-modern nationalism, articulating a developing

sense of Christian nationhood, existed in Europe since at least as early as the ninth century. Pre-modern nationalism was bound up with the religious conflicts of medieval and post-Reformation Europe, and gave rise to the concept of the 'Christian nation' which has survived in the West into the 20th century.

It was the secular nationalism born out of the Enlightenment, German Romanticism and the French Revolution that declared the nation and the nation-state to be absolute and sovereign. This modern nationalism has often made this claim to sovereignty in defiance of God's ultimate claims.

The Dawn of Post-Nationalism

The end of the 20th century is seeing the emergence of a 'post-modern nationalism', as regions and nations defined by cultural pluralism, a common civil society and citizenship rather than by ethnicity seek autonomy within larger political communities such as the European Union.

Post-modern nationalism pursues its goals on the basis of the (originally Christian) principle of subsidiarity, or shared sovereignty, rather than the modern, nationalist principle of the absolute sovereignty of the nation-state. The political dilemma of the late 20th century is that the nation-state is too large to satisfy people's sense of identity or their demand for autonomy at the local, regional or national levels while at the same time it is too small to tackle many economic, environmental and international issues. This has led to the rise of distinctive, new forms of post-nationalism.

As David McCrone has suggested, some forms of contemporary nationalism have moved from emphasising ties of ethnicity or common descent, language, culture or even religion, to defining a nation in terms of territoriality, living and working together as citizens in a common area:

"This is a plea for new forms of self-determination, of limited autonomy and self-managing communities based on the rights of people to govern themselves. Such plans are based on limited sovereignty in an interdependent world. The assault by nationalists on traditional nation-states is a symptom of the decay of these political formations, as well as the search for new forms as yet unimagined...."

The irony is that nationalism is probably the gravedigger of the conventional nation-state with its commitment to "a world of sovereign, self-reliant nation-states claiming the right to assert themselves and pursue their essential national interests by taking recourse to force".

In its classical form, nationalism is pursuing precisely those political structures which are rapidly falling

*into disuse. As such, [it] is probably destined to consume its own offspring. In this sense, these are post-nationalist times.*⁷

Scotland and Wales

This emerging post-nationalism, with its concern for responsible citizenship in an interdependent world, and autonomous communities pervaded by democratic accountability, may be compatible to some extent with Christian social doctrines of solidarity, subsidiarity, justice and stewardship at local, regional and global levels in ways that a 19th century glorification of the sovereign nation-state or, at the end of this century, a resurgent xenophobic ethnic nationalism manifestly are not.

To understand Scotland or Wales, for example, within the divine economy requires us to ask what kind of historical nations and nationalism we are addressing. Can the central role of the Welsh language and culture in Welsh nationhood or the national civil institutions in Scottish civil society be held together with a post-nationalist understanding of nationhood as an autonomous and inclusive democratic territorial society pursuing post-materialist values?

The policies of Plaid Cymru and the SNP and the concerns of cross-party constitutional reformers such as the Campaign for a Parliament for Wales and the Coalition for Scottish Democracy suggest to me that there is a serious courtship, if not yet a consummated marriage, between these two dimensions of Welsh and Scottish nationhood today. England, however, has still to do more than flirt with post-nationalism, although Charter 88 is serving as an influential match-maker in introducing the English to the attractions of constitutional reform and civic democracy.

The Image of God

Finally, we must consider nations in relation to both the image of God and God's mission to the world. In the Bible, God's image in humanity is not primarily perceived in terms of discrete qualities such as rationality or speech, conscience or will, but in terms of relationships. To be human is to be in a right and dependent relationship with the Creator, who is a triune community of holy love, and to be in right relationships with one's fellow creatures.

We are fundamentally 'persons-in-community'. It is within this social set of right relationships that we find our individual personhood and enjoy true humanity.⁸ Sin is the breaking and distorting of these relationships. In Jesus Christ, the one true image of the invisible God, our broken relationships are restored and our new humanity experienced as a gift of our gracious Father in heaven. But in God's mercy, by 'common grace', our humanity is sustained even in our sin and brokenness.

It is within the parameters of this set of relationships - created, sustained, judged and restored in Christ - that we use language, develop cultures, maintain patterns of government and form

those frail historical shelters of community and identity that we call nations. Any nation must be judged by its faithfulness to the pattern of such relationships, which constitute our humanity in God's image.

The biblical vision of the coming reign of God affirms both the place of the nations in final judgement and the prospect that their cultural legacy for good may enter the new Jerusalem.⁹ No nationalism will survive its ambivalent role in this passing age, but it seems that the unity of the new humanity in Christ will not efface the frail national and ethnic identities within which humanity has so expressed itself in its history. The Tree of Life is for the healing, not the elimination, of the nations.

A Proper Love

It is through a critical assessment of these three dimensions, biblical, historical and theological, within the divine economy that nations and nationalism must be judged. Too often, Christian responses have offered a qualified support for patriotism while dismissing nationalism out of hand.

This is understandable in a world of genocidal ethnic conflicts, but indiscriminating. (It may also confuse nationalism with racism: they may be linked, but are not necessarily so.) In context, patriotism may cloak national aggression while nationalism may express a just defence of universal civic and democratic rights for particular communities within one world. Both are morally two-edged concepts. Imagined communities must serve and not deny the divine image in humanity

In what sense are nations worthy of our Christian patriotism? Patriotism is the love shown in loyalty to a native or adopted country: as such, it must be examined in the light of that greater love that characterises Christian social ethics. No country can legitimately make an absolute moral claim on the loyalty of its people, Christian or otherwise. Individuals and nations alike are called to a greater love and an ultimate loyalty to the Lord Jesus Christ. It is identity in Christ and the gospel of the kingdom which offer hope and reconciliation in a divided world, not national identity and patriotism.

And yet Christians, and the one human race, live in the context of a range of social, cultural and political communities. That is an integral part of a God-given humanity as created social creatures. The gospel both judges and affirms the social context and cultural identity of human life within history, including the context of country and nationhood.

Patriotism may be a worthy disposition for Christians in their earthly citizenship within the wider loyalty and horizon of the heavenly city. It may also be a cloak for national or party self-interest, 'the last refuge of scoundrels' in Dr Johnson's memorable judgement.

The love Christians may show for their country must be discriminating. At its core, patriotism must be an affirmation of what is best in a country's history and life, including its cultural achievements, its struggles for greater justice in human affairs at home and abroad, and the expression of certain moral values in its public life and institutions.

The True Patriot

And yet, as Simone Weil argued with regard to France, at its core a true Christian patriotism does not ignore the failures, injustices and shameful episodes that mark the history and contemporary life of a nation, and must expose fully all that is evil and morally compromised in its identity.

Such honesty in no way diminishes a Christian love rooted in the Cross, which accepts the frailty and sinfulness of human nations within history while embracing them within the divine love in Jesus Christ. The measure of a nation's worth does not lie in some innate spirit or genius, as in the spurious claims of Romantic nationalism, but in its share in that human creativity and partial grasp of truth which remain always available to us even in the midst of our rebellion.

Each culture and country may express that creativity and grasp of truth in its own distinctive ways, but no mere country is endowed with a monopoly of wisdom or possesses some unique destiny. Nor do nations escape the judgement and corruption of human sin. It is the Church of Jesus Christ which is the herald of the coming kingdom of God, a community which draws its membership from every country and culture. Only from within the perspective of the kingdom can we exercise a true patriotism for provisional communities and cultures, which deserve only a penultimate loyalty and a conditional commitment.

Nor must patriotism be confused with an ethnocentric or chauvinistic view of the world. The qualities and achievements that evoke a love for one's own country, however distinctive, should lead a true patriot to a respect and appreciation for other countries and cultures.

A false patriotism does not dare to expose itself to such realities. It is Christian patriots such as Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Simone Weil who show the honesty, courage and sacrifice required for true love of God and nation in Christ.¹⁰

⁹ Matthew 25.31-46; Isaiah 60, Revelation 21.22-22.3.

This point is made by Richard Mouw in *When the Kings Come Marching In: Isaiah and the New Jerusalem* (Eerdmans, 1983)

¹⁰ See Keith W Clements, *A Patriotism for Today: Love of Country in Dialogue with the Witness of Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Simone Weil, The Need for Roots*

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¹ Psalm 106 is typical, especially verse 35

² See Isaiah 44.28-45

³ D McCrone

Understanding Scotland: The Sociology of a Stateless Nation (Routledge, 1992) p219, quoting Anthony Smith

⁴ B Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origins and Spread of Nationalism* (verso, revised 2nd edn, 1991)

⁵ See W Storrar *Scottish Identity A Christian Vision* (Handsel Press, 1990), chs6-8

⁶ Genesis 10.31f

⁷ D McCrone, op cit, p219 (see also pp6-10, 197-221)

⁸ On the relational understanding of the image of God, see Ray Anderson's *On Being*

Human: Essays in Theological Anthropology (Eerdmans, 1982), John ilall's *Imaging God* (Ecedmans, 1986) and David Cairns' *The Image of God in Man* (Collins, 1973)



certificate in biblical peace building

ECONI, through its Programme for Christian Peace-building, aims to equip Christians with practical skills to address community division in Northern Ireland and the long-term task of peace building. Training plays a key role in achieving this.

Since the launch of our new strategic vision plan we have renewed our emphasis on developing a training programme which is accessible and relevant to local churches and communities. We aim to contribute to a developing culture of learning in churches by facilitating dialogue, understanding and ultimately change. Courses provide a 'safe space' to look more closely at issues related to religious, political, cultural and national identity.

Course participants come from diverse theological backgrounds, yet they share a need to understand what the Bible has to say about being a Christian in a divided community. For many, the need to understand a theological rationale for peace and reconciliation brings them back to new courses as they are developed.

Recognising this commitment to learning, ECONI training has become more structured and the content reflects a progression from introductory type courses, to more in-depth material and the development of skills. In addition all our courses now combine towards a new Certificate, which is validated by ECONI. This Certificate brings courses together and offers an opportunity to consolidate the learning potential of all the courses we facilitate.

The Certificate in Biblical Peace-Building will be awarded by ECONI to participants who complete **six of the modules** offered in the training programme outlined below and complete a written assignment on a relevant topic. The Certificate may be completed over two years.

TRAINING PROGRAMME OUTLINE

Journey in Understanding

A six-week introductory course exploring the influence of culture, history and religion in shaping our identity.

Bridge Builders

Designed to motivate, inform and equip Christians in the task of building peace in the community in which we live. The course is delivered over two modules:

Bridge Builders 1 is primarily dealing with identity, conflict and peace building.

Bridge Builders 2 is primarily concerned with the role of the church in a divided community. Each module lasts 10 weeks.)

Skills for the Task 1 - Facilitating Others

An eight-week course designed to meet the growing need for high quality training. This course is a practical introduction to the skills required to work with others in local churches and to deliver some of the ECONI training programmes. It is particularly suitable for those currently engaged in training or those hoping to take up a training role.

Skills for the Task 2 - Using the Bible in a Divided Society

An eight-week course on the theme of biblical interpretation with particular reference to the Northern Ireland context. This course is suitable for those who carry responsibility for handling Scripture in preaching or teaching, but not exclusively.

Summer School

ECONI's summer school involves a four day residential exploring two important issues relating to Christian witness in a divided community. **Back to the Future** looks at the relationship between faith and cultural identity. **A Spirituality for Social Engagement** considers the kind of spiritual values and practice we need to cultivate in the church if we are to engage meaningfully in the healing of our community (see page 30).

If you are interested in registering for the Certificate in Biblical Peace-Building, please contact Lynda Gould at the ECONI office Tel: 028 9032 5258 or email: lynda@econi.org

LEPU?

LIBERAL EVANGELICAL POST-UNIONISM (LEPU) AND ECONI

ESMOND BIRNIE

A Preliminary Identification plus Response

This piece attempts to identify and begin the evaluation of a series of characteristics which I believe are central tendencies within the mindset of many (though not all) within the ECONI constituency. Categorisation of ideologies and/or theologies inevitably involves some simplification. For that I apologise. Almost certainly no one individual will hold to all the beliefs I am about to enumerate but I think most ECONI writers/supporters would hold to at least a majority of them.

This article does not pretend to be the last word on the subject. I have not provided a full system of supporting references so as to link perceived tenets of belief to those individuals who espouse them. Such an exercise would in any case be very difficult to do since many of these tenets are rarely stated directly. Even when they are this has often been only verbally rather than in writing. Nevertheless, notwithstanding all these caveats, it remains a worthwhile exercise to identify and begin the evaluation of what I will term Liberal Evangelical Post-Unionism (LEPU).

Empirically there was a close linkage between conservative evangelicalism/reformed Christianity and political unionism (CEPU) in Ireland throughout the 1850s-1960s period.¹ I am saying this as an historical observation and not a statement of whether such a relationship was either a good or bad thing. By the late 1990s a substantial change has occurred. ECONI itself has been both part cause and part consequence of the growth of LEPU.² Firstly, there has been some theological change towards a sort of liberal evangelicalism and, secondly, there has been the growth of a post-unionism. Post-unionism meaning something other than traditional unionism whilst not necessarily being explicitly anti-unionist (in other words, an ambiguous relationship somewhat akin to that which may exist between so-called modernism and post-modernism).

Why do I use the designation 'liberal evangelical'? Some may find the qualifier 'liberal' question begging and/or provocative. In fact it is meant to highlight the shift, for good or bad, away from a more traditional conservative evangelical approach. At the same time, its use here need not imply any marked similarity to classical, nineteenth century theological liberalism. 1990s liberal evangelicalism involves some of the following: openness to various explanatory models regarding the Cross (i.e. not just penal substitution and objective atonement), emphasis on structural evil and communal/historical guilt, use of subjective and psychological approaches to reconciliation, a reading of Biblical theology which is sometimes narrative rather than systematic, down-playing of anti-Catholicism on grounds of principle or pragmatism, and 'anti-triumphalism' (i.e. a reluctance to use any state/legal backing for Christian principles).

The rest of this article attempts to identify, and sometimes comment on, nine characteristics of LEPU which are in contrast to the more traditional CEPU (I personally adhere to the latter though not, I trust, uncritically).

Reluctance to take a moral stance in the unionist-republican dispute

The old style evangelical-unionist alliance had no difficulty in seeing Ulster politics as moral drama. There was good and there was evil. The unionists were assumed (perhaps sometimes too easily) to be on the right side. For those who still hold to that approach the IRA campaign since 1969 may have reinforced their conviction of moral certitude.

LEPU, however, seems to be characterised by a moral agnosticism. Yes, the taking of innocent life is clearly wrong but

there seems to be reluctance to distinguish between the morality of the unionist and republican positions. LEPU *may* be saying that political disputes are simply too complex to bring any sort of moral calculus to bear (surely a rather defeatist and nihilistic position for any Christian to adopt).

Alternatively, the adherents of LEPU may argue that unionists bear a large part of the responsibility for the creation of the post-1969 terrorist campaign given the perceived shortcomings of the 1921-72 Stormont regime (see points 2 and 3 below). In short, LEPU tends to emphasise a structural evil whereas CEPU would favour stress personal moral responsibility. Of course, these positions need not be mutually exclusive. What I do personally find very difficult to swallow is the inference of moral equivalence between unionism and republicanism.

I am old enough to have had experience of vestgially evangelical Churches in England which in the mid 1980s, during the final climax of the Cold War, with Cruise Missiles versus CND's unilateralism, seemed to posit moral equivalence between the West and East. Between the admittedly flawed market economy and the hugely more barbaric Soviet totalitarian system. Maybe that is why I have such distaste for a moral equivalence approach in Ireland. If LEPU is simply arguing from a position of political pragmatism - i.e. that there is little point, and it may even be counter-productive, in hitting republicans with the big stick of moral censure - then this should be admitted. Such pragmatic judgements could even be correct at a certain level though I have to say that whilst political commentators/actors may sometimes have to act pragmatically I fear for the future if there are no Christian commentators who can give an explicitly moral judgement.

Let me give an historical analogy. The 1941-45 wartime alliance with the Soviet Union, which was essential to the UK's ultimate victory in the Second World War, required Churchill to be a close partner with Stalin. Indeed, to be convivial with him. It would, however, have been inappropriate for the Archbishop of Canterbury to have shared a vodka and cigars with the bloodstained Russian tyrant. The reader may be able to discern a parallel with our situation in terms of the moral dilemmas inherent in recent attempts to form an inclusive Executive in Northern Ireland.

A particular view of 1921-72

LEPU tends to take a dim view of the quality of unionist government during 1921-72. The more radical fringe may have absorbed the Michael Farrell/John Hume line that Stormont was a fascistic 'Orange State' comparable in its persecuting zeal to the worst of central Europe during 1933-45 or the Soviet Bloc during 1917-91.³ A more moderate, and therefore more defensible, version of LEPU would argue that unionists have a lot to apologise for in their recent history given their treatment of their catholic fellow countrymen (see next point below).

CEPU has had a number of views on the record of the Stormont Parliament. The most extreme would be one of total denial, i.e. there was no discrimination or unfairness whatsoever (I concede this position is very hard to support). Such views merge into a rosy story of 'proud little Ulster', the Northern Ireland technologists and inventors, the record in the two World Wars, the Scots-Irish etc. In short, a rather romantic view with elements of truth though there are now, for example, more sober

assessments of Northern Ireland's contribution during 1939-45.

A more nuanced approach, as exemplified in Prof. Tom Wilson's 1955 book *Ulster Under Home Rule*, would be that whilst there was some unfairness in the treatment of catholics under Stormont the position of Northern Ireland's minority compared very favourably to that of other minority groups around the world (e.g. Blacks in the Southern USA or South Africa, ethnic groups within the central and eastern European countries). Admittedly, this relatively favourable position was of little comfort to Ulster's catholics either at that time or since. Perhaps the worst fault of the old Stormont system was that it patronised the minority—implying that they should have been grateful for what was theirs by right. Whilst Prime Minister Terence O'Neill may have been right in his final conclusions his mode of expressing them (e.g. in speaking about how to get Northern Ireland catholics behaving like protestants) was a striking example of such a patronising attitude.

The transmission of guilt at the collective level or transgenerationally

LEPU seems to hold to the possibility that guilt can be transmitted from one member of a group to another (thus I as an individual unionist should feel some guilt for the activities of other members of 'my community') or from one generation to another (thus I as a unionist in 1999 should feel some guilt for Bloody Sunday, 1950s gerrymandering, the 1920s pogroms, the Famine in the 1840s, 1600s Plantation etc.).

CEPU, in so far as it has thought about this subject, would have grave difficulties with the concepts of collective or transgenerational guilt.⁴ If there is really a collective guilt was there an equivalent substitution and atonement for that guilt on the Cross? Christ took my place on the Cross. Did he also take on himself the guilt of the 'Ulster protestant community', the 'catholic community', 'German anti-semitism' and 'white colonialism' etc? I wonder if notions of collective or transgenerational guilt are evidence of a downgrade from ideas of an objective atonement?

Certainly, I can see how an idea of collective/transgenerational guilt could match up with a moral example theory of the Cross (i.e. the Cross is seen primarily in terms of its subjective impact on us, making us love God more as we follow Jesus's example, rather than any objective external impact in terms of satisfying God's standards of righteousness). This would be more congenial to a LEPU than CEPU outlook. For example, the Christian moved by the moral example of the Cross would then attempt to break down the structural causes of evil (which could be the roots of the collective/transgenerational guilt). In CEPU, however, the Cross provides the ground for the justification of a sinner who is individually morally responsible before God and hence the basis for his/her sanctification.

The Bible suggests 'each is to die for his own sins...' and 'the soul who sins is the one who will die' (Deut 24:16 and Ezek 18:4; see also 2 Kings 14:5-6). Even 'punishing the children for the sins of the fathers to the third and fourth generations...' (Ex 20:5) proves too much because this is an attribute of the sovereign God which we would surely be presumptuous to copy.

Quite apart from theological considerations, historically notions of collective/transgenerational guilt have tended to lead to

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unjust outcomes - those who have not sinned are punished in order to reward those who were not victims. Here are some modern examples. Chamberlain and others pursued appeasement of Hitler during 1935-38 partly because they felt ashamed at the perceived vindictive treatment of Germany in the 1919 Versailles Diktat. Some of the Western policy towards Israel since 1948 (and hence towards the dispossessed Palestinians) has been driven by desire to assuage guilty feelings for 'allowing' the Holocaust. Former colonial powers, perhaps motivated by a sense of transgenerational guilt, have since the 1950s handed a series of Third World tyrants and despots blank cheques (sometimes literally so) to wreck their domestic economies and despoil their citizens. At least until very recently German policy towards the European Union has probably been motivated by an attempt to atone for 1933-45.

More post-modernist than modernist in its theology

A. McGrath, D. Bebbington and others have pointed out that from the eighteenth century onwards modern evangelicalism in the UK and USA has been somewhat influenced by the Enlightenment. This is sometimes meant as praise and sometimes as blame. What this has implied is an empirical and systematic approach to theology.

In contrast LEPU relies relatively more on the telling of personal stories, narrative theology, feelings and considerations of group psychology (e.g. adherents of LEPU would counsel that it is not just objective moral wrongs which matter but subjective ones; if catholics **perceive** job discrimination that is still crucially significant regardless of what the objective reality may be).

Yes, CEPU systematisation may sometimes be too cut and dried in its approach to the Bible. I hope I will not be judged irreverent if I say that if the Almighty had wanted the Bible to be structured like L. Berkhof's Systematic Theology he would have inspired the authors to write it that way!⁵ At the same time, whilst we may benefit from being reminded that the Bible often has a narrative structure, e.g. especially in the Gospels, I rather fear a ditching of the baby along with the bath water. The Truth contained in the Bible is not only expressed in terms of propositions but yet at the same time the Bible does contain many propositional truths.

Narrative versus systematic theology

This antithesis has been hinted at already. LEPU tends to the narrative approach and CEPU the systematic one. The implication is that LEPU is strong (and sometimes in commendable ways) on individual Christian ethics (e.g. in terms of forgiving one's enemies and embracing the excluded). What it does not seem to have (or perhaps recognise the need for) is a separate 'box' of ethical/Biblical precepts (e.g. Rom 13:1-7) governing the behaviour of the state as God's magistrate (e.g. with respect to issues like law and order, release of prisoners etc.).

Anti-triumphalism

LEPU condemns James Craig's often quoted (and sometimes misquoted) reference to a 'Protestant Parliament for a protestant people'.⁶ My fear, and this is grounded in a CEPU approach, is that they thereby throw out the baby with the bathwater. Have they given up all hope or aspiration to a state which does somewhat try to uphold Christian principles? In practice no state

can be 'religiously neutral'. Legislation on abortion, divorce, Sunday trading, human rights, commercial regulation, gender relations etc. inevitably relies on value judgments and metaphysical assumptions.

Is it Christian charity to allow the secular, humanist agenda to continue to prevail in the West? Paul seems (in Rom 13:1-7) to have obligated the state to be both a 'minister of wrath' and a 'rewarder of the good'. Yes, we live in a fallen world where real states will not attain the perfect but should we aim for anything else? LEPU, sadly, buys too much into the Radical Reformation/Anabaptist approach and therefore surrenders any attempt to use power to maintain any level of civic or social righteousness.

Superceding traditional evangelical views on Catholicism

LEPU has argued that the CEPU attitude of hostility and/or distance from Catholicism in Ireland is wrong, outdated or both. LEPU justifies this assertion in terms of the general decline in religious observance across the island and the changes in the Republic of Ireland (declining political clout of the Catholic hierarchy) in particular. LEPU sometimes goes further. It is argued that evangelicals and Catholics can work productively together on areas of social concern and perhaps even on evangelism as well.⁷ The LEPU position might charge CEPU with false and damaging anti-Catholicism. LEPU might feel it has been vindicated by a recent book by Professor J.D. Brewer and G. Higgins.⁸ However, Brewer and Higgins' analysis may represent sociological reductionism whereby Ulster's anti-catholicism is reduced to simply a economic and political instrument in group conflict without adequate recognition for any theological or Biblical drivers for that anti-Catholicism.

My own response is that I wonder if official catholic teaching has yet adequately responded to the traditional protestant position on justification by faith alone (Trent is still 'on the books' and the recent Papal welcome to indulgences may even indicate some regression).⁹ Secondly, I have a suspicion that some have embraced ecumenism in the theological sphere because they see this as a necessary step towards getting unionists, nationalists and republicans working together in the political sphere (a worthy intention but, I submit, a misguided process).

Confronting the traditional unionist-protestant 'alliance'

As I have already suggested, there is a clear difference between LEPU and CEPU in this regard. At its best LEPU provides a challenge to those evangelical and reformed christians, such as myself, who are unionists, to put our own house in order, to prayerfully and Biblically re-examine our presuppositions.

However, at its worst, LEPU may indulge in the rhetorical device of the straw man (of course, some of my readers may think that is what I have done to them!). Construct the image of a bigoted and reactionary Orangeman and then cast doubt on all adherents of CEPU.¹⁰

A new category of excluded ones

LEPU is strong on CEPU's tendency to exclude. It is alleged that unionism (and perhaps also nationalism) was/is an exclusive ideology which, by definition, provided no sense of belonging to a sizeable minority group.¹¹ I recognise some force in such

critiques. Though, I wonder how far our response should be taken? Are Christians obligated to sublimate both unionism and nationalism into joint sovereignty? This depends on whether 'exclusion' applies only to social, cultural and economic rights (because these can be granted in the full even to an Irish nationalist/republican living in a Northern Ireland which remains in the UK) or is someone to be judged excluded if Northern Ireland fails to attain his/her aspired constitutional position? Almost all ideologies/theologies, e.g. capitalism, socialism, racism and Euro-federalism, exclude someone by their definitions. Christianity implies the eventual and eternal exclusion of the unsaved!

LEPU, however, needs to be cautious lest it generate its own category of the excluded, i.e. those sections of the protestant church community who do not share LEPUs 'enlightenment' as to the need for a new dispensation with respect to politics and theology. I am thinking of, for example, Free Presbyterians, some members of the Loyal Orders and also those members of the smaller evangelical churches who still take a 'separatist' view on religion and politics.

Conclusion

By this stage the reader will realise my reaction to the various strands of LEPUs varies from interest, through to intellectual engagement and then through to a judgment that it sometimes downright wrong. What LEPUs does represent is a new animal. A new way of 'doing' Christianity and politics in Northern Ireland. As such it needs to be examined and investigated with the same vigour that ECONI and others have devoted to weighing up CEPU.

¹ Indicated by the General Assembly and Synod deliberations on the 1912 Home Rule Bill (the latter receiving almost no backing) and the very high proportion of 1921-72 unionist MPs who were also Orangemen.

² Indications of the relative strength of LEPUs include:

- (i.) At the time of writing (November 1999) perhaps 60 per cent of the "protestant electorate" oppose the Belfast Agreement. Nevertheless, the official position of the three "main protestant churches" remains strongly pro-Agreement.
- (ii.) In the 1998, as revealed in a leaked memo, the Northern Ireland Office perceived the main protestant church leaders as useful salesmen for government policies.
- (iii.) The Church of Ireland, Presbyterian Church and, particularly, the Methodist Church have been much more muted in their criticisms of the September 1999 Patten Report than any of the unionist parties.

³ Interviewed on the Peter Taylor BBC "Provos" Documentary on 23 September 1997 Mr Hume said that Stormont represented the, "worst injustice in Europe". See M. Farrell (1976), *Northern Ireland: The Orange State*, Pluto Press, London; E. McCann (1974), *War and an Irish Town*, Penguin, Harmondsworth; and P. Foot (1989), *Ireland: Why Britain Must Get Out*, Chatto Counterblasts, no. 2, Chatto, London. Some of the LEPUs response to the perception of the "nationalist nightmare" is recorded in J.E. Birnie (1997), *Without Profit or Prophets*, Ulster Review Publications, Belfast.

⁴ For a discussion, see J.E. Birnie (1997), *Without Profit or Prophets*, Ulster Review Publications, Belfast. Also, J. Dunlop (1995), "Northern Ireland the year after the Ceasefires: Taking responsibility", *The British Irish Association Extracts from the Conference held at Emmanuel College, Cambridge*, 8-10 September.

⁵ L. Berkhof (1984), *Systematic Theology*, Banner of Truth, Edinburgh. As a stylised contrast compare

Berkhof to A. McGrath (1996), *A Passion for Truth*, Apollos, Leicester.

⁶ See A. Thomson (1994??), *The Fractured Family: Fundamentalists, Evangelicals and ECONI*, Pathways, ECONI, Belfast, for an example.

⁷ See A. Thomson (1994??), *Beyond Fear, Suspicion and Hostility: Evangelical-Roman Catholic Relationships*, Pathways, ECONI, Belfast for a useful summary of various approaches.

⁸ (1998), *Anti-Catholicism in Northern Ireland 1600-1998*.

⁹ I do welcome the recent Evangelical and Catholics Together statements in the USA which imply that *some* prominent American catholics, e.g. Professor Michael Novak whose views on the relationship between Christianity and capitalism I have found very helpful, do seem to interpret justification in the way that Luther did. I am waiting to see how far these individuals reflect the Catholic Church as a whole. The 31 October 1999 catholic-Lutheran statement is obviously of note. Taken in isolation it is impressive and commendable. However, since it does not contain a repudiation of any other and contrasting catholic official teaching we have the very post-modernist prospect of catholicism living with contradiction. For a more sympathetic view see The Faith and Politics Group (1999), *Self-Righteous Collective Superiority as a Cause of Conflict*, Belfast.

¹⁰ Of course there are *some* representatives of CEPU whose politics show unreasoning fear and whose religion shows little Christian love. As a pro-Agreement UUP Assembly Member I have probably been on the receiving end from such persons more often than the average LEPUs/ECONI supporter!

¹¹ See J. Dunlop (1999, June 8), "Communities must protect minorities", *Irish Times*.

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O GOD!

(OUR HELP IN AGES PAST)

By Christopher Catherwood

In an art gallery in Boston, Massachusetts, one can see a famous painting by the French impressionist, Gauguin. It is entitled 'Where do we come from? What are we? Where are we going?' The questions posed are at the heart of the nature of self-identity. Let us therefore look at the core issue of 'who am I' in the context of:

self-identity as Christians

self-identity among our fellow Protestants in Northern Ireland

political identity on the basis of a spiritual state of being.

Let us look first, therefore, at the nature of salvation itself and then at the nature of the Christian Church.

The Nature of Salvation

Jesus tells us, "My kingdom is not of this world." When he proclaims, "The kingdom of heaven is at hand," he is evidently preaching about a spiritual transformation, a New Covenant, based not on physical birth, as he points out to the Pharisees who challenge him, but on spiritual rebirth.

The Pharisees were looking at most for a war leader who would liberate the Jewish people from Roman oppression, or, if not something quite as militaristic, for a Jewish national leader in a spiritual/political sense, much as David had been. Jesus, we know from the genealogies at the beginning of Matthew and Luke, was, in human form, of Davidic descent. But as he pointed out to a puzzled Pharisaic leader, Nicodemus, unless someone is **spiritually** born again, he cannot enter the Kingdom of God. Likewise, he told those Pharisees who were out to trap him in conversation that God is able to create children of Abraham from stones. It is not physical descent from Abraham that matters, but spiritual rebirth.

What does this tell us about the Christian faith? Who are we as Christians? Where do we come from? Where are we going? God, as many an evangelist has surely told us, has no grandchildren. We are saved **individually**. Being born into a Christian family does not save us. Nor are we saved by our geography. Northern Ireland may have the highest church going population in the United Kingdom, but people in the province do not become Christians by breathing the air, by

simply attending church or by some mysterious process of osmosis. As Billy Graham once put it, "You can be a deacon in your church and not born again."

Since **Lion and Lamb** is the journal of the **Evangelical** Contribution on Northern Ireland, we ought not to forget the specifically **evangelical** perspective on salvation - it is through Christ on the Cross alone, not **ex opere operato** but equally not through birth into a nominally Protestant community. Being born into a Presbyterian or Baptist family does not save us either. Theoretically we remember this and in our evangelism we make it clear (whether Calvinists, like the author of this article, or otherwise).

The Nature of the Christian Church

However, we may be in danger of forgetting, in the context of Northern Ireland, its political dimension. Who are **God's** people in Northern Ireland? How are they constituted? Where do they come from? The biblical answer is surely plain - the Church, as we are reminded constantly throughout the New Testament, consists of those who are saved by Jesus Christ, the redeemed, the elect.

Consequently someone who is born into a community containing many born again Christians, but who is not himself or herself born again, is not a Christian. This may seem obvious, but what does it mean, for example, when we speak of the 'protestant community'? Historically it ought to mean those who hold to the glorious doctrines of the Protestant Reformation, to its core teachings on salvation, which, we as Evangelicals would argue, are in fact no more than a wonderful rediscovery of Biblical truth as enunciated in the teaching of our Lord and the writings of the New Testament in general.

However, it is also evident that many members of the 'Protestant' community do not share a specifically Biblical view of salvation and are Protestants very much in name and culture rather than in actual spiritual belief and practice. A simple but true story from the 1970s illustrates this. A Catholic Minister of State was dining with an agnostic senior civil servant. "We want to see the Minister!" demanded an angry group of Protestant women outside. The official went to see them and said, "He can't see you right now. But one thing puzzles me. You say you are Protestants, and he is a Catholic. Surely, if you are all Christians, you should get on with each other?" "We're not Christians," the women replied, "we're Protestants."

We would probably not agree with the official that simply calling yourself Catholic or Protestant makes you a Christian. The reason for putting this story here is to ask the more important question. When we are defending people who call themselves Protestants what do we actually mean by that? Are we defending fellow Christians, brothers and sisters in Christ, or are we actually defending people whose Protestantism is no more than a cultural point of self-identity, divorced in practice from the truths of the Gospel itself?

Christian or Protestant?

What therefore is our **basic** self-identity? Evangelical Christian? Someone for whom Jesus died on the cross to save their sins? Or Protestant - a form of self-identification which links us to many people whose behaviour often discredits the very basis of Christian teaching.

"Love your neighbour as yourself," Christ commanded us. He illustrated that with the parable of the Good Samaritan. What parallels should we draw in Northern Ireland today? If we behave in a hateful manner to those unlike ourselves, are we being Christ-like or simply Protestant? We rightly condemn Protestant theologians who deny large parts of the Bible, or who have strange interpretations of personal morality. But they are Protestants! Yet, for cultural or political reasons, we subconsciously identify ourselves with 'Protestants' whose political platforms preach a very different Gospel from that of the New Testament, or whose violence is alien to the teaching of Scripture. How can we, if we say we are Evangelical Christians, identify ourselves **primarily** with a community which describes itself as Protestant, and gives that term no further qualification?

Genuine Biblical Christianity is linked to faith, to a spiritual reality, and not to any particular geographical place. As Evangelical Christians we have, ultimately, more in common with fellow Evangelical believers in Brazil or Zambia or China than we do with fellow Ulster Scots living down the street from us. As Scripture shows us, our citizenship is in heaven, not on earth. Where are we going? To heaven, to our real and eternal home, to be with Jesus.

Supranational Christians

Culturally and emotionally, this can be very hard to swallow. Fortunately for us, many Christians have been there before. The Bible is, not surprisingly, a wonderfully realistic book, and it does not conceal the puzzles and struggles Christians have in accommodating uncomfortable truths, or in getting on with one another. Perhaps the prime New Testament examples of this can be found in the Book of Acts and in Paul's description of internal church disputes in several of his Epistles.

As Peter's constant bewilderment, evident from the accounts in Acts and Paul's reference to it in Colossians, makes clear, the disciples found it hard to understand that the message of salvation through Jesus Christ was not for the Jews only but for the Gentiles as well. No longer was God's covenant restricted to one physically/ethnically discrete race (though here again, the stories of both Ruth and Naaman show clearly that belief in God, even in Old Testament times, was fully open to those not of the Jewish race). As Paul pointed out, the Christian message is **supranational**, not limited to any one race, but open to believers of every nationality. Furthermore, within the Christian church itself previously existing national barriers cease to exist. There is now no more Jew or Gentile, but all are one in Jesus Christ.

One can see this in the contrast between the Tower of Babel and the Day of Pentecost. The story in Genesis 11 shows us a group of people trying on their own account to build a tower to reach God. Until then, the entire human race spoke one faith language. God, however, punishes them for their arrogance and disobedience by splitting them up into different tribes and languages. A hitherto united humanity is divided up into separate, mutually incomprehensible and soon conflicting national/linguistic groups. One nation became many nations. One can argue that nations as separate entities are thus born in sin, part of the consequence of the Fall. Nations are proof that we are sinners. Governments, as we read in both Romans and Peter, are ordained of God. But these too are there because of sin, because of the need to have elements of control, decency and order over a fallen and sinful humanity.

Furthermore, the government to which Paul and Peter were telling the early Christians to be obedient was that of the sinful, pagan and persecuting government of Imperial Rome. It should be obvious that while government is God ordained, it is not in and of itself necessarily godly. God in Old Testament times used pagan kings to protect his people or teach them lessons, and that too was no endorsement of pagan belief.

On the day of Pentecost, one of the most significant things is the large list of nationalities given. This shows that Christianity was a truly universal faith, not limited to the Children of Israel, the Jews. All heard the message **in their own language**. The message was the same in all of them. God was reuniting the human race on His own initiative. We are united through the shed blood of Jesus. Within the Christian church, as the disciples were to find, there are now no national, linguistic or racial differences.

The Christian State?

Christians, therefore, are united by their common Saviour in a truly **supranational** body (to use a phrase popularised by John Stott in Lausanne in 1974). Our prime loyalty, and thus our ultimate self-identity, is not to a national, racial, cultural, ethnic or linguistic grouping, but upwards to God, through Christ, through the common indwelling of the Holy Spirit, and sideways, in fellowship, to each other.

It is difficult, therefore, to see how Christians can contemplate the idea of a Christian state, an essentially political and thus man made unit by its very nature, this side of eternity. There have been brave attempts. Oliver Cromwell tried it in our country, but the attempt was already a failure by his death. Not only was the Restoration, two years after his demise, one of the most debauched periods in English history. His attempts to subdue Ireland, while nowhere near as bloodthirsty as legend would have it, created folk memories in the island that have unfortunate consequences for the Gospel three centuries later.

The Puritans aimed to create a Christian society in the New World. But in 1662, the same time in which countless godly Puritans were expelled from the Restoration Church of England, they had to introduce something called the Half Way

Covenant. This admitted to church membership those who had been baptised but who had not (and in some cases never did) profess Christian faith. The Puritans discovered something that we saw at the beginning of this article: however deep the faith of the founders, biological descent is no guarantee of faith in the descendants. Establishing a Christian country is rather like the 20th Century American attempt at prohibition - a great idea, but of no use when the majority of inhabitants simply do not believe in what a godly minority is trying to do.

The sad spiritual state of England, nominally a Christian country, shows what the legacy of such attempts can be. Today, the United States, which formally insists on the separation of Church and State, is a far more Christian country **in practice** than the United Kingdom. The epic growth of the Christian church in China, a land where missionaries were expelled, followed soon after by the savage persecution of the Cultural Revolution, should show beyond argument that God does not need sympathetic governments for his people to grow in numbers. Despite recently renewed persecution, the Chinese church continues to grow. There are far more Chinese Evangelicals than there are people in the whole United Kingdom, let alone in Northern Ireland.

The very notion of a Christian state, in a fallen world, should thus be unthinkable for Christians whose political analysis is informed by Biblical principle. Christians, by their very definition, are spread throughout the globe, in Shanghai and Lagos, in New York and Rio, not just in Belfast or Bangor. The reality of sin is that no second generation can ever be guaranteed to have real faith, something that can be determined by God in His mercy alone.

We cannot defend **as Christians** the structure of any one political entity. We must, of course, as Jesus commands, be salt and light wherever we live. In many totalitarian societies it has been Christians being just that, loving their neighbours as themselves, that has led countless others to faith in Christ, especially where overt evangelism is illegal. Being salt and light necessitates that we play our full part as temporary citizens of whatever country we are in this side of Heaven. We cannot opt out into a kind of monastic withdrawal. If the state permits the free expression of Christian faith, as does ours, then we can be thankful! But God is not dependent on human state structures to do His will. If He is not, nor should we be.

Where do we come from? A sinful, rebellious past. Who are we? The adopted children of God, through our Saviour Jesus Christ. Where are we going? Heaven. That is the fundamental nature of our self-identity. As the great hymn **O God Our Help in Ages Past** reminds us, God, not political structures, has been the true help of Christians throughout the ages. Our eternal home is not the man made nation state, but Heaven itself.

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transformation

ECONI Summer School exploring the themes of Faith, Culture, Spirituality & Society.

ECONI Residential Conference

Transformation is a four-day Summer School designed to help participants consider the relationship between Christian faith and the issues of Culture & Identity and Spirituality & Society. This year we will be running two independent strands around these themes.

Strand 1: Back to the Future will explore the nature of political, religious and cultural identity. Through a series of creative workshops, Biblical reflections and field trips, we will consider the positive and negative aspects of the relationship between Protestant faith and culture in the context of Northern Ireland. **Strand 2: A Spirituality for Social Engagement** is an opportunity to look at what kind of spiritual life and vision is needed if Christians are to engage prophetically with the problems of a divided community. Through a series of workshops, studies and interactive discussion we will seek to define the nature of Biblical spirituality and how this should inform our witness in society.

Speakers and Facilitators

David McMillan will lead our daily Bible readings which will be shared by both strands of the conference. David is Pastor of Windsor Baptist Church, Belfast, and is a member of ECONI's Central Co-ordinating Group.

Lynda Gould (ECONI's Training Officer) will be the main facilitator of **Back to the Future**, Strand 1 of the conference.

Derek Poole (ECONI's Programmes Officer) will facilitate **A Spirituality for Social Engagement**, Strand 2 of the conference.

A number of informed and experienced guests will join us to share in the workshops and group interaction of both strands.

Back to the Future

Through a series of creative workshops, Biblical reflections and field trips, Back to the Future will explore the political and religious dimensions of culture in Northern Ireland. In particular, the aim of this strand is to deepen our understanding of the relationship between cultural identity and the theological and historical influence of Evangelical Protestantism. The programme promises to provide considerable opportunity for interactive discussion and personal reflection around some of these themes:

- Exploring what it means to be Protestant.
- Considering Protestant perception, prejudice and perspectives.
- How Protestantism has cultivated a particular cultural identity.
- The politics, culture and religious nature of Orangeism

Integral to the input from speakers will be visits to the late night bonfires, to the Orange parades and 'the field' on 12th July.

A Spirituality for Social Engagement

Central to Biblical spirituality is a concern that God's redemptive love will affect the totality of life. For Christians, spirituality is not an emotional escape from the brokenness of the world but a quest for spiritual resources that will help us in our commitment to the healing of our estranged relationships and the restoration of peace and justice in society. Strand two of our Summer School will be exploring this theme in considerable depth and during our four days together we will be asking many questions that relate our Christian witness and spiritual values to the complexity of our changing world:

- What responsibilities do Christians have for the transformation of society?
- What kind of spirituality is needed for meaningful social engagement?
- What is a Biblical spirituality and how does this influence our social concerns?
- What kind of vision will sustain Christians through difficult and despairing times?
- What is the relationship between the spirituality of the Church and the commitment of the individual?
- In the context of Northern Ireland, how does the spiritual practice of prayer and Biblical meditation nurture social compassion?

Conference Details

- Dates:** 10 – 14 July 2000
Venue: Belfast Bible College
(Accommodation - Derryvolgie Halls)
Cost: The full cost for the Conference including fees, field trips, accommodation, transport and meals is £130, or £100 for non-residents. A bursary is available for full-time students and those who are unemployed.
Details: Tel: 028 9032 5258
email: lynda@econ.org

and finally

Skills for the Task 1: Transforming Bible Study

An 8 week course exploring the theme of Biblical interpretation and providing practical skills for the task of reading the Bible in a divided society.

Venue: ECONI training room, Howard House
Dates: 2 May – 20 June 2000
Cost: £35 (£20 concession rate)

Skills for the Task 2: Facilitating Others

Spread over 2 weekends, this course is designed to meet the growing need for high quality training.

Venue: ECONI training room, Howard House
Dates: 19 & 20 May and 16 & 17 June
Cost: £35 (£20 concession rate)

CENTRE FOR CONTEMPORARY CHRISTIANITY

SEEK THE WELFARE OF THE CITY

Church and society in Scotland and Ireland

The Centre for Contemporary Christianity is organising a major conference in September. Local speakers will be joined by guests from churches in Scotland. Together they will explore the challenge to the identity and role of the church, both in ministry and mission and in public witness to society.

Dates 25-26 September 2000 in Belfast
Speakers Those expected include:
Professor David Wright (University of Edinburgh)
Dr Graham Blount (Scottish Churches' Parliamentary Officer)
Dr Esmond Birnie MLA
Rev Norman Hamilton

THIRD CATHERWOOD LECTURE

- Tuesday 26 September 2000
- Speaker - **Professor Duncan Forrester** Professor of Christian Ethics and Practical Theology at the University of Edinburgh, and Director of the Centre for Theological and Public Issues.
- Subject - **Trust and Risk: Christian Virtues in Politics?**

The third annual Catherwood Lecture will bring the conference **Seek the Welfare of the City** to a conclusion. For further information contact Alwyn Thomson at the ECONI Office Tel: 028 9032 5258 or email alwyn@econ.org

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