

Gay, Doug. (2013) *Honey from the Lion: Christianity and the Ethics of Nationalism*. London: SCM Press. 978-0-334-04647-9. Pbk. £19.99.

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The majority of voters in Orkney and Shetland opt to retain the Union in the September 2014 referendum on Scottish independence. The political implications – they will be bound by the national outcome – will be much more straightforward than the ethical implications. Why should one perceived ‘democratic deficit’ (Scotland in the rest of the UK) be addressed at the expense of introducing another democratic deficit (Orkney and Shetland in the rest of Scotland)?

The majority of voters in Cumbria and Northumberland opt to throw their lot in with a new independent state of North Britain. In this much less likely scenario, the political implications are straightforward – they will be kept within Westminster's orbit. The ethical implications are more complicated. Perceptions that British economic policy is determined by the requirements of the London city-state and the southeast of England overflow into independence for people living in Dumfries & Galloway but not for their neighbours in Cumbria.

How would a Christian ethics of nationalism help me were I, in these two possible scenarios, to have conversations with fellow believers in Kirkwall, Castle Douglas and Alnwick (in Orkney, Dumfries & Galloway and Northumberland, respectively)?

Doug Gay's argument is that nationalism need not carry intrinsic characteristics of exclusion and superiority nor be embedded in uncivil discourse that denigrates others. Instead, Gay proposes an ethics of nationalism that Christians may enact because it coheres sufficiently well with treasured values such as hospitality, respect, and self-determination. Gay invites us to rethink nationalism as an “‘incarnation’ of democracy” (p. 14) rather than framing it as dangerous. So, nationalism is about a population laying claim to its identity with consequences for jurisdiction and territory.

Gay draws on three strands of Christian ethics to construct an “ethical, liberal, civic and democratic nationalism” (p.24): Roman Catholic Social Teaching, Reformed and Anabaptist praxis. From the Roman Catholic stream he brings the emphasis on human dignity and the common good. The Reformed tradition (which is his own context as a Church of Scotland minister and academic) offers the reforming impetus of vigilant discipline in the virtues required for public and commercial vocations. The Anabaptist / Mennonite perspective of the Radical Reformation (mediated here largely through John Howard Yoder and Stanley Hauerwas) offers its stress on distinctive communal practice that is exemplary of the Christian story.

Gay presents a Christian idea of society that turns on the fullness of life and which he succinctly articulates as: beloved and joyful; free, just and equal; landed and lawful; complex and peaceful (p.43). This leads him into his theological account of nationalism that owes much to reading the myth of the Tower of Babel as an affirmation of, and indeed a commission to steward, cultural diversity (p. 70). Gay, however, goes much further and argues for nationalism as a vocation because it is a necessary mirror in which we see ourselves and, crucially, are thereby in a position to be self-critical of what we love and the implications of such national desires for others. Augustinian civic nationalism provides Gay with support for his positive framing of both territory and self-image as a nation.

From the fifth chapter onwards Gay turns to the Scottish context. He traces highlights in the ‘evolution’ of the political and cultural aspirations for devolution of state powers to a legislative body in Scotland, elected by people in Scotland. The tradition of claim-making over political

rights is given due prominence and goes quite a considerable way to marking out a particular path and ethos in Scotland's malleable constitutional settlements.

Gay then attempts an evaluation of Scotland's parliament from its reinstatement in 1999. He organizes this around 'sweet notes' such as fairer voting, 'bitter sweet notes' for example, land reform, and 'sour notes' of which persistently high levels of poverty are given first place.

In the light of his evaluation – and an assessment that Gay has been making in his personal journey for many years – he is convinced of the need for the Scotland to be an independent state. The sequence of his argument is crucial because Gay is not presupposing that national narratives entitle any 'nation' to self-determination; rather, 'each ethical and prudential case for "re-stating" a national community needs to be assessed on its own merits' (p.143). Whilst he has found the current constitutional arrangement of the United Kingdom to be detrimental to the common good in Scotland, Gay sketches out what 'a Christian vision for transforming Scotland' might look like (pp. 155-7). The tone is captured in the first on his list of almost 30 bullet points: 'a society committed to seeking and pursuing the Common good, insistent on the dignity and worth of every member of the body social and of their valued place within the commonwealth' (p.155).

Prior to a short conclusion Gay offers a discussion of the implications for the Church of Scotland were an independent state to develop a written constitution. Although the place of the 1921 Church of Scotland Act (an Act of the Westminster parliament) might seem arcane to those with affiliation outside the Kirk (and probably to most within it), there are important issues around assumptions of secularism that Gay brings to the foreground (pp. 185, 191).

Gay writes accessibly with detailed knowledge and a generally sophisticated analysis. His argument that nationalism is not intrinsically incompatible with Christian ethics almost convinces me. Gay does admit that 'nations' are 'approximate, relative and provisional communities' with the consequence that 'attempts to align them with state boundaries [are] continually problematic' (p.139) but the problem of boundaries is, I fear, much more significant than he acknowledges. The scenarios I present at the opening of this review illustrate where the major challenge to Gay's thesis lies. It is a political challenge because national borders are not self-evident but constructions (even where geographical features such as rivers or mountain ranges seem to dictate a common sense boundary). As constructions that are frequently complex coalitions of numerous allegiances (including ethnicity, history, language, religion, etc.) the challenge is also cultural. Furthermore, as the scenarios I posit indicate, there are ethical challenges around representation, exclusion, inclusion and fairness.

I think it is the thorough-going Scottishness of Gay's outlook that hinders him from exploring these challenges adequately. It is vitally important that his work deals with a particular context and thus avoids abstraction. However, Scotland is part of Great Britain. Gay tells us little, if anything, about the ethics of nationalism when more than one layer of national identity is in play. Like so many people around the world who have to deal with national and state boundaries (on maps, in the mind, and in the body), Scots negotiate their own 'British', 'Scottish', 'European', 'Asian-Scottish', 'British-Asian', or numerous other hyphenated identities. At the same time, there are many respects in which (setting national identity to one side) some people in certain parts of Scotland have much in common with Northumbrians and Cumbrians. Gay's neglect to engage with, for example, fellow practical theologian Ian Bradley's extensive work on Britishness (e.g., his *Believing in Britain*, Taurus, 2007) weakens his case.

Gay's seeing through solely a Scottish lens could also have been ameliorated, not just by examining Britishness, but by adopting a different entry point point in his reading and re-telling the biblical narratives. By starting with the inhabitants of mythical Eden in Genesis Gay's approach circumvents the significant ethical challenge of Israel's *taking* of the Land from its

residents. Israel's being *given* the Land is only one side (and the victor's side) of God's promise. Were Gay to start his ethical construction with the Exile (the context in which it can be argued that the Hebrew Bible as we have come to know it was brought together) then the pain of exclusion and of being dispossessed come immediately to the surface. Perhaps such intense emotional experiences would become hermeneutical principles that attune an ethics of nationalism to the historical contingency (sometimes arbitrariness) of national borders?

This alternative starting point (that gives the interpretive process a bias for those affected by (other) nations' decisions) might also have given Gay more reason to question his mapping of the common good. To put it bluntly, is the Christian idea of society really one that is 'free, just and equal' as Gay argues (p. 53)? Conservative evangelical stances against equal marriage for same-sex couples and Roman Catholic contentions with abortion legislation are indicative of a different trajectory.

This reader is suspicious whenever anyone argues for normalising anything – as Gay does for nationalism. Such a step is too-readily dismissive of the disciplinary power that those able to name 'normal' can exert against those who are different. Drawing a 'best fit' line on a graph of results makes for a strong visual representation but can be at the expense of the outliers. Those outliers might well be far more interesting – let alone be the possessors of critical wisdom and rights that are otherwise overshadowed by the 'normal', 'best fit' line. The lack of a Canaanite perspective on Israel's being 'given' the Land makes me slightly anxious that Gay's Christian ethics of nationalism tips towards the claimant of independence. In context, this means too little – if any – consideration is given to the consequences of Scottish independence upon the rest of the UK and especially for regions within Scotland that have a strong sense of identity too.

Such criticisms aside (but they are significant in my opinion), Gay's book is an important contribution to the immediate referendum debates but it will have lasting significance as a serious treatment of the ethics of nationalism more widely. Whether or not a reader has a vote in the 2014 referendum, questions of national identity are integral to economic development and peace-making: people, especially Christians, in Ukraine, Crimea and the Russian Federation will have their story to tell and ethical issues to explore. Gay's text would be a valuable contribution well beyond the UK.

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