

# Kierkegaard's Critique of Christian Nationalism

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# Nationalism, Christianity and Kierkegaard

It is bad because it is a lie, and a lie can never be uttered without doing harm.<sup>1</sup>

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Notoriously difficult to define, ‘nationalism’ is a powerful ideology which harnesses ideals of personal identity, history, race and language, often in order to promote good citizenship or human flourishing, whose values are affiliated to the privileging of a particular cultural-ethnic identity. Nationalism is broader than the explicitly racist and/or militaristic movements as popularly understood. These more obviously malevolent forms are of course phenomena of nationalism, but the ideology is more extensive and pervasive than the virulent types would suggest. Following Michael Billig’s identification of ‘banal nationalism’, we can see that nationalism also includes those elements that undergird the (usually subconscious) everyday expressions of identity and affiliation connected to a specific people group.<sup>2</sup> Nationalism encompasses that which establishes a ‘sense of the common’ in a society, including religious and generational wisdom that is privileged for racial and ethnic reasons. Nationalism contributes to many of the narratives by which people live their lives and base their prejudices. One need not talk only of its extreme forms to talk of nationalism—for the banal versions also hold sway in everyday life. So although nationalism can (and often does) erupt as a justification for genocide or apartheid, before it reaches that stage, it can remain an unconscious set of ideological assumptions that govern who one considers worthy of friendship,

<sup>1</sup> Leo Tolstoy, ‘Christianity and Patriotism’ in *The Kingdom of God and Peace Essays*, trans. Aylmer Maude (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1936), 487.

<sup>2</sup> ‘Banal nationalism’ refers to ‘ideological habits’ that underlie national identities. ‘Nationalism, far from being an intermittent mood in established nations, is the endemic condition.’ Following Hannah Arendt, Billig stresses that ‘banal’ should not be confused with ‘benign’. Michael Billig, *Banal Nationalism* (London: Sage, 1995), 6, 7.

what type of person appears appropriate to marry, to educate, to heal or on whom to spend public money.

I propose that nationalism is ultimately malignant, even when not overtly antagonistic to other national groups: this theme will be explored in detail below and expanded upon throughout the book. I argue that even apparently benign nationalisms rely on quasi-historical myths, selective cultural memories and suspect racial theories, and as such, they undermine human flourishing by prioritizing the unstable, abstract notion of the 'compatriot' over the concrete reality of the 'neighbour' (the Kierkegaardian understanding of which I discuss in detail in the following chapters). Furthermore, I maintain that 'patriotism' is not, ultimately, distinct from nationalism, and thus cannot provide the solution to nationalism's deficiencies that its proponents desire. When nationalism and patriotism are combined with Christian thought and practice, or when Christians fail to see the ways in which these ideologies make rival overarching claims establishing identity and destiny, it becomes not only a political and cultural problem, but also a theological problem.

I do not attempt here to provide an exhaustive account of the political-philosophical literature on nationalism. Instead, I aim to sketch some of the main lines of inquiry, flagging key issues and thinkers in the field whose discourse particularly invites or benefits from Kierkegaard as an interlocutor. After considering the political-philosophical issue of nationalism and patriotism, the chapter will focus on specifically christianized forms of the phenomenon and its relation to the specifically theological aspects of Kierkegaard's project.

## 2. NATIONS AND NATIONALISM

One of the reasons it is difficult to define nations and their attendant nationalisms is the history of their development.<sup>3</sup> However, one common consensus is that nations as we know them today are relatively modern social phenomena, with their ideology and discourse only becoming prevalent in the latter half of the eighteenth century. Key dates in the growth of the idea of nationalism include 1775 (First Partition of Poland), 1776 (American Declaration of Independence), 1784 (Herder's cultural-linguistic historical theories in *Reflections on the Philosophy of the History of Mankind*), 1789 and 1792 (the two

<sup>3</sup> A brief scan of confident, and occasionally contradictory, statements on nationalism's source is revealing: 'There was no such thing as nationalism as such before the eighteenth century.' (Conzemiuss, 1995); 'Nationalism is a product of European thought from the last 150 years.' (Kedourie, 1960); 'The age of nationalism began in 1815.' (Featherstone, 1939); 'We can say quite precisely when [nationalism] came into the world, in 1789.' (Schneider, 1995).

phases of the French Revolution) and 1807 (Fichte's *Address to the German Nation*).<sup>4</sup> The English word 'nationalism' has been traced back to occasional use in literature in 1798 and again in 1830, and it did not appear in lexicographies until the late nineteenth century.<sup>5</sup> 'The nation' is relatively new, therefore, and in constant flux, its contours continuing to develop while new forms of nationalism spring up.<sup>6</sup>

In the absence of total agreement about terms, sociologist Anthony D. Smith has proposed some good working definitions which are helpful here. *Nationalism*, he writes, is 'an ideological movement for the attainment and maintenance of autonomy, unity and identity of a human population, some of whose members conceive it to constitute an actual or potential "nation".' Furthermore, *nation* is defined as 'a named human population sharing an historic territory, common myths and memories, a mass, public culture, a single economy and common rights and duties for all members.'<sup>7</sup> These definitions take into account the two main forces at play in any incarnation of nationalism, namely the *primordial* and *political*.<sup>8</sup> The primordial force is one that affirms the values of heritage, blood and culture. Nations do not arise from borders and states, but from pre-rational (or a-rational) 'givens' of kin, religion, language and custom.<sup>9</sup> The political force describes nationalism's drive towards civic autonomy, which in turn creates various movements towards defined borders, national independence, and the relations of national groups sitting together at the world's table.<sup>10</sup>

A synthesis of the primordial and the political is evident in all forms of nationalism. All nationalisms maintain that 'the people' must be free to

<sup>4</sup> John Hutchinson and Anthony D. Smith (eds), *Nationalism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), 5.

<sup>5</sup> Walker Conner, 'A Nation is a nation, is a state, is an ethnic group, is a . . .' in *Ethnic and Racial Studies* Vol. 1 No. 4 (October 1978): 377–400 at 384.

<sup>6</sup> Habermas refers to nationalism as 'a specifically modern phenomena of cultural integration' that emerges 'at a time when people are at once both mobilised and isolated as individuals'. 'Citizenship and National Identity' in *Praxis International* 12/1 (April 1992): 1–19 at 3.

<sup>7</sup> Anthony D. Smith, 'The Nation: Real or Imagined?' in Edward Mortimer (ed), *People, Nation, State* (London: I. B. Tauris, 1999), 37.

<sup>8</sup> See Clifford Geertz, 'The Integrative Revolution' in *Old Societies and New States* (London: Macmillan, 1963), and Conner, 'Nation'.

<sup>9</sup> Geertz, 'Revolution', 109.

<sup>10</sup> Note however that 'nations' are often erroneously conflated with 'states'. A state is a territorial, juridical unit, whereas a nation is 'a psychological bond' (Conner, 'Nation', 379). While nationalism may display affinities towards the political, territorial unit, it does not ultimately demand loyalty upon the *state*, but the *nation*. Nations are far more numerous than states, and every state has more than one nation living within its borders. 'With very few exceptions, the greatest barrier to state unity has been the fact that the states each contain more than one nation, and sometimes hundreds.' (Conner, 'Nation', 383–4). See also Anthony D. Smith, 'Imagined?', 38; Charles Tilly, *The Formation of Nation States in Western Europe* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1975). Cf. ch. 2 below where Martensen occasionally recognizes the distinction.

pursue their own destiny. This involves fraternity, unity, the dissolving of all internal divisions, and being gathered together in a single historic territory and sharing a single public culture.<sup>11</sup> In nationalism, culture and territory are determined by historic rights, heritage and generational inheritance which are taken to constitute 'authentic identity'.<sup>12</sup> The belief in blood ties and heritage leads to, and is in turn protected by, the political drive towards boundary identification and civil autonomy. Nationalism's movement is historically conditioned: rooted in the past, celebrated in the present and providing hope for triumph and success in the future. Each period—past, present and future—is continually constructed and re-imagined according to current need. Thus it is very difficult to identify the roots of 'the nation'. Nationalism requires an ambiguous relationship to history in order to thrive, for it is a constantly developing construction, not simply a brute fact of geography and laws.

It is not the things which are simply 'there' that matter in human life. *What really and finally matters is the thing which is apprehended as an idea, and, as an idea, is vested with emotion until it becomes a cause and a spring of action . . . a nation must be an idea as well as a fact before it can become a dynamic force.*<sup>13</sup>

## 2.1 Imagined communities

The 'nation' is therefore an invented idea and consequently 'nationalism' is an act of collective imagination, a claim which for some arouses righteous indignation.<sup>14</sup> Yet nations did not fall fully formed from the sky, and they are not natural features of any landscape.<sup>15</sup> All nations are the psychological/cultural productions of human beings which, following Eric Hobsbawm, are merely sets of invented traditions comprising national symbols, mythology

<sup>11</sup> There are forms of mainstream civic nationalism, such as the Scottish and Welsh Nationalist parties, that do not seem to synthesize the political with the primordial, or take a strong line on primordiality. As such these parties are much closer to espousing constitutional or civic patriotism and, as such, they share in the weaknesses attached to these models of citizenship participation and identity (see below).

<sup>12</sup> *Nationalism*, 4.

<sup>13</sup> Ernest Barker, *National Character and the Factors in its Formation* (Methuen: London, 1927), 173 (emphasis added).

<sup>14</sup> For example, conservative commentator Melanie Phillips quotes with derision a think tank report which suggests that the 'nation' is an artificial construct, and that there is not a fixed conception of national identity and culture. She claims this as yet another example of 'British society trying to denude itself of its identity'. Melanie Phillips, *Londonistan* (London: Gibson Square, 2006), 111–12. Cf. *The Future of Multi-Ethnic Britain: Parekh Report* (London: Profile Books, 2001).

<sup>15</sup> Cf. Mark Dooley, 'The Politics of Statehood vs. A Politics of Exodus' in *Søren Kierkegaard Newsletter* (Issue 40, August 2000), 6.

and suitably tailored history.<sup>16</sup> The question is therefore not whether nations are *real*, but rather *in what way* they exist. Even though they may exist only as invented constructions—kept alive by symbols, ethnic memory, myth and common consent—Smith emphasizes that they are still actual enough in the way they operate: ‘Nations and nationalism are real and powerful sociological phenomena, even if their reality is quite different from the tale told about them by nationalists themselves.’<sup>17</sup> While it would be foolish to say that national identities do not exist, one is equally mistaken if one does not recognize the human ingenuity, imagination and narrative construction that is *essential* to those identities.<sup>18</sup>

## 2.2 Salvation drama

Recognition of the symbolic and narrative elements of nationalism brings us to the heart of its constructed nature. The secular rhetoric that accompanies much modern nationalism is in fact a later addition masking a foundational premise. The original engine of nations and nationalisms is in fact theology. Whether writers such as Martensen or Grundtvig (discussed in the following chapters) recognized it or not, the pseudo-theological language of nationalism arises from an explicit attempt on behalf of European nationalism’s founding fathers to provide an alternative home for the passions and energy that people used to pour into the Christian Church.

Nation talk often betrays a Messianic enthusiasm that draws heavily from Judeo-Christian roots. As Max Weber notes, there is in nationalism ‘a fervour of emotional influence’ that does not have, in the main, a political-economic origin.<sup>19</sup> Instead, nationalism is based upon what he calls ‘sentiments of prestige’ rooted deep in notions of common descent and essential cultural/ethnic homogeneity.<sup>20</sup> The prestige of a nation is directly linked to the foundational idea (albeit not always explicitly addressed) of that nation’s ‘mission’ in the world, which in turn invites the notion that a particular nation’s culture and spirit is set apart from other nations. A ‘culture mission’ to the rest of the world creates and affirms sentiments of national significance

<sup>16</sup> Eric Hobsbawm, *The Invention of Tradition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), ch.1; Smith, ‘Imagined?’, 39. Benedict Anderson defines a nation as an ‘imagined political community’. Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities* (London: Verso, 1991), ch. 3.

<sup>17</sup> Smith, ‘Imagined?’, 36–7.

<sup>18</sup> Cf. Matušík, who says of Kierkegaard that he ‘cuts beneath traditional conceptions of human nature as something already formed and given once and for all. There is no given essence. Human nature itself is shaped through our choices.’ Matušík, ‘Interview’, 6. This of course is the antecedent for Sartre’s guiding maxim, ‘existence precedes essence’.

<sup>19</sup> Max Weber, ‘The Nation’ in *Essays in Sociology* (London: Routledge, 1948), 171.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 173, 176.

and superiority, or at least irreplaceability. For Weber, prestige is directly linked to a nation's belief in its own 'legend of providential "mission"'.<sup>21</sup> Smith refers often to nationalism as a 'salvation drama', which 'specifies what shall count towards collective purification and regeneration. Briefly, everything that is popular, authentic and emancipatory contributes to the renaissance of the nation'.<sup>22</sup>

The Messianic ardour of nationalism identifies and preserves one people as distinct from any other people: 'One of the goals of nationalism is the attainment and maintenance of cultural identity, that is, a sense of a distinctive cultural heritage and "personality" for a given named population.'<sup>23</sup> In order to attain the highest ideal of authentic existence, the nationalist must 'discover and discern that which is truly "oneself" and to purge the collective self of any trace of the "other"'.<sup>24</sup> Nationalism must therefore have an 'authentic' history, which marks out and excludes the influence of any other cultures and must not admit any opportunistic invention on behalf of the nationalist dogma.<sup>25</sup> As nationalist history rediscovers, reconstructs and appropriates the communal past in order to build the basis for a vision of collective destiny, its collective salvation drama often derives from religious models.<sup>26</sup>

That the nation poses as a rival for individuals' ultimate allegiance is not lost on sociologists or theologians. What humans once projected onto their gods, they can also entrust to the nation:

Nationalism . . . substituted the nation for the deity, the citizen body for the church and the political kingdom for the kingdom of God, but in every other respect replicated the forms and qualities of traditional religions.<sup>27</sup>

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 176. The 'culture mission' motif runs throughout Martensen's thought: 'It is only by means of Christianity that nationalities can attain the development to which they are really appointed.' *SE*, 93–4. Also *SE*, 333, 345; *CD*, 173, 275. It is even stronger in Grundtvig. As the 'divine experiment' the Norse nation has a pre-eminent role in the world (*US X*, 45) and it has assumed the mantle of history (N. F. S. Grundtvig, 'Christian Signs of Life' in *A Grundtvig Anthology* trans. Edward Broadbridge and Niels Lykne Jensen (Cambridge: James Clarke & Co., 1984), 154). See especially 'The Pleiades of Christendom' *VU VI*, 274–390; also 'Introduction to Norse Mythology' in *A Grundtvig Anthology*, 35, 'New Years Morn' *VU VII*, 373.

<sup>22</sup> Anthony D. Smith, *Nationalism and Modernism* (London: Routledge, 1998), 4. Cf. Dooley, 'Talk of the "historical mission" of a state, or of the *Geist* of world history, was bound to send shivers up [Kierkegaard's] stooped spine. For in either its secular or religious variations, a divinized state implies terror' in 'Statehood', 5.

<sup>23</sup> Smith, *Modernism*, 90.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 44.

<sup>25</sup> Cf. Grundtvig's *mageløse opdagelse* which bases Danish Christianity on common speech as opposed to written words translated from foreign languages. (See, for example, *Christelige Prædiker I.*) Popular/National (*folkelig*) religion is clearly impossible if it is to be 'derived from and based on books'. 'Elementary Christian Teachings' in *A Grundtvig Anthology*, 136–7.

<sup>26</sup> Smith, *Modernism*, 90.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 98.

Tomka points out that as a rival to Christianity, the nation offers itself as the dominant institution for formulating individual and cultural identity and as such it is 'a likely starting point for ideologies with a claim to absoluteness'. In the face of the collapse of religion, 'nationalism creates its own sacred microcosm from within, in a way which cannot be refuted from outside'.<sup>28</sup>

One of the theological threads of nationalism can be definitively traced back to 1789, when Abbé Emmanuel Sieyès published his pamphlet entitled 'What is the Third Estate?' and declared the nation to be the ground of all politics.<sup>29</sup> Indeed, it seems that for Sieyès, the nation is more than just the ground of politics, for it is also 'the origin of all things' and it 'exists before all else', independent of 'all forms and conditions'.<sup>30</sup> Its law is the supreme law, prompting one commentator to conclude that 'Sieyès the theologian gives the nation the traditional predicates of God'.<sup>31</sup> Sieyès did not produce the supposed divine attributes of the nation *ex nihilo*, for behind them lies Rousseau's doctrine of the sovereignty of the people. 'Rousseau is similarly a theologian in disguise—or a pseudo-theologian: he attributes superhuman sovereignty to the "*volonté générale*"'.<sup>32</sup> Often understood by social historians as a political construct referring to the general will of the people, Rousseau's '*volonté générale*' was, in fact, a theological term current at the time, meaning simply the will of God.<sup>33</sup> Is it any surprise that nationalisms encroach upon allegiances and functions normally attributed to Christianity? From the start, nationalism appropriated Christian theological concepts. In short, nationalism is simply a re-worked religious construct.

### 2.3 A great aggregate of men

From the pseudo-theological underpinnings of nationalism naturally flow religious-like claims of providing authenticity and identity to individuals.

<sup>28</sup> Miklós Tomka, 'Secularisation and Nationalism' in John Coleman and Miklós Tomka (eds), *Concilium: Religion and Nationalism* (SCM, 1995), 29. Cf. Westphal, 'The society that becomes its own point of reference absolutizes itself... Eichmann and Mengele were good Germans in this sense, and apartheid is what the age demands for Afrikaners. This is why Johannes Climacus says that the system has no ethics... We would do well to remember that Socrates and the early Christians were accused of atheism because they did not worship at the shrines of the self-absolutizing cultures in which they lived.' *Critique*, 125.

<sup>29</sup> Emmanuel Sieyès, *What is the Third Estate?* trans. M. Blondel (London: Pall Mall Press, 1963. *Qu'est ce que le Tiers Etat?* (1789)).

<sup>30</sup> See Sieyès, *Estate*, ch.1. Cf. Heinrich Schneider, 'Patriotism and Nationalism' in *Concilium*, 38.

<sup>31</sup> Schneider, 'Patriotism', 38.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>33</sup> Cf. Patrick Riley, *The General Will Before Rousseau: The Transformation of the Divine into the Civic* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1986). An example of a more 'political' reading of *volonté générale* is Maurizio Viroli, *Jean-Jacques Rousseau and the 'Well-Ordered Society'*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988).

A prime component of nationalism is that it must tell *the* story of the essential character of the people who belong to the nation.<sup>34</sup> It is this 'authentic identity' that preserves and defines the group. Defining 'the people' involves notions of unity, dissolving all internal divisions and subsuming the needs of the individual into the group. Such unity requires a single public culture, which in turn is determined by historic right, heritage and generational inheritance.<sup>35</sup>

As a necessary condition for authentic identity, nationalist narratives advertise themselves as historically inviolable, rooted in self-evident or common sense truths. Only certain useful aspects of history and culture are selected for the narrative, and even then they are often radically transformed. Dead languages are revived, traditions invented and fictitious pristine purities restored.<sup>36</sup> Contrary to its self-image as an 'inevitable' expression or movement of 'the people', nationalism is in fact a product of intellectual endeavour and (re)education, prompting Gellner to comment, 'The basic deception and self-deception practised by nationalism is this: nationalism is, essentially, the general imposition of a high culture on society'.<sup>37</sup> Nationalism is a cultural invention, indoctrinated into a people with the aim of producing *the People*.

The creation of *the People* and their story also constructs an identity for the individual within the group. The story of a nation is, for nationalism, effectively the story of a 'group person' created by individuals, a factor clearly seen in Renan's 1882 influential nationalist essay where he claims:

A great aggregate of men, with a healthy spirit and warmth of heart, creates a moral conscience which is called a nation. When this moral conscience proves its strength by sacrifices that demand abdication of the individual for the benefit of the community, it is legitimate, and it has a right to exist.<sup>38</sup>

The story of national identity co-opts, and claims definitive rights over, the identity of its individuals, and the collective identity of the group is *the*

<sup>34</sup> Cf. Grundtvig, 'Nyårs-Morgen' US IV, 239ff; 'Living Memory', 91, 94; *Daneskere*; 'Norse Mythology', 48–50; ch. 6 below.

<sup>35</sup> A nationally understood 'people' is the basis for Martensen's 'principle of personality'. See especially: *Outline*, 259, 271, 302–4; *CE*, 230ff; *SE*, 88, 196. Martensen says that the national people is the 'condition of all human, all moral and mental development'. *SE*, 96.

<sup>36</sup> This is not only apparent in Grundtvig's poetical and mythological project for the Norse people, but can also be seen, for example, in the successful re-invention of 'the Celts' in the service of Scottish nationalism. 'I believe that the whole history of Scotland has been coloured by myth; and that myth, in Scotland, is never driven out by reality, or by reason.' Hugh Trevor-Roper, *The Invention of Scotland: Myth and History* (London: Yale University Press, 2008). Less polemical, but arguing a similar case, is Murray G. H. Pittock's study of 'sham Celtification' in *The Invention of Scotland* (London: Routledge, 1991), 100ff.

<sup>37</sup> Ernest Gellner, *Nations and Nationalism* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2006), 55, 56. See also Smith, *Modernism*, 42.

<sup>38</sup> Ernest Renan, *Qu'est-ce qu'une nation?* trans. Ida Mae Snyder (Paris: Calmann-Levy, 1882), 29; *Nationalism*, 18.

essential component of individual identity: the collective defines the individual, and not the other way around.<sup>39</sup>

Primordial appeals to ancestral culture and heritage (such as Bismarck's purported exhortation to the German people to 'think with their blood') are key elements within the construct of a nation, giving it the psychological dimension of an extended family or blood lineage. This adds credence to the demand that the destiny of 'the people' takes priority over that of any one individual in that group. Indeed, for nationalism, the sublimation of an individual into the group marks the highest point of authentic existence for that individual, insofar as each personal sacrifice contributes to the authentic identity of the whole.<sup>40</sup>

## 2.4 Illusion of destiny

Following closely on the heels of the story of essential identity comes nationalism's appeal to *destiny*: Messianic fervour and a sense of cultural mission lead naturally towards the concept of a grand, possibly inevitable, future for the chosen nation. It is precisely the problems connected to the dogma of a nation's unique purpose that prompted Amartya Sen's concern with what he calls 'civilizational partitioning', that is, a tendency to essentialize cultures into easily manageable, and supposedly predictable, units. His target is 'the odd presumption that the people of the world can be uniquely categorized according to some *singular and overarching* system of partitioning'.<sup>41</sup> The process of identifying the supposed 'essence' of a unique culture inevitably leads to speculation about that culture's role and purpose on the world's stage, as well as the assumption that certain nations are destined to clash.<sup>42</sup> For Sen, this is less an accurate scientific prediction than it is a self-fulfilling prophecy: 'The illusion of destiny, particularly about some

<sup>39</sup> For example, for the Axis nations, 'Japan to the Japanese [and] Germany to the Germans was something far more personal and profound than a territorial-political structure termed a state; it was an embodiment of the nation-idea and therefore an *extension of the self*.' Conner, 'Nation', 385 (emphasis added). Cf. Martensen, 'I am not formed to stand alone . . . [I am] fitted to be a *member of one great whole*.' *CE*, 230; *Outline*, 298. For his part Grundtvig maintained that 'man' apart from his national context, was an abstraction. See 'Living Memory', *Danskeren* and the discussion on '*Menneske først*' in ch. 3 below.

<sup>40</sup> 'National self-determination is, in the final analysis, a determination of the will; and nationalism is, in the first place, a method of teaching the right determination of the will.' Elie Kedourie, *Nationalism* (Oxford: Hutchinson, 1960), 81.

<sup>41</sup> Amartya Sen, *Identity and Violence: The Illusion of Destiny* (London: Allen and Lane, 2006), xii.

<sup>42</sup> It is this thought which underpins the political philosophy of Samuel Huntington, whose work has been an influential source text for neo-conservative foreign policy and military interventions. Samuel Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1996).

singular identity or other (and their alleged implications), nurtures violence in the world through omissions as well as commissions.<sup>43</sup> Many of the conflicts of the world are sustained through the illusion of a 'unique and choiceless identity'.<sup>44</sup>

## 2.5 Group sustaining fictions

The claim to a national destiny, or culture mission, based as it is on a constructed essential identity, can be observed as a tendency towards *abstraction*, although this seems counterintuitive to those who envision their national culture as a tangible reality, rooted in the shared cultural artefacts of land, history and kin.<sup>45</sup> And yet, any attempt to direct attention towards certain favoured features worthy of allegiance is in effect to misdirect attention away from the real existence of the complex of narratives, history and people that have been deselected in order to arrive at *the* nation. Abstraction detracts from engagement with the practical realities and problems of everyday community life—Sen's 'ordinary and mundane' facts of existence—that every actual society exhibits, and fixates instead upon ideals.

Nationalism abstracts an individual when it subsumes his particular, complicated identity into the general, simple identity of the group, even while it claims to be the foundation for that individual's identity. It is here that we return to the topic of 'imagined communities'. Personal identity is trivialized and truncated when a national idea is taken to constitute not *part* of, but the *whole* of who a person is. American political philosopher George Kateb refers to 'group-sustaining fictions' which 'offer to help persons carry the burden of selfhood, of individual identity'. The greatest part of the burden is 'the quest for meaningfulness, which is tantamount to receiving definition of the self'.<sup>46</sup> Nationalisms act as group-sustaining fictions in that they provide the what, why and wherefore for their individual adherents, demanding only allegiance in return. And yet, of course, as judiciously selected historical facts and information, nationalisms are a *fiction*, an abstraction from actual personal experience, and therefore ultimately unsuited for establishing authentic personal identity in its complex entirety.

<sup>43</sup> Sen, *Identity*, xiv.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, xv.

<sup>45</sup> We shall see in ch. 3 below how this is precisely the case for Grundtvig. It is also true for Martensen, who describes the idea of a person abstracted from his society as a fiction: 'No one is a human being in pure generality, but only in a definite peculiarity... in a certain circle of society.' *SE*, 196. See ch. 2 below.

<sup>46</sup> George Kateb, *Patriotism and Other Mistakes* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006), 4, 5.

## 3. PATRIOTS AND PATRIOTISM

Thus far I have argued that nationalism is problematic not only as a mode of communal relations but also as a conceptual foundation for individual identity. But what of *patriotism*? Patriotism is usually considered a virtue by those who would otherwise repudiate the excesses of nationalism. Patriotism is often seen as a middle way between bland apathy and excessive devotion to one's civic identity, 'a particular loyalty compatible with universal reasonable values'.<sup>47</sup> The idea of belonging to a *state* or *country* is seen as an alternative to the *nation*, with allegiance not to blood-ties, ethnicity and myth but instead to the apparatus of state—constitutions, laws and historical symbols. Whereas nationalism is love of nation, it is hoped that patriotism, truly, is love of country.

Many sociologists and political writers assume that distinguishing patriotism from nationalism is a fairly straightforward task. Elie Kedourie, for example, defines patriotism as 'affection for one's country, or one's group, loyalty to its institutions, and zeal for its defence'. Kedourie claims that unlike nationalism, the sentiment of patriotism does not depend 'on a particular anthropology, [or] assert a particular doctrine of the state or of the individual's relation to it'.<sup>48</sup> Habermas compares the political loyalty of citizens to the free polity they share in patriotism, to the focus on ethnicity and culture in nationalism.<sup>49</sup> Here 'civic' or 'constitutional' patriotism is proposed as a corrective antidote to the problems of nationalism,<sup>50</sup> so that loyalty to the 'primordial' elements of race, generational inheritance and language are replaced by political institutions and the constitution of the state.<sup>51</sup> Hence the claim that 'patriotism saves populations from nationalism'.<sup>52</sup>

<sup>47</sup> Andrew Vincent, *Nationalism and Particularity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 111. See also Stephen Nathanson, 'In Defence of "Moderate Patriotism"' in *Ethics* 99, no.3 (1988/89), 535–52; Maurizio Viroli, *For Love of Country* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995).

<sup>48</sup> Kedourie, *Nationalism*, 73–4.

<sup>49</sup> See Habermas, 'Citizenship'. Habermas has on occasion defended constitutional patriotism with reference to Kierkegaard. He acknowledges that 'in the identifications that the nation state expected of its citizens more was pre-decided than Kierkegaard, with the interests of the individual in mind, could allow'. However, Habermas continues, 'the situation is different with a constitutional patriotism'. Habermas, 'Historical', 261. Martin Matušík's treatment of Habermas and Kierkegaard is discussed at length in ch. 7 below.

<sup>50</sup> See, for example, Charles Blatburg, *From Pluralist to Patriotic Politics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000); Jürgen Habermas, 'Citizenship and National Identity' in *Praxis International* 12 no.1, 1–19; Attracta Ingram, 'Constitutional Patriotism' in *Philosophical and Social Criticism* 22 no.6 (1996), 1–18.

<sup>51</sup> Smith, *Nationalism*, 211, 213.

<sup>52</sup> Vincent, *Particularity*, 114, 115.

### 3.1 A viable alternative?

I suggest that patriotism is not sufficiently distinct from nationalism to offer a viable alternative to its malignant effects. At this point, some readers may question whether I do not here run the risk of accidentally targeting those good citizens who practice the (Christian) virtue of loving their country. This is not inadvertent; they are, indeed, my targets. The assumption that love of country provides the ideal foundation for the Christian love of neighbour has a respectable pedigree.<sup>53</sup> Likewise, the assumption that sentiments of national superiority and manifest destiny need not trouble the Christian patriot, and that one should allow others to love their country just as one should love one's own is commonplace in Christian literature, thought and practice.<sup>54</sup> Such widespread assumptions, however, simply beg the questions at hand. Is any 'country' worthy of our love? What if it turns out that rather than enabling, patriotism *precludes* true neighbourliness?<sup>55</sup>

In practice, the distinction between nationalism and patriotism fails. In practice patriotism does not in fact escape the problems of nationalism for which it is supposed to be an alternative. This is because patriotic language and ideas draw from the same well as those of nationalism.<sup>56</sup> Commentators who wish to preserve patriotism while avoiding nationalism often unwittingly use nation-language when they mean to be talking about the state, too easily assuming a difference between a supposedly rational, constitutional patriotism, and emotive, fluid nationalism. For Kedourie and other civic patriots, patriotism does not rely on a 'particular anthropology' or 'doctrine' of individual relations as nationalism does; yet upon inspection, it is these very things that patriotic rhetoric manifestly *does* rely on. Although understood as a rational, constitutional allegiance to the strictly political, 'state' structures of a society, patriotism still enjoys a symbiotic relationship with the nationalist ideas of particularity, sentiment and selective memory. Furthermore, these confusions of patriotism and nationalism are for the most part inevitable, due

<sup>53</sup> Perhaps the best theological defence of patriotism as distinct from nationalism comes from Dietrich Bonhoeffer. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Ethics* Eberhard Bethge (ed), trans. Neville Horton Smith (SCM, 1955); Bonhoeffer, *True Patriotism: Letters, Lectures and Notes 1939–45*, trans. Edwin H. Robertson and John Bowden (Collins, 1973). See also Keith W. Clements, *A Patriotism for Today: Dialogue with Dietrich Bonhoeffer* (Bristol Baptist College, 1984).

<sup>54</sup> A notable example is C. S. Lewis, *Four Loves* (London: Collins, 1977), who also attempts to differentiate between 'demonic' nationalism and rightful patriotism.

<sup>55</sup> See especially ch. 7 below.

<sup>56</sup> Indeed, the relationship between the concepts is more complicated still, with classical patriotism providing the conceptual furniture for modern nationalism, which in turn has fuelled modern patriotic imaginations. See below.

to the foundations that patriotism and nationalism share but which many commentators do not acknowledge.<sup>57</sup>

Part of the problem lies in the fact that patriotic notions of citizenship are based on ideas of civic duty and allegiance to a specific legal and cultural entity, which themselves have their roots in the Greco-Roman ideas of *patria* and *res publica*. *Patria* refers both to the father as head of a family, and to the land and property associated with that paternal authority.<sup>58</sup> The political scientist Andrew Vincent puts it thus: “The qualities of “local familial emotive identification” and “abstract legal loyalty and entitlement” have remained part of the curious conceptual baggage of patriotism to the present day.”<sup>59</sup> Love of the particular homeland and family unit is an intrinsic part of the concept of *patria*, a sentiment that arises partly to compensate for the remoteness of the impersonal, generalized entity of the *res publica*. The emotive/familial as a target of allegiance is not trumped by the rational/legal, but instead they exist—sometimes uneasily—side by side.

Despite the language of rational/objective allegiance to laws and states, in reality the patriot is being asked to identify him or herself morally and emotionally with one particular way of life.<sup>60</sup> Yet the laws and social structures that are the supposed objects of patriotic affection are themselves deeply rooted in the collective (un)consciousness of an historical community. In other words, pledging allegiance to a flag is *not* simply a way to unite disparate groups around a neutral, objective symbol. The flag itself represents a complex mix of cultural, religious and ethnic assumptions. Like nationalism, patriotism assumes a ‘theoretical cultural homogenization’, a ‘moral chauvinism’ implicit in the patriotic story that is told to enforce or shore-up sentiments of loyalty and identity.<sup>61</sup>

<sup>57</sup> Two defenders of patriotism who do recognize (and welcome) its inseparability from forms of nationalism are Roger Scruton, ‘In Defence of the Nation’ in J. C. D. Clark (ed), *Ideas and Politics in Modern Britain* (London: Macmillan, 1990) and Alasdair MacIntyre, ‘Is Patriotism a Virtue?’ in Igor Primoratz (ed), *Patriotism* (New York: Humanity Books, 2002). MacIntyre suggests that the state could not survive if the ‘bonds of patriotism’ were dissolved by liberal morality, which questions national partiality. He argues that for this reason soldiers cannot (and should not) be given a liberal education. MacIntyre, ‘Virtue’, 56. Cf. Nathanson, ‘There is an air of realism about MacIntyre’s psychological claim that morality is a weak motivator that must be supplemented by blind patriotism.’ in ‘Moderate’, 549.

<sup>58</sup> Vincent, *Particularity*, 111.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, 112.

<sup>60</sup> Cf. Canovan’s critique of constitutional patriotism which argues that Habermas and Ingram constantly betray possessive, localized language in their discussion of the supposedly supranational identity and allegiance. She concludes that ‘the notion that constitutional patriotism can provide a substitute for ties of birth and blood is incoherent’. Margaret Canovan, ‘Patriotism is not Enough’ in *British Journal of Political Science* 30 (2000), 413–32.

<sup>61</sup> Vincent, *Particularity*, 123–4; Paul Gomberg, ‘Patriotism is like Racism’ in *Patriotism*, 106–7.

It is often assumed, and occasionally made explicit, that patriotism names a virtue that applies to real people and concrete situations. So it is that Hegel can praise patriotism as:

The political *disposition* [which is] certainly based on *truth* (whereas merely subjective certainty does not originate in *truth*, but is only opinion) and a volition which has become *habitual*.<sup>62</sup>

Similarly, Alasdair MacIntyre defends patriotism based on a country's 'true history' over and against the 'irrational attitude' of pledging allegiance towards those nations which have built themselves on 'largely fictitious' narratives.<sup>63</sup> Yet the assumption about the 'truth' of patriotism's love, or the assumption that there can be *any* country whose story is not largely fictitious, begs precisely the question at hand. Because it requires an element of cultural homogenization and identity formation, patriotism does not escape the charge of *abstraction*. It is for this reason that I agree with Kateb's claim that patriotism (love for country) 'is a mistake'. This is in large part because the identity of the individual is lost just as surely in patriotism as it is in nationalism, as Kateb continues:

[Countries] are best understood as an abstraction . . . a compound of a few actual and many imaginary ingredients . . . A country is not a discernible collection of discernible individuals like a team or a faculty or a local chapter of a voluntary organisation.<sup>64</sup>

Of course, a country has a 'rational', geographical place: a setting, a landscape, cities, a climate and so on. 'But it is also constructed out of transmitted memories true and false; a history usually mostly falsely sanitized or falsely heroized; a sense of kinship of a largely invented purity.'<sup>65</sup> Like nationalism, patriotic abstraction occurs in the construction of the target of its affection. Even if the feelings of affiliation are not overtly focussed on race or ethnicity, they are still focussed on objects or ideas that are the result of (often extremely) selective historical memory. Furthermore, any act of selection by definition involves multiple *de-selections* of elements that do not fit the preferred patriotic picture. By telling you *who* you are and *what* you should love, patriotic narratives also make foundational claims on identity. Even when patriotism is opposed to nationalism, it finds itself appealing to 'a kind of communal identity formation' that depends, in part, on a story of people and place 'to provide both identity and direction to the citizen-ideal'.<sup>66</sup> In order to avoid

<sup>62</sup> Hegel, *Philosophy of Right*, §268. Original emphasis.

<sup>63</sup> MacIntyre, 'Virtue', 55.

<sup>64</sup> Kateb, *Mistakes*, 3.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*, 8.

<sup>66</sup> John Coleman, 'A Nation of Citizens' in *Concilium*, 54.

content-less generalizations, 'people and place' inevitably becomes 'The people and A place'.<sup>67</sup>

### 3.1.1 Case study USA

One need only look at today's flagship of constitutional patriotism to see this phenomenon in effect. The United States of America (USA) endorses a form of civic patriotism that is, theoretically, an alternative to 'primitive' nationalism. Politicians and commentators routinely look to the USA as their prime positive example of a patriotic society that eschews the demand of affiliation to a particular cultural or ethnic group in order to belong.<sup>68</sup> And yet, as Charles Taylor has noted, mere appeals to democracy, justice, equality and constitution are too 'thin', even for a country that places such a high value on the above named political goods.<sup>69</sup> Almost as soon as it was introduced, the model patriotism provided by the USA relied on the trappings of nationalism and nation-states, including appeals to founding fathers, origin myths, religiously endowed symbols and ideals, and references to historical, or quasi-historical, narratives with ancestral/ethnic overtones.<sup>70</sup> For Taylor, such a drift was inevitable: 'Nationalism has become the most readily available motor of patriotism.' Although the American Revolution was not nationalist in intent, later, 'so much did nationalism become the rule, as a basis for patriotism that the original pre-nationalist societies themselves began to understand their own patriotism in something like nationalist terms'.<sup>71</sup>

The trend is born out in topical sociological surveys. One example is Deborah Schildkraut's study of conceptions of American identity. She reports that, contrary to the 'official' version of a civic patriotism (separate from race or creed), 'lingering ethnocultural conceptions of American identity' are in full

<sup>67</sup> Prompting Coleman to comment: 'Nationalism and modern concepts of citizenship exist in a condition of both tensile conflict and mutual inter-dependence and influence.' in 'Citizens', 48.

<sup>68</sup> Prime Minister Gordon Brown has often referred to the USA as a model in this regard. See his 'Britishness' in *Moving Britain Forward: Selected Speeches 1997–2006* (London: Bloomsbury, 2006). Also Janet Daley, 'Everyone Needs to be Given a Strong Sense of National Identity' *Telegraph* 2 April 2007, and Canovan, 'Patriotism'. I agree with Canovan in doubting that the USA is really the constitutional patriotic success story that it is portrayed as. See discussion below.

<sup>69</sup> See Charles Taylor, *Multiculturalism and the Politics of Recognition* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992).

<sup>70</sup> So, for example, Benjamin Franklin expressed his resentment of German immigrants in his new America. 'They will never adopt our language or customs,' he wrote, 'any more than they can acquire our complexion.' Benjamin Franklin's Letters, quoted in Morris P. Fiorina et al., *America's New Democracy*, 3rd edn (New York: Longman, 2006), 69.

<sup>71</sup> Charles Taylor, 'Nationalism and Modernity' in R. McKim and J. McMahan (eds), *The Morality of Nationalism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 40–1.

force.<sup>72</sup> Despite the theory that the American civic identity is 'decoupled from ethnicity, separated from religion and detached even from race',<sup>73</sup> the reality seems to be that this decoupling exists more in theory than in practice. 'The place of race, ethnicity and religion in determining what people think it means to be an American is still very much an active debate.'<sup>74</sup> Even the best model of patriotism as embodied in the American experience reveals its reliance on the same essential elements as the nationalism for which it is supposed to be an alternative. Contemporary evidence and analysis suggest that, as a socio-political force, patriotism is not substantially different from nationalism.

#### 4. CURRENT CHRISTIAN NATIONALISM

A study of patriotism in the USA leads easily to a discussion of religious expressions of nationalism and patriotism. Although there are clear historical precedents, it is not anachronistic to talk of Christian (or perhaps *christianized*) nationalism today. Arguably, shades of Christian nationalism lie behind the most powerful populist forces at play presently in US politics. A brief survey of some more popular treatments on the topic reveals not only the problem itself, but also the many attempts that have been made in recent years to understand and critically assess it. Such attempts betray a sense of urgency as well as a common difficulty in coming to grips with the theoretical and theological roots of Christian nationalism.<sup>75</sup>

<sup>72</sup> Deborah Schildkraut, 'The More Things Change . . . American Identity and Mass and Elite Responses to 9/11' in *Political Psychology* Vol. 23 no. 3, 2002, 511–35 at 512.

<sup>73</sup> Stanley Renshon, *One America?* (Georgetown: Georgetown University Press, 2001), 258.

<sup>74</sup> Schildkraut, 'Identity', 514. Cf. the 1996 General Social Survey in which 55% of the respondents said that being Christian was important in making someone a 'true American', and 70% said the same thing about being born in America. The study also showed that white Americans revealed a tendency to assume that people who did not fit the stereotypical WASP identity were foreigners, despite the fact that these 'foreigners' enjoyed full legal citizenship as Americans. R. Takaki, 'Race at the End of History' in D. Batstone and E. Medieta (eds), *The Good Citizen* (London: Routledge, 1999).

<sup>75</sup> The literature on this topic is immense, and the polemical and ideologically motivated nature of much American discourse in this area does not seem to have provided much clarity on the issue, as evinced from the examples I deal with here. Solid historical surveys of the roots of the christianized 'Chosen People' understanding of US identity and narrative include: Sydney E. Ahlstrom, *A Religious History of the American People*, 2nd edn (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004); Nicholas Guyatt, *Providence and the Invention of the United States 1607–1876* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007); Martin E. Marty, *Religious Empire: The Protestant Experience in America* (New York: Dial Press, 1970). See also many of the essays in Mark A. Noll (ed), *Religion and American Politics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990). The controversy surrounding US civil religion and the purported religious intent of the founding fathers is briefly discussed below.

In his 2005 book, *God's Politics*, the American theologian and social activist Jim Wallis lambastes US politicians (of the left and of the right) for their vacuous use of Christian symbolism and ideas. His book contains a chapter on the 'dangerous theology' of empire, in which he highlights the rhetoric of President George W. Bush, and subjects it to special criticism:

It is one thing for a nation to assert its raw dominance in the world; it is quite another to suggest, as this president does, that the success of American military and foreign policy is connected to a religiously inspired 'mission' and even that his presidency may be a divine appointment for a time such as this.<sup>76</sup>

Tony Carnes, notes in *Christianity Today*, 'Some worry that Bush is confusing genuine faith with national ideology'.<sup>77</sup> The *Christian Century* agrees: 'What is alarming is that Bush seems to have no reservations about the notion that God and the good are squarely on the American side.'<sup>78</sup>

Not content with merely focussing on a particular president, journalist Michelle Goldberg has investigated the Christian worldview of her conservative, 'Red State' compatriots, seeking to uncover the culture that lies behind the alarming announcements of her country's elected leader. A self-styled 'secular Jew and ardent urbanite',<sup>79</sup> Goldberg seems shocked to find a subculture espousing militant Christian patriotism in the rural heartlands and suburbs.<sup>80</sup> She traces the roots of the movement to the reactionary preaching of 'depression era demagogues' and in the highly partisan politics of the 1970s.<sup>81</sup>

Clifford Longley, trying to locate the 'big idea' that shapes both English and American identity, goes further back, finding a Chosen People motif in the American national myth. The early Puritan Americans, he writes, 'firmly believed that the Bible was primarily about them, and not primarily about the ancient tribes of Palestine. It was not history, it was contemporary narrative and prophecy.'<sup>82</sup> Longley admits the previous existence of some 'extreme fundamentalist sects in America' and suggests in passing that these ideas 'may well' have contributed to US policy.<sup>83</sup> However, Longley assumes that in the present USA these ideas are now old and obsolete, referring to 'modern Protestants' who would find the concept of a chosen nation alien. Only the 'fringe' element continues to maintain a Chosen People status, and

<sup>76</sup> Jim Wallis, *God's Politics: Why the American Right gets it wrong and the Left doesn't get it* (Oxford: Lion, 2005), 139.

<sup>77</sup> Tony Carnes, 'The Bush Doctrine' in *Christianity Today*, May 2003.

<sup>78</sup> John Dart, 'Bush's Religious Rhetoric Riles Critics' in *Christian Century* 8, March 2003.

<sup>79</sup> Michelle Goldberg, *Kingdom Coming: The rise of Christian Nationalism* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2006), 21.

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid.*, 8.

<sup>81</sup> See Goldberg, *Kingdom*, 10–13.

<sup>82</sup> Clifford Longley, *Chosen People: The Big Idea that shapes England and America* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 2002), 101.

<sup>83</sup> Such as America's long-term support for the state of Israel, see Longley, *Chosen*, 109.

the closest example Longley can find of a religious group that still holds to this are the Mormons.<sup>84</sup>

He cannot have been looking very hard. Goldberg, too, claims that the attitude does not represent the majority of Americans, or even a majority of all evangelicals, but instead represents 'a significant and highly mobilised minority'.<sup>85</sup> That the mindset has coalesced into movements that are significant and mobilized is undeniable. That it represents only a minority view is far less certain. When commentators such as Longley, Wallis and Goldberg express surprise at particular pronouncements from certain presidents, or ascribe these sentiments to fringe, fundamentalist subcultures, they fail to appreciate the depth and breadth of these ideas in present-day, mainstream America.

The sense of America's 'chosen' status, its favoured place in history and its famous claim to 'exceptionalism' runs deep in the culture, crosses political allegiance and is espoused by both Christian and non-Christian alike. What is the source of these ideas? Goldberg, building on her 'mobilised minority' theory, suggests that it represents 'a conscious refutation of Enlightenment rationalism'.<sup>86</sup> This, however, fails to recognize that the worldview is itself an example of a rationalist, modernistic mindset, albeit with adjustments. It is a religious Chosen People ideology, bolted on to a classically liberal interpretation of the progression of history, cemented by a thoroughly Enlightenment vision of modern nations and national identity.

The result is a theology best described as 'Christian nationalism'. The theology is not systematic, but it is pervasive. It does not have a single source or author, but it does appear regularly from multiple voices and at multiple times. It has not been explicated dogmatically, but its core themes recur with remarkable consistency. Significantly, in his critique of George W. Bush, Wallis complains that the President's Christian theology 'seems not to have an impact on foreign policy, but simply serves to bolster an ideology of US moral supremacy'.<sup>87</sup>

I suggest that what is happening here is not the *absence* or failure of theology, but is in fact the *presence* and success of the particular theology of Christian nationalism. Bush's confusion of faith with national ideology, and the equation of God with the American Way, are evidence not of a deviation from theology, so much as the fruit of a theology which has long been at the heart of US self-identity.

In a speech made after the first anniversary of the September 2001 attacks, President Bush said of his country that it is 'the hope of all mankind. . . That hope still lights our way. And the light shines in the darkness. And the darkness has not overcome it'.<sup>88</sup> What is most profound here is not the use

<sup>84</sup> Longley, *Chosen*, 105.

<sup>85</sup> Goldberg, *Kingdom*, 8.

<sup>86</sup> *Ibid.*, 6. <sup>87</sup> Wallis, *Politics*, 141.

<sup>88</sup> *Ibid.*, 142. A transcript of this speech can be found at (<http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/americas/2252515.stm>).

of a scriptural phrase but the fact that the Bible-believing, born-again demographic (to which this language would have the most resonance) heard their Christian president substitute America for the incarnate Christ and no one batted an eye. The fact that such explicit idolatry could go unnoticed and even applauded, demonstrates that the culture to whom Bush spoke was quite comfortable with equating nation with divine revelation.<sup>89</sup> Puritan preacher John Winthrop, on the boat to the New World in 1630, told his fellow travellers that their community will be ‘as a city on a hill’, a substitution of America with the Kingdom of Heaven that was famously taken up by President Reagan in a speech more than 300 years later.<sup>90</sup> In 1850, Herman Melville wrote:

And we Americans are the peculiar chosen people—the Israel of our time . . . Long enough have we been sceptics with regard to ourselves, and doubted whether indeed the political Messiah had come. *But he has come in us*, if we would but give utterance to his promptings.<sup>91</sup>

Influential broadcaster and right-wing political enthusiast Pat Robertson maintains that America is a Christian nation and thus that ‘studying the constitution is like studying the Bible’.<sup>92</sup> Popular early twentieth-century evangelist Billy Sunday said ‘Christianity and patriotism are synonymous terms’. He would often end his sermons by jumping onto the pulpit and waving the American flag.<sup>93</sup> In 1995, during the push to protect the US flag by drafting laws that intentionally used religious terms such as ‘sacralisation’ and ‘desecration’, Republican Congressman Bill Young said ‘alone of all flags, it has the sanctity of revelation’.<sup>94</sup>

These are pronouncements and attitudes that worry many theologians, political scientists and sociologists, not to mention US politicians working to

<sup>89</sup> For an example of this tradition and a robust defence of President Bush on this point, see the unapologetic celebration of the theology of American exceptionalism in Stephen H. Webb, *American Providence* (New York: Continuum International, 2004) esp. the introduction and ch.1. The phenomenon is far more prevalent amongst the American-right than the American-left; however, it occasionally comes from this quarter too. Presumably Hebrews 10:23 was not talking about ‘the American promise’ as Democratic presidential candidate Barack Obama was when he exhorted his audience to ‘hold firmly without wavering to the hope that we confess’ during his nomination speech on 28 August 2008.

<sup>90</sup> Robert Jewett and John S. Laurence, *Captain America and the Crusade Against Evil: The dilemma of zealous nationalism* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 2003), 276–7. Cf. Conrad Cherry (ed), *God’s New Israel: Religious Interpretations of American Destiny* (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice Hall, 1971), 43; Longley, *Chosen*, 109.

<sup>91</sup> Jewett, *Captain*, 1. Cf. Herman Melville, *White Jacket* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1970. Original 1850), 151 (emphasis added).

<sup>92</sup> Jewett, *Captain*, 143. Cf. Pat Robertson, *In America’s Dates with Destiny* (Nashville: Nelson, 1986), 90.

<sup>93</sup> George Marsden, *Understanding Fundamentalism and Evangelicalism* (Grand Rapids, William B. Eerdmans, 1991), 51.

<sup>94</sup> Jewett, *Captain*, 297–300. Cf. Congressional Record, June 28 1995, H6435, 299.

navigate their way around religion and patriotism.<sup>95</sup> Yet, Americans did not invent Christian nationalism, and most likely they will not be the last culture to exhibit it.<sup>96</sup> The American experience is not unique—it is simply that the USA is currently where the theological problem is most acute. This not a book-length assessment of the situation in the USA, and I am not proposing to pit Kierkegaard against the musings of George W. Bush or Pat Robertson. Nor do I intend to become embroiled in the specifically American conversation about the source and legitimacy of its civil religion.<sup>97</sup> Instead, having demonstrated the contemporary potency of ongoing Christian nationalist narratives, I suggest that all Christian nationalisms share similar traits, and rest on common theological assumptions. For this reason, Kierkegaard's critique of the nationalistic ideas of his contemporaries can be fruitfully considered today. Kierkegaard's authorial project contains a wealth of argument that engages the elements of any Christian nationalism, whatever flag it waves.

## 5. KIERKEGAARD AND THE MODERN CONVERSATION

In the following chapters, I hope to demonstrate that Kierkegaard's thought proposes and supports a radically egalitarian orientation in which the problematic specifics of nationalism and patriotism do not take on ultimate or

<sup>95</sup> As Obama no doubt discovered in his association with Rev. Jeremiah Wright and that preacher's infamous prophetic injunction that 'God Damn America'. This case is discussed in ch. 7 below.

<sup>96</sup> Some other examples worthy of future study include the resurgence of the Orthodox Church and its relationship to Putin's Russia, and the fact that the officially recognized (and very popular) Christian Church in China is called the Three-Self Patriotic Church. Africa is also of interest. Zambia has written Christianity into its constitution and was declared a 'Christian nation' by President Frederick Chiluba in 1992. Simon Kimbangu began a Christian movement in the 1920s in what was then the Belgian Congo. It is still flourishing today with associations of Congolese nationalism.

<sup>97</sup> This conversation, begun in earnest by Robert N. Bellah's 'Civil Religion in America' in *Daedalus* 96 (winter 1967) and subsequent writings, often centres on the religious intent of the American founding fathers and the question of whether America was (or is, or could be once again) a 'Christian nation'. The issue has become a focal point in the so-called 'culture wars' between American conservatives and liberals, and there is no shortage of literature on the topic. See, for example, George Marsden, *Understanding Fundamentalism and Evangelicalism* (Grand Rapids, William B. Eerdmans, 1991); Mark Noll, *America's God* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), and the collection of point-counterpoint essays in Jerry Herbert (ed), *America, Christian or Secular?* (Portland: Multnomah Press, 1984). While obviously of importance to certain sections of US society, the historical-political debate tends to bypass more fundamental theological reflection and analysis. Even if we were to grant the highly contentious and revisionist conservative claim that the architects of the US constitution worked from principles that broadly coincide with present-day American evangelical Christianity, we would still be left with the deeper question of whether the idea of any nation being Christian is Christianly desirable, or indeed makes sense at all.

eternal significance (though they may help to set the context of identity formation).<sup>98</sup> I argue that the foundation of this thought is Kierkegaard's incarnational Christology, a person and event accessed by a faith and composed of the existential elements of the moment of vision, the leap, and contemporaneity.<sup>99</sup> Kierkegaard's prising of the single individual away from identity in a group, and his propounding of true Christianity and real sociality<sup>100</sup> preclude the very elements which nationalisms need to exist: that is, his thought denies the narrative of authenticity rooted in group affiliation and it denies the doctrine of inviolable historical development and destiny. Furthermore, Kierkegaard not only denies that the mass-man speaks for the like-minded units which make up the whole, he also denies that the mass-man acts and relates to other mass-men in ways analogous to individual persons.<sup>101</sup>

Despite all this, it is true that some have tried to recruit Kierkegaard for their nationalist cause and the perception still lingers in some quarters that Kierkegaardian existential individualism amounts to little more than incipient fascism. These commentators think Kierkegaard props up the brand of *bourgeois* self-interest that lent itself easily to some of the more virulent ideologies of the twentieth century, especially National Socialism.<sup>102</sup> In this book I hope to demonstrate that, although Kierkegaard is often tainted by the vestiges of this association, this is a spurious reading of Kierkegaard. For this reason, it is worth briefly considering the use that some National Socialist thinkers made of Kierkegaard, before going on to reviewing other, I think more legitimate, ways that Kierkegaard can be brought into the modern conversation about nationalism, religious identity and patriotic allegiance. I shall first look briefly at the use that Carl Schmitt made of Kierkegaard in the service of nationalist ideals, and then consider the readings by Mark Dooley and Merold Westphal whom I think more validly use Kierkegaard to suggest an ideology critique of these same forces.

## 5.1 Schmitt

While Heidegger is often brought up in the context of a potentially fascistic reading of Kierkegaard, an arguably more politically significant National

<sup>98</sup> Cf. chs. 5 and 6 below.

<sup>99</sup> Cf. ch. 4 below.

<sup>100</sup> Cf. ch. 7 below.

<sup>101</sup> This runs against the spirit guiding Grundtvig (ch. 3 below), but also especially Martensen, as we shall see in ch. 2 below. Behind the latter lies Hegel: 'The state has individuality which is [present] essentially as an individual and, in the sovereign, as an actual and immediate individual.' *Elements of the Philosophy of Right*, trans. H. B. Nisbet (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), §321.

<sup>102</sup> The criticisms of Adorno, Lukács, Marcuse and others will be addressed in the following chapters. See especially chs. 5 and 6 below.

Socialist thinker also wrote under Kierkegaard's influence.<sup>103</sup> Yet unlike Heidegger, Carl Schmitt's appropriation of certain Kierkegaardian categories has gone largely unremarked in the secondary literature. Schmitt joined Hitler's National Socialist party in May 1933<sup>104</sup> and was promptly trumpeted as 'one of the most visible academic sympathisers and intellectual ornaments of the new order'.<sup>105</sup> Schmitt supported granting the Reich president the authority to suspend basic constitutional rights and take extraordinary measures in order to eliminate threats to the public order.<sup>106</sup> Schmitt's theoretical justification for emergency state sovereign exceptionalism has remained influential to this day.<sup>107</sup> Kierkegaard is rarely mentioned by name in Schmitt's work, and as a result commentators tend to miss both Schmitt's debt to—and distortion of—the Danish philosopher's ideas.<sup>108</sup> Yet Kierkegaard's influence is evident in Schmitt's critique of romanticism and his construction of sovereign exceptionalism, a philosophy that he was happy to put to use for nationalist ends.

<sup>103</sup> The debate over Heidegger's relationship to both Kierkegaard and Nazism is wide ranging and cannot be the focus of the present discussion. Heidegger himself minimally acknowledged Kierkegaard, however see, for example, Patricia Huntington, who argues that Heidegger abstracted from Kierkegaard's notion of inwardness, a move which depleted Kierkegaard's thought of its ethical import and which accounted 'in significant measure' for Heidegger's decisionistic turn towards fascism. 'Heidegger's Reading of Kierkegaard Revisited' in Martin Matušík and Merold Westphal (eds), *Kierkegaard in Post/Modernity* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995), 44. Richard Wolin banishes Kierkegaard and indeed all existentialist philosophy to a decisionist and quietist corner in light of Heidegger's politics in *The Terms of Cultural Criticism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1992). Cf. Martin Heidegger, *An Introduction to Metaphysics* trans. Ralph Manheim (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1959), where he identifies metaphysics as 'the pivotal point and core of all philosophy' (at 17) and then goes on to identify the German nation as 'the most metaphysical of all nations' (at 38). Dooley (following Levinas) finds in Heidegger an existentialist touting of the 'Teutonic spirit' that feeds directly into National Socialist ideology. Levinas' rejection of Kierkegaard was derived in part from Kierkegaard's association with the philosophy of Heidegger, and in turn that philosopher's association with the Nazis. 'Statehood', 1.

<sup>104</sup> The same month as Heidegger also joined the Party.

<sup>105</sup> Translator's introduction, Carl Schmitt, *Political Romanticism* trans. Guy Oakes (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1986), xi.

<sup>106</sup> Oakes in *Romanticism*, ix; Joseph Bendersky *Carl Schmitt: Theorist for the Reich* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983), part III.

<sup>107</sup> Despite his Nazi affiliations, Schmitt's thought has retained its importance in political science, and he is seen as a perceptive critic of liberalism and the liberal state. See, for example, Renato Cristi, *Carl Schmitt and Authoritarian Liberalism* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1998); Duncan Kelly, *The State of the Political* (Published for the British Academy by Oxford University Press: Oxford, 2003); John P. McCormick, *Carl Schmitt's Critique of Liberalism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997).

<sup>108</sup> Schmitt's commentators often do not mention Kierkegaard even when discussing those texts where Schmitt himself quotes or alludes to him. This is the case for Bendersky and Kelly, and Jan-Werner Müller, *A Dangerous Mind: Carl Schmitt in Post-War European Thought* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003). A notable exception to the general rule appears in Guy Oakes' introduction to his translation of *Political Romanticism*, discussed below.

Schmitt's *Political Romanticism* champions 'decision politics' via an attack on the romanticism that Schmitt thought had permeated the European *bourgeois*, which appears to draw its force from such elements as *Concept of Irony* and Kierkegaard's portrayal of the hedonistic Seducer in *Either/Or*.<sup>109</sup> For Schmitt, romanticism had transformed political debate into an endless conversation that rendered genuine political decisions impossible. Here we find more than a shade of Kierkegaard's critical assessment of the Present Age's obsession with 'chatter' in *TA*.<sup>110</sup> However, whereas Kierkegaard intends his criticism to spark inwardness and spiritual seriousness in the individuals of the chattering classes, Schmitt takes from his own version of the critique an endorsement of decisive political action. This becomes especially apparent in *Political Theology*, a work on sovereignty and the politics of exceptionalism.<sup>111</sup> Here Schmitt is interested in the degree that modern national politics derives its power from the theological tropes of authority, uniqueness and sovereignty. The book looks at the politics of emergencies and extraordinary circumstances, privileging the personal political decision over and against liberalism's abstract norms: 'Sovereign is he who decides the exception.'<sup>112</sup>

Here Schmitt adopts a tone evoking not only Kierkegaard's exploration of Abraham in *FT* but also his analysis of levelling in *TA*. The Schmittian sovereign is the one who can stand outside of normal legal systems and make decisions on behalf of the people. It is here that Schmitt approvingly quotes from *Repetition*:

A Protestant theologian [i.e. Kierkegaard] stated: 'The exception explains the general and itself... Endless talk about the general becomes boring... The exception on the other hand, thinks the general with intense passion.'<sup>113</sup>

<sup>109</sup> The strong presence of Kierkegaardian categories in *Political Romanticism* coupled with an almost complete lack of accreditation (there is a minor footnote near the end of the work) prompts Oakes to say of Schmitt's treatment of Kierkegaard that it is 'either disingenuous or remarkably obtuse'. Oakes in *Romanticism* n.19, xxxiv. In light of the perceived Kierkegaardian connection, it is worth noting that Lukács includes this book under the rubric of the 'destruction of reason', calling it 'pre-fascist'. Georg Lukács, *The Destruction of Reason*, trans. Peter Palmer (London: Merlin Press, 1980. Original 1962), 652. Cf. Müller, *Dangerous*, 21 and n. 6, 253.

<sup>110</sup> Cf. *TA*, 97ff and ch. 5 below.

<sup>111</sup> Carl Schmitt, *Political Theology* trans. George Schwab (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1985 originally published 1922).

<sup>112</sup> Schmitt, *Political*, 5. In his introduction, Schwab sees Schmitt's prioritizing of social stability as paving the way for totalitarian governments. If the ruler can ensure your safety, then he can demand your obedience. This would lead directly to Schmitt's support for the National Socialists 10 years later.

<sup>113</sup> *Ibid.* This quote ends the chapter, thus giving Kierkegaard the last word on Sovereign Exception. Cf. *Repetition*, 227.

With his appeal to the individual exception above the normative herd *on behalf of the herd*, Schmitt has transformed Kierkegaard's project of egalitarian inwardness before God into a political philosophy of the totalitarian state.<sup>114</sup> This leads Müller to conclude:

[Schmitt] affirmed 'decisionism', namely, the notion that it mattered not so much how and which decisions are made but that they are made at all. The state did not have to be right to create right.<sup>115</sup>

Of course, Kierkegaard too is commonly labelled as a decisionist, with an ethic that in the end cannot amount to much more than a subjectivist version of 'might is right'.<sup>116</sup> However, while this may well be a deserved judgement for Schmitt (the apologist for National Socialism), it is less appropriate for Kierkegaard, whose application to the politics of national identity tends toward the opposite direction. I now turn to two authors who, I think, suggest a more legitimate reading of Kierkegaard as a critic of the ideological structures of nationalism.

## 5.2 Dooley

In a number of works, Mark Dooley has undertaken a 'prophetic' and political reading of Kierkegaard.<sup>117</sup> In the company of Derrida and Caputo, Dooley finds Kierkegaard to be useful for carving out a political space for the marginalized person disenfranchised by the totalizing narrative claims of the established order. Dooley does not write as a theologian, but instead 'translates' Kierkegaard's Christian categories politically. Although he does not deny or ignore the Christian Kierkegaard, Dooley privileges the political over the religious messages that can be drawn from books such as *Practice in Christianity* and *Works of Love*. Indeed Dooley intimates that Kierkegaard's religious concerns 'have no practical utility today'.<sup>118</sup>

<sup>114</sup> On 'totalitarianism' and Schmitt's coining of the term 'totalitarian state', see Schwab's introduction.

<sup>115</sup> Müller, *Dangerous*, 23.

<sup>116</sup> The proponents of this type of reading of Kierkegaard are discussed in chs 5 and 6 below. Alongside Schmitt, George Pattison has identified other German writers who made similar 'decisionistic' appeals to Kierkegaard. Nazi ideologue Alfred Bauelmer championed Kierkegaard (along with Nietzsche) as a rare example of one who *acted* on the basis of his will against the stultifying social order. Kierkegaard's German translator, Theodore Haecker, was not a Nazi; nevertheless his 'Kierkegaardian' attack on liberalism, his defence of authoritarian government, and his flirtation with 'sophisticated' forms of anti-Semitism gave intellectual solace to supporters of nationalistic totalitarianism. 'Kierkegaard and Nineteenth Century Democracy' (unpublished paper, 2008).

<sup>117</sup> The prophet as the model for the critical philosopher has also been championed by Westphal, discussed below.

<sup>118</sup> Mark Dooley, *The Politics of Exodus: Søren Kierkegaard's Ethics of Responsibility* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2001), xvi.

Aiming to find points of congruence between Derrida and Kierkegaard, Dooley develops what he calls a politics of the émigré.<sup>119</sup> The individual in exodus is one who is in a state of liminal existence apart from—or in spite of—a common culture.<sup>120</sup> Dooley recognizes that Kierkegaard can be usefully employed in the search for meaningful individual identity in the face of overarching narratives that, by their absolutizing nature, exclude more than they embrace. To this end, Dooley draws from Kierkegaard's assertion in *TA* that the genuine community is one that unites around a common idea. Yet the common idea can only be appropriated by individuals as inward subjects who are thinking apart from the crowd:

The particular, ideal community [Kierkegaard] seeks to generate is composed of ethically responsible and committed individuals or selves, each of whom has critically challenged the basic assumptions underlying the philosophical, political and ethical paradigms that have heretofore determined the manner in which both the individual and society have been defined.<sup>121</sup>

Dooley acknowledges that for Kierkegaard, the idea that the genuine community must unite around is the God of the God-man. However, Dooley morphs this explicitly theological trope into what he believes the God-man stood *for*, namely, 'one who challenged the established order in the name of the nuisances and nobodies, in the name of justice and radical egalitarianism'.<sup>122</sup> Dooley aligns himself (and Kierkegaard) with John Dominic Crossan and other 'historical Jesus' approaches, arguing that Kierkegaard's Christian commitment must translate politically into a preference for the poor and marginalized.<sup>123</sup> In tandem with his emphasis on Jesus of Nazareth as a political agitator, Dooley opposes the idea of Kierkegaard as primarily 'a Christian philosopher for a Christian people', and instead insists on a broader scope for his social and ethical theories.<sup>124</sup> Thus Dooley attempts to demonstrate how Kierkegaard's ethics of responsibility can act as a foundation for a radical conception of social relations that does not locate the worth of an individual primarily in his relationship to culture, creed or country.

In the essay 'The Politics of Statehood', Hegel's *Sittlichkeit*, or social morality, stands as a cipher for all systems that monopolize narratives of

<sup>119</sup> Ibid., xiii, also ch. 6 of *Exodus*.

<sup>120</sup> Dooley refers to such a person as the 'deconstructed subject'. See, for example, 'Risking Responsibility: a Politics of the Émigré' in George Pattison and Steven Shakespeare (eds), *Kierkegaard: The Self and Society* (London: Macmillan, 1998), 139.

<sup>121</sup> Dooley, *Exodus*, 8; Cf. *TA*, 106.

<sup>122</sup> Dooley, *Exodus*, 23.

<sup>123</sup> The nuisances and nobodies line comes from a chapter in Crossan's *Jesus: A Revolutionary Biography* (San Francisco: Harper, 1994), 54–74.

<sup>124</sup> Dooley, *Exodus*, 146, also 144. Against Dooley, I argue below that an overemphasis away from Kierkegaard's specifically Christian concerns undermines his effectiveness as a political philosopher.

identity.<sup>125</sup> Dooley reads *Sittlichkeit* as effectively conferring divine legitimacy on the powers that be. If, as Hegel says, the laws of the state are the material manifestation of God's divine design on earth, then God is woven so fundamentally into the fabric of the state and the historical development of human cultures 'that it may be legitimately assumed that he must prefer one set of people to another, he must, that is, be given to nationalistic fervor'.<sup>126</sup> It is this conclusion, found in Hegel and in Hegel's followers, that Dooley argues 'deeply disturbed' Kierkegaard. 'The idea that God is on the side of the powers that be was what most offended Kierkegaard about Hegelian philosophy.'<sup>127</sup> It is on this reading that Dooley bases his Kierkegaardian 'politics of exodus' over and against rival 'politics of statehood':

[The politics of exodus] challenges the dominant political, ethical, religious, and metaphysical paradigms governing reality, in the name of those whose welfare they do not serve, those poor existing individuals who have not made it as far as Hegel's *Encyclopaedia*, or into the grand narrative of Being.<sup>128</sup>

### 5.3 Westphal

Behind Dooley lies the work of Merold Westphal, as Dooley himself acknowledges.<sup>129</sup> Westphal emphasizes the possibility of reading Kierkegaardian inwardness as an ideology critique with concrete social ramifications, rather than as merely a prop for individualistic religion.<sup>130</sup> For Westphal, Kierkegaard's critique of reason is intricately tied up with his critique of society. This is because it is not any and all 'reason' that Kierkegaard holds to account, it is specifically the reason of the established order, of quantitative valuation and of Hegel's *Sittlichkeit*. Modern expressions of Christianity have uncritically incorporated this 'reason' to the extent that it is difficult to tell the difference between socio-historical triumphalism and Christian truth: 'Kierkegaard, in fact, is not at all sure it's possible to keep the arguments for Christianity's reasonableness from being heard as affirmations of Christendom's righteousness.'<sup>131</sup>

For Westphal, underlying Kierkegaard's critique of reason and society is the prophetic aspect of speaking truth to power—reminding the present age that its status quo is, in fact, not inviolable or eternal:

<sup>125</sup> Mark Dooley, 'The Politics of Statehood vs. A Politics of Exodus: A Critique of Levinas's Reading of Kierkegaard' in *Søren Kierkegaard Newsletter* (Issue 40, August 2000), 5.

<sup>126</sup> Ibid.

<sup>127</sup> Ibid.

<sup>128</sup> Ibid., 6.

<sup>129</sup> Ibid., 5 n. 13.

<sup>130</sup> On the philosopher as prophetic critic see Merold Westphal, *Kierkegaard's Critique of Reason and Society* (Pennsylvania: Pennsylvania University Press, 1991), 22, 105ff.

<sup>131</sup> Ibid., 24.

Underlying Kierkegaard's verdict on apologetics is . . . a recognition that human reason is a social enterprise and, as such, historically conditioned. This is where the genuinely prophetic element becomes apparent.<sup>132</sup>

Westphal ascribes to Kierkegaard a 'sociology of knowledge' which recognizes that social groups legitimize themselves through their belief systems in which the established order is justified.<sup>133</sup> This is clearly seen, for example, in the tone that Kierkegaard has his Hegelian clergyman take in *PC*. Here, the clergyman is portrayed (and satirized) for maintaining that 'reason is man's capacity to recognise the authority of the established order, thereby participating in its self-deification'.<sup>134</sup>

By constantly attacking the speculative apotheosis of Hegel and his followers, Kierkegaard critiques the divinization of society apparent in any belief system that incorporates soteriology with group membership:

Kierkegaard seeks to discomfort those who confuse socialisation with salvation; they find their existential task completed when the initiation rites prescribed for adulthood by their society have been completed.<sup>135</sup>

Westphal places Kierkegaard in sharp contrast to Hegel, who claims that the 'wisest of antiquity have therefore declared that wisdom and virtue consist in living in accordance with the customs of one's nation'.<sup>136</sup> Socrates—Kierkegaard's simple wise man—represents the opposite conclusion. Virtue is found in the space where the individual refuses to abrogate all responsibility to the group merely because it is the group. To be sure, such a position is not *anti*-social. Pointing out that human society is not god is not the same as seeking to annihilate that society. Nevertheless the self-deified established orders<sup>137</sup> tend not to condone such citizens in their midst:

We would do well to remember that Socrates and the early Christians were accused of atheism because they did not worship at the shrines of the self-absolutising cultures in which they lived.<sup>138</sup>

## 6. TOWARDS A KIERKEGAARDIAN IDEOLOGY CRITIQUE

In the light of the directions suggested by Dooley and Westphal, it is clear that I am not alone in recognizing the relevance that Kierkegaard might have in the

<sup>132</sup> Ibid., 22.      <sup>133</sup> Ibid., 23.      <sup>134</sup> Ibid. Cf. *PC*, 47.      <sup>135</sup> Westphal, 34.

<sup>136</sup> Westphal is here quoting from Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. A.V. Miller (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1977), 214.

<sup>137</sup> Westphal refers to the 'apotheosis of the present age'. *Critique*, 38.

<sup>138</sup> Ibid., 125.

area of identity politics, or the critical edge that he brings when examining society's various self-divinizing creeds. With them I affirm Kierkegaard's prophetic voice that speaks against the idolatrous status quo of institutionalized 'common sense'. With Dooley I recognize that Kierkegaard provides for meaningful individual identity in the face of absolutizing narratives. I wish to further Westphal's suggested project of marrying Kierkegaardian inwardness with a robust ideology critique. These authors, their projects and others who share them will be discussed later in this book, and with some caveats I would place myself within this general school of thought.

### 6.1 Centrality of nation

One qualification I offer is that the constellation of ideas that make up 'nationalism' hold a deeper and more central place in constructing a Kierkegaardian prophetic ideology critique than has been previously realized. Typically, commentators touch on, but do not develop, the relevance that Kierkegaard has to nation and state talk.<sup>139</sup> So for example, Dooley's emphasis on the émigré is much more concerned with economic and social class structures than it is with issues of national affiliation. By pitting Kierkegaardian 'politics of exodus' against the various 'politics of state', Dooley recognizes that his reading has a bearing on these issues, but he does not pursue them, preferring instead to consider those victims of 'the state', rather than the role that 'the state' plays in forming the identity and commanding the allegiance of its citizens—victims and perpetrators alike.<sup>140</sup> For his part, Westphal is interested in the ways in which social groups legitimate their established order through the propagation of belief systems.<sup>141</sup> He occasionally refers to nationalism and tends to see national allegiance as one of many ways that this happens, alongside other rites of socialization such as marriage, economic activity, education and the 'distinctly modern kind of social formation' fuelled by the mass media.<sup>142</sup>

<sup>139</sup> This seems to be the general rule for those who recognize Kierkegaard's political application, including Dooley and Westphal as well as James. L. Marsh, 'Kierkegaard and Critical Theory' in *Kierkegaard in Post/Modernity*. In various works Cornel West alludes to the Kierkegaardian project as one with political ramifications for racial and national relations, but he does not elucidate further. See *Prophecy Deliverance!: An Afro-American revolutionary Christianity* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1982) and *Keeping Faith: Philosophy and Race in America* (New York: Routledge, 1993). In chs. 6 and 7 below, I find the same trend for commentators working on *Works of Love* such as C. Stephen Evans, Robert Perkins and M. Jamie Ferreira. A notable exception is Martin Matušík, whose political (and explicitly non-theological) treatment of Kierkegaard's contribution to 'postnational identity' is discussed at length in ch. 7 below.

<sup>140</sup> For example, after considering the links between Kierkegaard's and Derrida's 'deconstructed subject', Dooley mentions in passing that such a discussion is related to a Derridian critique of 'national identity' constructs without developing the idea. 'Émigré', 145–6.

<sup>141</sup> Westphal, *Critique*, 23.

<sup>142</sup> *Ibid.*, 34, 47.

And yet the self-deification of the established order that Westphal and Dooley rightly wish to critique is, at base, nationalism by a different name. The absolutization claimed *via* technological, economic, familial or religious means takes place not in some generic ‘society’, but in a time, place and population, expressed in the language and idioms of an identifiable people group and in the service of demanding allegiance to a specific culture over and against other specific cultures. Thus it is that when Westphal writes about Kierkegaard’s attack on those who confuse salvation with proper socialization<sup>143</sup> he is in effect talking about a Kierkegaardian attack on nationalistic ideology. This is because the very act of defining what is ‘proper’ and what counts as ‘socialization’ is to privilege one form of society over another, and to attempt to determine who counts as a member of that society—again a preserve of nationalist ideology. Later in this book, I shall explore how Kierkegaardian inwardness does indeed offer an ideology critique of society, always remembering that ideologies of societal absolutism can exist only in relation to actual societies, thus placing us within the sphere of nationalism. What is more, when Westphal writes of Kierkegaard wanting to preserve the possibility of the incarnation against the apotheosis of the present age,<sup>144</sup> he is inadvertently signalling a point of contact with those nationalisms that crop up in Christendom. The apotheosis of national cultures has happened and is happening still within the christianized societies of the West. These are specifically Christian forms of divinization, using Christian motifs and concepts, often appropriating incarnational language to describe the divine mission of the nation itself. Nationalism is not simply one of many ways that society divinizes itself—the apotheosis or absolutization that Westphal, Dooley and others discuss is precisely the Christian nationalism that I have in view. In setting out a Kierkegaardian critique of Christian nationalism, I am not in disagreement with those commentators who find the target of Kierkegaard’s ideology critique to be the divinization of the established order. It is simply that I find ‘nationalism’ to be the best way to describe the ideological tie that binds the disparate elements that contribute to the self-deification of society—claiming for their nation the arbitration of destiny and identity that for the Christian should properly be the domain only of God.

## 6.2 Centrality of Christianity

This final point constitutes the second caveat to my approach in this chapter, which is that I primarily read Kierkegaard as a Christian writer, even a theologian, and not as a secular philosopher or socio-political critic. Furthermore, while

<sup>143</sup> *Ibid.*, 34.

<sup>144</sup> *Ibid.*, 38.

it is obviously true that non-Christians can and do make effective use of Kierkegaard, it remains the case that his primary intended audience were Christians (or putative Christians) living within Christendom. For this reason, it seems perverse to apologize either for Kierkegaard's Christianity, or for the contribution that his writings might make to Christian life and thought. Nevertheless, many commentators are suspicious of imposing a Christian structure onto the broad spectrum of Kierkegaard's thought. For example, Louis Mackey proposes that Kierkegaard was primarily a poet-artist who did not have an overarching plan for his pseudonyms.<sup>145</sup> For Mackey, arguing that in Kierkegaard there is a doctrine that needs to be accepted or rejected 'makes about as much sense as agreeing or disagreeing with *Hamlet*'.<sup>146</sup> Benjamin Daise, expressly following Mackey, also attempts to separate 'Kierkegaard' from any one philosophical or theological point of view.<sup>147</sup> The implication of this assumption for Kierkegaard's overtly Christian works is that they are approached with suspicion, if they are approached at all. Daise only looks at the Climacus books, and Mackey intentionally avoids Kierkegaard's last works, claiming that this is in line with Kierkegaard's original preference; he thereby implies that the later Kierkegaard is not representative of the best Kierkegaard.<sup>148</sup>

Here we come to the crux of the issue that much contemporary critical literature takes with the later (usually non-pseudonymous but always overtly Christian) Kierkegaard. It is often assumed, and occasionally made explicit, that Kierkegaard's Christianity and his final Christian polemics are an academic embarrassment, possibly a product of an increasingly deluded and fading mind. This view can be traced back to Kierkegaard's contemporaries, most notably Bishop Martensen, who wrote in his memoirs:

[Kierkegaard] was a noble instrument who had a crack in his sounding board. This crack, alas, became greater and greater. To this I attribute his broken health, which increasingly exercised a disturbing influence on his psychological life . . . No one can say to what degree he is accountable.<sup>149</sup>

Michael Plekon (who does not himself hold this opinion) reports that in conversation 'not a few scholars have muttered, off the record, that the rantings and ravings . . . the raw material for the public attack literature, are

<sup>145</sup> Louis Mackey, *Kierkegaard: A Kind of Poet* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1971).

<sup>146</sup> *Ibid.*, x; 'Taken as instruments of his intent,' writes Mackey, 'his works add up to a magnificent nonsense', 290.

<sup>147</sup> Benjamin Daise, *Kierkegaard's Socratic Art* (Macon: Mercer University Press, 1999), viii.

<sup>148</sup> Mackey, *Poet*, xi.

<sup>149</sup> Hans Lassen Martensen, *Af mit Levnet* III, (12ff), trans. T.H. Croxall, *Kierkegaard Commentary* (London: James Nisbet, 1956), 244–5. Bishop Martensen was not alone amongst Kierkegaard's peers to hold this opinion, see Michael Plekon, 'Introducing Christianity to Christendom' in *Anglican Theological Review* LXIV (1982), 328–9 and 331. A modern example of this view lies behind Josiah Thompson's *Kierkegaard* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1973).

decidedly inferior to the earlier writings and ought to be ignored'.<sup>150</sup> Some scholars do not ignore it, but effectively make an anomaly of the final phase of Kierkegaard's life. Danish critics K. E. Løgstrup<sup>151</sup> and Johannes Sløk<sup>152</sup> are amongst those who argue that Kierkegaard's Christian polemics exemplify a distortion of his earlier dialectics and intellectual position. Their influence is discernible in the English scholarship. David Aiken, for example, proposes that with the overtly Christian writing Kierkegaard was breaking with the precedent that his earlier works had set. Aiken suggests that Kierkegaard's accounts of authentic Christianity act as a sort of literary confession of failure, and mark a regression from the highpoint that had come before in the pseudonyms.<sup>153</sup>

It is, perhaps, Kierkegaard's claim on behalf of Christianity itself, more than the coarseness of the polemics, which most irk some critics. One of the commentators most openly hostile to the Christian Kierkegaard is Henning Fenger.<sup>154</sup> Fenger is forthright about his aversion to Christianity, and is especially critical of any proposal that there is a legitimate 'theological' direction to Kierkegaard's works.<sup>155</sup> He does not find Kierkegaard's role as 'persecuted martyr in the market town of Copenhagen' very appealing; he implies instead that by and large the events surrounding the affair of the *Corsair* were in fact a product of Kierkegaard's own delusional tendency for self-destruction.<sup>156</sup> Fenger is sceptical of Kierkegaard's late claims, in his journals and in the posthumously published *Point of View for My Work as an Author* (written 1848, first published 1859), in which Kierkegaard retroactively stated the Christian direction of all of his work.<sup>157</sup> This Kierkegaard, Fenger says, was a 'falsifier of history',<sup>158</sup> and he views with a 'deep and fundamental distrust' the late journals and other Christian writings.<sup>159</sup> It is the interpretations of so-called 'theologians' who attract most of Fenger's invective, and he criticizes them for letting ideology cloud their judgement when reading Kierkegaard.<sup>160</sup>

<sup>150</sup> Plekon, 'Introducing', 332. Plekon reports that this view is made 'on the record' by Valter Lindström, *Efterføljelsens teology* [The Theology of Imitation] (Stockholm: Diakonistyrelsens Bokförlag, 1956), 128–9.

<sup>151</sup> K. E. Løgstrup, *Opgør med Kierkegaard* (Copenhagen: Gyldendal, 1968).

<sup>152</sup> J. Sløk, *Da Kierkegaard tav. Fra Foratterskab til Kirkestorm* (Copenhagen: Hans Reitzel, 1980).

<sup>153</sup> David Aiken, 'Kierkegaard's Three Stages: A Pilgrim's Regress?' in *Faith and Philosophy* 13 (1996), 352–67.

<sup>154</sup> Henning Fenger, *Kierkegaard: The Myths and Their Origins*, trans. George Schoolfield (London: Yale University Press, 1980).

<sup>155</sup> *Ibid.*, 214.

<sup>156</sup> *Ibid.*, xi. Cf. *COR*.

<sup>157</sup> See *POV*, especially part 1, 27–37. *POV* is discussed at length in ch. 6 below.

<sup>158</sup> Fenger, *Myths*, 1.

<sup>159</sup> *Ibid.*, 20. Cf. ch. 6 below.

<sup>160</sup> Fenger, *Myths*, 214. Fenger tends to label anyone who recognizes that Kierkegaard was primarily a religious author as a 'theologian'.

By contrast, I think it is eminently possible, indeed necessary, to read the religious Kierkegaard sympathetically and to avoid the blunt, naive reading that Fenger and others seem to ascribe to all 'theological' commentators.<sup>161</sup> By treating both Kierkegaard's Christianity and his pseudonyms with respect, it is possible to find a balanced interpretation of the project in its entirety. Indeed, I hope to demonstrate that Kierkegaard as a political philosopher can only be understood properly once theological underpinnings of his project are acknowledged, and his intended Christian audience is appreciated. A key feature of Kierkegaard's project is that he is preaching not the raw data of 'Christianity' (he is living within Christendom after all), but rather 'honesty' for those who already claim to be Christians.<sup>162</sup>

I am not saying that it is for Christianity I venture—suppose, just suppose that I become quite literally a sacrifice. I would still not become a sacrifice for Christianity but because I wanted honesty. (*Moment* 49)

So let there be light on this matter, let it become clear to people what the New Testament understands by being a Christian, so that everyone can choose whether he wants to be a Christian or whether he honestly, plainly, forthrightly does not want to be that. (*Moment* 97)

It is for this reason that it is appropriate to speak of Kierkegaard as a theologian: he is working with the 'givens' of Christian faith. His aim is to be consistent with Christian claims, actions and events—most notably those surrounding the incarnation or the God-man. Kierkegaard is profoundly uninterested in apologetics or proving the central claims of Christianity—but he is concerned with tracing out the consequences of them for everyday life.<sup>163</sup>

Neither does [God] want anything to do with this human impudence about why and wherefore Christianity came into the world—it is and shall remain the absolute. (*PC* 62)

If you cannot bear contemporaneity, if you cannot bear to see this sight in actuality, if you could not go out into the street—and see that it is the god [*Guden*] in this dreadful procession and this your condition if you fell down and worshiped him—then you are not *essentially* Christian. (*PC* 65)

In other words: *if* Jesus is God in some way that Christianity traditionally says he is, *then* there are certain implications of this event for the self-professed Christian's orientation towards God and society. For Kierkegaard, these implications are not contingent upon the truth of the incarnation event

<sup>161</sup> Commentators with theological sensitivities including Eriksen, Ferreira, Mooney, Pattison, Perkins, Plekon and Westphal (to name but a few from a rich list) consistently fail to live up to Fenger's stereotype of the blunt reader.

<sup>162</sup> This is a key feature throughout the later works, but especially the final stage of Kierkegaard's writing career: 'Very simply—I want honesty [*Redelighed*].' *Moment*, 46.

<sup>163</sup> See especially 'The Halt' part IV, *PC*, 62ff.

(because it cannot be proved) as much as they are on the honest following through of this professed faith in Christ in the everyday life of the individual.<sup>164</sup> This 'inward' orientation to the God-man thus has tangible and 'outward' ramifications for the Christian's life in the nation, state and neighbourhood, as we shall see.

To argue for Kierkegaard's political relevance is eminently possible and desirable. However, to do so by first downplaying or radically re-interpreting his Christianity does not do justice to Kierkegaard's project. I am writing with a sense of those to whom the force of Kierkegaard's political relevance will be most keenly felt, namely those people who can most closely identify with Kierkegaard's religious concerns and religious language. Here I diverge from Dooley when he writes that he does not want to see Kierkegaard as primarily 'a Christian philosopher for a Christian people'.<sup>165</sup> The fact that Kierkegaard has time and again been taken up by non-Christians is testament to the reasonableness of Dooley's wish. Yet these readings of Kierkegaard, in their attempt to work with Kierkegaardian categories, almost invariably turn Kierkegaard's God into 'Society' or 'The Other', his God-man into a social class or proletariat, and his ethics of choice and responsibility into a subjective and decisive leap into the dark, to name just a few ways that Kierkegaard's Christian categories have been co-opted, in an attempt to appeal to a more general philosophical-socio-political audience.<sup>166</sup>

Yet, as I have stated, after all these attempts have been made, it remains the case that Kierkegaard wrote as a Christian, employing Christian themes to catalyse authentic Christianity amongst a population of Christendom who already thought they were Christians. In an age where God saves the Queen and Blesses America, any suggestion that Kierkegaard's religious concerns have no practical utility today seems at best an oversight and at worst myopic. To recommend Kierkegaard's insights to a Christian audience is not to direct it at a dwindling, increasingly irrelevant population. The opposite is true. As a religion, Christianity is on the ascendancy, often in forms that actually or potentially feed into the ideology that I have here called Christian nationalism. This is not only true for the growing Christian cultures of the majority world such as South America, Africa and China. As recent world events have demonstrated, it is often at, or near, the seats of power in the first-world West. To offer a Christian critique of Christian nationalism is not to participate in anachronism. Therefore, it is to a discussion of the political theologies of Kierkegaard's contemporaries, Kierkegaard's response to them, and his contribution in turn to the wider conversations of nationalism, that we must now turn.

<sup>164</sup> 'Honesty before God is the first and the last.' *PC*, 66.

<sup>165</sup> Dooley, *Exodus*, 146.

<sup>166</sup> The examples of this interpretative trend will be discussed as they arise in the following chapters. Authors include Heidegger, Sartre, Matušík (who is in turn following Habermas), Best and Kellner to name but a few.