



Who do we think we are National and religious identities

The Rt Revd Lord Harries of Pentregarth

11 March 2010

In an interview Norman Tebbit once said:

A large proportion of Britain's Asian population fail to pass the cricket test. Which side do they cheer for? It's an interesting test. Are you still harking back to where you came from or where you are?

This remark highlights an issue that has been with us for some decades now and is of growing importance. Where do our loyalties lie? It is not of course a new question. After Tebbit's remark a cartoon appeared showing a Scotsman in full regalia in jail complaining 'I failed the Tebbit cricket test.'

The main reason why this is an issue of growing concern, as revealed by Tebbit's remark, is of course immigration. But there are others that feed into it. One is the decline of the British Empire; another is devolution with the existence now of a Scottish Parliament and a Welsh Assembly. These factors alone raise two questions. One is, what is it now to be English? The other is what is it to be British? Further reasons why questions of identity are now very much on the agenda include the debate over regionalisation, membership of the European Union, the growing importance of religion as a marker of identity, and a general weakening of our national institutions, from the Sovereign and parliament down to the local church.

Issues of identity are important in themselves. But I have a particular concern, and that is how a Christian perspective might make a difference to the way we understand and value them. Before anything else, though, it is important to try to make some clear distinctions between different kinds of identity, because this is such a confusing, disputed area.

First, there are racial identities and ethnic identities, which can overlap but need not do so. We say someone is African or Asian or Caucasian. Such identities do not in themselves make for a political identity unless a particular government wishes to make it so, as the Nazis tried to make Germany an exclusively Aryan State, and as in the modern world where we have the terrible phenomenon of ethnic cleansing in order to create a political unit of composed of people of identical ethnicity.

Secondly, there is national identity. A nation is a people with a common language, culture and a shared historical narrative. The people who belong to it are conscious of belonging together as a community over a period of time, but they may or may not form a state or even a political community. The Welsh and the Scots form nations and they now have a form of political expression through the Scottish Parliament and the Welsh Assembly, but they are part of a wider, British State. The Palestinians are a nation, and they have a form of political expression but as of now they have no state of their own. The Kurds regard themselves as a nation, but they are split between four different states.

The concept of the Nation state belongs primarily to the period in Europe from the Reformation until the 20th century, when there were many attempts to create culturally and religiously homogeneous political units under a sovereign. Before that period European unity, in so far as it existed, was built around the Papacy. With the Reformation states sought their own centre of unity round the sovereign. This was always fraught with the potential for conflict, as the history of Europe shows. The origin of the terrible First World War is usually attributed to the growing nationalism at the end of the 19th century, so that now nationalism is regarded with deep suspicion. With nationalism in Europe there went along with it the concept of patriotism and after the war there was a reaction to both, expressed for example in the poems of Wilfred Owen or the remark of E.M. Forster who said:

If I had to choose between betraying my country and betraying my friend I hope I would have the guts to betray my country.

Whilst we are right to be very wary of the concept of nationalism, and its associated idea of patriotism, which Dr Johnson termed 'the last refuge of the scoundrel', there are several reasons why we should not simply turn from it to a bland internationalism. One is the fact that loves that are real and strong begin with the local, with our parents and family and then outwards to the communities of which we are a part, and then out to include humanity as a whole. So a poet like Blake emphasized the importance of the particular rather than the general or abstract. Love of the local can and should grow into a love of the wider realm. But a love of the wider realm that is not also rooted in the love of the local, can become abstract and unreal.

Then, as the Russian theologians tend to emphasise, nations also are a special part of God's purpose. As Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn put it:

Nations are the wealth of mankind, its collective personalities; the very least of them wears its own special colours and bears within itself a special face of divine intention.

That kind of view has its own great dangers, nevertheless we might say that individuals in their personal identity take on something of the special colour of the nation of which they are apart. They are in part shaped and nurtured by a national community which is a special face of the divine intention.

Another reason is a more practical one, and related to our own time, with its intense drive towards globalization. Globalisation erodes the traditional power of the nation state, because capital can be moved swiftly from one part of the world to another. A number of Trans-national corporations are bigger than all but the largest states. This means that if the world, particularly in its economic realm, is to be ordered for the common good, the nation state needs to be strengthened-not on its own, but in regional and global alliances. Unless there are these groupings to strengthen the power of individual states in alliance with other states, the juggernaut of capitalism will carry all before it.

That said, there is a fundamental paradox about love of one's country. As Reinhold Niebuhr put it:

There is an ethical paradox in patriotism which defies every but the most astute and sophisticated analysis. The paradox is that patriotism commutes individual unselfishness into national egoism'so the Nation is at one and the same time a check upon, and a final vent for, the expression of individual egoism.[1]

To these identities, racial, ethnic and national, we might add cultural identity and religious identity. So people now talk of Britain as a multi-cultural society or a multi-faith one, meaning that the population now

contains significant communities of people of differing cultural and religious backgrounds, though our public institutions in fact remain still predominantly Christian.

One of the advances in recent years has been the realization that it is entirely right and proper for us to have multiple identities. In fact there is nothing new about this. St Paul defined himself as religiously a Jew. He lived in Tarsus in what is now South East Turkey, and like everyone at that time would have had a strong sense of identification with his city, which was much stronger then than now, and Paul was proud of being 'a citizen of no mean city', as he put it. The Judaism in Tarsus, Hellenistic Judaism, was culturally very Greek. So Paul would have received a Greek, as well as a Hebrew education and he wrote his letters in the koinéor common Greek that was spoken all over the Eastern Mediterranean. But if his culture was Greek he also claimed proudly that he was a Roman Citizen, and this entitled him to certain legal privileges, not least in his case, the right to appeal to Rome. So Paul had multiple, overlapping identities, and so do most of us if we think of it. I define myself as nationally Welsh, a British citizen, religiously Christian and culturally European.

I now want to look in a little more detail at some of the pressures in our time making this an issue of such importance. First, the issue of religion. What has happened and is still happening is that globalization is making religion a marker of identity. We see this most clearly in countries like Indonesia, where people have moved from their traditional island or village communities into big cities to make goods for the Western market. In the village they had an identity as part of a traditionally ordered way of life. In the city, no such identity is available, and in gravitating to the Mosque or church they find their identity as part of that religious community. There is nothing sinister about this in itself. Precisely the same occurs to British ex-pats living in Spain or the South of France. In Britain they may not have been great churchgoers, but abroad they very often gravitate to one of the culturally English communities there, which may be the church-or for other people might be the golf club. But of course, in certain countries this situation can be exploited by people who want to stir up trouble, as in fact has happened in Indonesia in recent years. Indonesia was traditionally one of the most tolerant of Islamic countries but in recent years there have been some very ugly clashes between extreme Muslims and Christians. In Europe a related phenomenon was present in the breakup of the former Yugoslavia. This was a country on the border of Eastern and Western Christianity, so Serbia was Orthodox, but Croatia Catholic. At the same time, it was for a long time part of the Ottoman Empire, so there was a significant Muslim population in Bosnia and Kosovo. The wars there were certainly not caused by religion, but from time to time a war leader would play the religious card-because that was a way of getting the adherence of the community to which he belonged and which he wished to make militant.

In this country, again, there is a related phenomenon. Immigration has brought to our shores many people of non-Christian religions. Feeling lost in a new country, as we all do, it is natural to gather together around a Mosque or temple, and the role of religion as a marker of identity is heightened. This obviously has important implications for how we go about trying to create a society in which people of different cultural and religious backgrounds feel fully included. In short, it is not enough simply to take into account their ethnic origin, which may be Pakistani, or Indian or whatever, because this might have become less important to them than the fact that they are Muslim or Sikh.

This issue is of particular importance at the moment in relation to Muslims. For there is a strain of Muslim theology which holds that it is impossible to be a good Muslim except in a state which is wholly Muslim, that is, shaped by Shariah law. For such Muslims, religious identity is not only paramount, but also bound up with the creation of the umma, the international Muslim community. For them a concept of multiple identities which includes a non-Muslim national identity, is incompatible with their faith. This obviously makes for radical, and sometimes very dangerously radical politics. On the other hand, there is also a strand of Muslim theology which says that being a good Muslim means putting oneself under Shariah law as part of the Muslim community in a country, but this is quite compatible with living in a wider community that is non-Christian. Obviously, this view is quite able to accommodate the combination of religious and national identity without contradiction.

I now want to look at racial and ethnic identity from a Christian point of view. They are not of course quite the same, but for my purposes now I can treat them in the same way because for each of us they are a given, a fact about us that we cannot change. John Sentamu, the Archbishop of York feels strongly that there is only one race, the human race, and that is the only meaning we should give to the word race. It is easy to understand and sympathise with why he says this, because the concept of race has been too often used to exclude and oppress particular groups of people. However, there are a couple of points that suggest that a more flexible use of the word might be in order. One is that it has sometime been important for people to affirm their race or some other aspect of their identity as part of a process of affirming their worth after a period of subjugation. A good example of this occurred a few years ago in America where there were slogans to be seen saying 'Black is beautiful.' Another related example are the gay pride marches in different parts of the world. People want to join with others in affirming an aspect of their identity that had previously been rejected in some way. This is obviously very different from a particular racial group in a position of power, asserting that power to exclude or oppress those of other, weaker racial groups.

Then, the fact that certain things about us are a given, is from a Christian point of view, an aspect of the doctrine of creation. God has created us as part of the world in all its aspects, not as wispy spirits or disembodied souls. We are embodied, and we are embodied as particular people. I am born at a particular time of history, of a particular ethnic origin, in a particular cultural grouping. This is all part of the creation about which God in the book of Genesis says 'And behold it was very good.' Of course, many of us regard ourselves as cosmopolitan, or internationalist in outlook, and we claim to sit light to ethnic or national differences. But the fact is that these are part of what makes me me, and you you. As mentioned earlier, we are more likely to love wider humanity if we have first a proper love of ourselves and the local communities of which we are a part.

One crucial fact, of which we are probably more consciously aware than our forebears, is that identity is to a significant degree, a human construct. Now, clearly some things about us and the wider social and national groupings to which we belong, are a given. It is a fact that I was born on a particular day in a particular city. It is a fact that I am a white, getting on in years and male. There are some grey areas, even here of course. Some people find themselves born with a body that is physiologically of one sex, but emotionally and spiritually they feel from an early age, they really belong to the other one. So, we have a certain number of trans-gendered people. Some people think that sexual orientation can be changed. Personally, I believe that for the vast majority of people this is neither possible nor appropriate. Some people, particularly in their early years may be uncertain about their sexuality, but most gay people find themselves that way. They did not choose to be gay but found themselves that way. For them their sexuality is a given fact about their identity.

But leaving aside a few disputed areas, we can say there are facts about our identity that are a given. At the same time, there are other things about us which are much more open to how we might see or want to define ourselves. I like to describe myself as Welsh. My mother's side are English, so I could equally well have chosen to describe myself as English. For a variety of reasons, I like to think of myself and describe myself as Welsh. This is a construct. It could have been different.

At a personal level this kind of issue can be fun-at a national level it is of huge social significance. For example, historians now argue that British identity, far from being something that has been fixed and final down the ages, was in very large measure a creation of the 18th century and was obviously linked to imperialism and the concept of British superiority. 1707, which saw the formation of the United Kingdom of Britain and Ireland, which later became of Northern Ireland is regarded as the key date. Then, as Linda Colley has put it Britain was an invented nation.

Heavily dependent for its *raison d'être* on a broadly protestant culture, on the threat and tonic of recurrent war, especially war with France, and on the triumphs, profits, and 'otherness' represented by a massive overseas empire.

Over the last two decades a good debate has been going about British identity today, with all kinds of suggestions from political leaders, academic and government reports, think-tanks and newspapers. In what does it or ought it to consist? If there is a lack of British identity today, how should we go about re-constructing it? One aspect of this has to do with multi-culturalism. Recently there has been a reaction against the emphasis on multi-culturalism which has been an assumed basis of policy for the last 30 or 40 years. Some are worried that the reaction against this may go too far, and may fail to take into account the fact that we are now a multi-cultured society, composed of people whose views will need to be taken into account if they are to feel any sense of identification with the nation on which they are citizens. Tariq Modood, thinks that we do indeed need a civic rebalancing, but not an end to multi-culturalism as such. He is suspicious about taking a set of values, like equality, liberty, enterprise and so on, as he thinks these are either platitudinous or too disputed to be of use, and that, as he put it:

'National identity should be woven in debate and discussion, not reduced to a list.'

That is fair, but of course the discussion has to begin somewhere, and where it should begin is with what our history and culture have given us. It is at this point that mention must be made of religious forms of dress like the Burkah, and the Niquab. As indicated earlier, religion has become an important marker of identity, which is why this cannot simply be a matter of public indifference. A view has to be taken. This has of course been done by President Sarkozy, who wants them banned in France. Or, as the newly proposed compromise puts it, if people want to wear them, they cannot then go into public buildings, for example, to receive public benefits or some other state service. In Turkey, in principle a strongly secular state, but one in which Islam is very important, the issue of headscarves continues to be highly controversial. This is not an issue that can be considered as though every state was the same. What I would want to say about the British situation, is that they should be allowed in the same way that the Sikh turban is allowed and is now familiar. Like many others I find the Burkah and to a lesser extent the Niquab unsettling. I don't like it. But whether I like it is not the point. A state that seeks to be inclusive of a variety of cultures, where culture and religion are sometimes closely bound up, will respect people's desire to symbolize their faith in this particular way, if it does not cause harm to others.

America, as we know, despite its hugely varied ethnic makeup, has a strong sense of national identity symbolized by the flag and standing to attention before it with one arm across the chest on big occasions. It has been suggested that in this country we need to find something equivalent in order to generate a sense of British solidarity and loyalty across all our various communities. I am a little skeptical about such ideas myself, for I suspect that symbolic expressions of loyalty have to grow naturally and organically, and any attempt to impose something like that would strike people as artificial. However, the concept of Britishness has two components, what we might call the emotional pull, and the values enshrined in the idea of British citizenship. The latter is of great importance and needs serious attention. It is right that people who have newly acquired British Citizenship should take part in a citizenship ceremony, and I understand that these have turned out to be something of a success. It is right that Children should be taught citizenship at school, and that this should be an important and not a marginal part of the curriculum. Children are also taught history at school, and what is taught in that class clearly has a very close relationship to the pupil's understanding of who they are and their identity as citizens. So first something about this.

History in the old days was very much a national narrative about kings and queens, great men and the advance of empire. It is I hope taught very differently now. From a Christian point of view, it seems to me that the key principle we will want to bring to bear, not alone but along with other concerns, will be one of inclusivity. The key characteristic of the ministry and teaching of Jesus was its desire to include those whom others excluded. This has implications for all aspects of life, personal and political. It means that the national narrative taught in schools will be such as to make all the pupils in the class feel that they belong to this society about whom they are being taught. So it will not just be about men, but about women; not just about movers and shakers, but the vast majority of humanity, the nameless poor. It will not just be history from the standpoint of the imperialist, but from that of the subjugated; so it will not just be a history of white people, but of Asian and Black and of their contributions both to civilization in general and the

history of this country in particular. There should be a national narrative-for there will be one whether people think there is or not-and therefore the one we have should be done consciously. It should in effect be constructed with a view to what we want to achieve through it. A good example in recent years has been the way people have started to think of immigration, particularly in relation to the East End-not as something that began after World War II but as a feature of our history for two thousand years, and not as a threat but an enrichment. An attempt was made to do this on the stage recently with the play at the National Theatre 'English people very nice.' Of course, it is possible to go to the opposite extreme and seek to create a national narrative like that in the Soviet Union, Fascist Germany and nationalist dictators the world over. So, we need to be on guard here. For all that national narrative are constructs, they have to be rooted in the truth, and this means dealing with the dark side, the negativities of national history, as well as its achievements. It is not a question of fabrication but of selection, ordering and emphasis within the totality of what is available to pass on from the past to the next generation. It was very good to read not long ago that Germany and France have now published a joint history for teaching in schools. It is wonderful to think how much chauvinistic damage a history like that can undo just through the facts it selects and how it puts them forward.

This national narrative can clearly play its part in bringing about a healthy emotional attachment to the idea of being British. Depending on what is taught and how it is taught, pupils will be found to belong and define themselves in that way or alienated. But, as I have suggested, though important, this emotional content has to grow naturally and organically. At the same time as this creative teaching of history through an inclusive national narrative there is the important question of what people can and should commit themselves to when they describe themselves as British citizens.

Those who acquire British citizenship are currently supposed to swear:

I, (name), swear by Almighty God that on becoming a British citizen I will be faithful and bear true allegiance to Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth, her heirs and successors according to law.

I will give my loyalty to the United Kingdom and respects its rights and freedoms. I will uphold its democratic values. I will observe its laws faithfully and fulfil my duties and obligations as a British citizen.

Timothy Garton Ash says about the first part of this oath:

Now I myself am rather attached to the novels of Sir Walter Scott, but in 2008 this is an amazing load of anachronistic bunkum. First of all, let's leave God out of it, shall we? Secondly what on earth does it mean to 'bear true allegiance' to Her Majesty, and why should I extend this courtesy to Prince William, let alone Harry?[2]

Perhaps the language is unnecessarily anachronistic, but that does not mean to say that the sentiments themselves can simply be thrown away. As a teenager, I was a republican. In those days the national anthem was played at the end of every public performance in the theatre and cinema. When my mother stood to attention, I remained firmly in my seat and a fierce row ensued. It was some years later that I was converted from this view- by a casual conversation. I was attending some official gathering at Westfield College, in the University of London, and chatting to Norman St John Stevas, as he then was, now Lord St John of Fawsley. Somehow, we got onto the question of the monarch, and he pointed out that the Sovereign was the one symbol we now have that in some way unites the whole of our society. He was right and despite the decline in the prestige of the monarchy since then, and active hostility to it in some quarters, it is still about the only symbol we have. Furthermore, the basis of our constitution, though unwritten, is not simply parliament, but the Queen in Parliament under God. When there is so little that binds our country together, it seems foolish to jettison what, for all its historic faults, has in fact been a central feature in our national identity for hundreds of years, if not longer. Edmund Burke's understanding

of society as something organic, persisting over time, with obligations both to the past and the future, always changing but doing so incrementally, rather than by a violent chopping away, seems relevant here.

With the second part of the oath of allegiance, Timothy Garton Ash firmly agrees, and so do I. This encapsulates the essentials of what it means to be a British Citizen, with the emphasis on citizenship. As I have suggested earlier, the emotional content of this, its symbolic expression and so on, probably has to grow organically and naturally. An example of such growth in relation to Englishness, rather than being British, is the emergence of flags of St George in recent years, not least at sporting fixtures, rather than the Union Jack.

Citizenship is a different matter. This is a concern which the Government has a proper responsibility to promote, and which it now seeks to do so in various ways, as already mentioned. It should certainly include education about the rights and responsibilities of citizenship, teaching about the rule of law and the political values underlying it and about our system of parliamentary democracy. None of this, perhaps, is very sexy, but it is essential if our society is to be a value based one, in which people participate and to which they feel a real sense of belonging, whatever ethnic or religious background they come from.

From a Christian point of view this emphasis on citizenship is firmly rooted in the New Testament and carried forward in all mainstream theology, catholic and protestant. Of course, in the New Testament we have a very different political system-an empire with little corresponding to our liberal democracies. This was an empire that was in many ways hostile to the newly emerging Christian church-there was a fierce period of persecution under Nero in 66 for example, which is reflected in the pages of the New Testament. But despite this the New Testament still stressed the importance of government. There is a famous passage in the 13th chapter of St Paul's letter to the Romans where he tells his readers that we are to obey the secular authorities. As he says, this is:

An obligation imposed not merely by fear of retribution but by conscience. This is also why you pay taxes. The authorities are in God's service, and it is to this they devote their energies. (Romans 13, 5, 6)

In subsequent church history and theology, it is the teaching and example of St Augustine that sets the pattern. According to him, as outlined in his major work *The City of God*. Christians are members of the City of God, which God is building up through human history. But at the same time in this life we are members of the earthly city, and here it is our duty to work with people of good will for the peace, order and justice without which no human society can exist. So, Augustine himself, as well as being a Bishop, spent a great deal of time as a magistrate. Indeed one of the ways in which the church consolidated its position in the 4th century was by Bishops taking over positions in city councils that had previously been occupied by secular magistrates. So, the concept of being a good citizen is very firmly rooted in both the New Testament and subsequent Christian teaching.

Now I want to go back to an earlier crucial point about all identities being to a significant degree a human construct. In short, identities have changed, are changing and will continue to change in the future. There is nothing fixed and final about who we are. Let me consider this at a personal level. This is brought out in a very moving poem by Dietrich Bonhoeffer. Bonhoeffer, you may remember, was a distinguished theologian in the 1930's who, in reaction to Hitler's policy of Aryanising the church, that is eliminating all Jewish elements from it, was one of the founders of the Confessing Church, and indeed ran their seminary. He took part in the plot to assassinate Hitler, was imprisoned and shot shortly before the end of the war. Whilst in prison he wrote letters, prayers and poems, subsequently published in *Letters and Papers from Prison* which made such an impact in the 1960's. One of the poems is called 'Who am I'

Who am I? They often tell me

I stepped from my cell's confinement

Calmly, cheerfully, firmly,

Like a squire from his country house...

Am I then really all that which other men tell of?

Or am I only what I myself know of myself?

Restless and longing and sick like a bird in a cage?.

Who am I? This or the other?

Am I one person today and to-morrow another?

Am I both at once? A hypocrite before others,

And before myself a contemptibly woebegone weakling?...

Who am I? They mock me, these lonely questions of mine.

Whoever I am, Thou knowest, O God, I am thine!

I very much like the double meaning of that last line-

We may not know who we are but God does.

Then whoever we are, we belong to him.

In the future, his future for us, we will be who we truly are.

This is a point powerfully made in a verse in the first letter of John:

Dear friends, we are now God's children; what we shall be has not yet been disclosed, but we know that when Christ appears we shall be like him, because we shall see him as he is. (1 John 3, 2)

In other words, again, our true identity will be fully revealed and known only in the future. For we are made

in the image of God, and called to grow into his likeness, the likeness that shines in the face of Christ. This identity in Christ, does not take away from our distinctiveness, but brings it to its true fulfilment.

This is to put it in personal terms. But our personal identity is inseparable from our membership of various communities, from our family to the state. The same principle holds there. National identity, like religious identity, is in a constant state of change. It is in part a given, but even more significant, it has still to be created.

This suggests that Christian loyalty is a commitment to a nation conceived as being itself a process-of sharing, struggling and change; a commitment to what might be rather than simply what has been...Loyalty is the decision to be actively part of such a process.[3]

The dominant philosophy of our time, which takes two forms, is liberalism, which emphasizes the priority of personal choice. Economic liberalism applies this to the market and says, let the market rule supreme. Leave people free to consume and produce what they want. This view is unhistorical, in that Adam Smith, the intellectual fount of the market economy was quite clear that the markets needed to be rooted in certain moral principles, and its best defenders in recent years have tried to say the same, without getting much response in practice. Michael Sandel draws attention to what happened in New Orleans after the terrible flooding there. Some people tried to exploit the situation by selling basic goods at truly exorbitant prices. An unqualified admirer of the free market devoid of moral values would support this. People were so desperate that they were prepared to pay 100 times the normal value of goods, and there were people ready to sell them for that price. What utilitarianism does not take into account is the widespread sense of outrage in America that people's desperate need should have been exploited in this way. It was felt to be wrong: honourable people in an honourable society did not do this kind of thing. In short, moral judgements and values came into play. More widely, many people would feel that there are certain areas where the market should not rule. It would be wrong to have a free market in organs, for example. It would be wrong to sell places at university to those who would pay the highest price for them.

The other form of liberalism is social liberalism. This says that people should be free to choose their own lifestyle, and they should not have one imposed on them by society as a whole. It is easy to see why this view has been so popular. One reason is that there is widespread disagreement over lifestyles. The other is a fear that if we start talking about virtue as a value that the whole community should exhibit, there will arise an oppressive moralism. This was perhaps the fear that stopped the movement known as communitarianism making more headway a few years ago. But can we avoid making judgements about virtue and value? In an earlier chapter on law and morality I mentioned by own feeling as a member of the Home Office Advisory Committee for the Reform of the Law on Sexual Offences when we considered offences against animals. I realized I had a deep conviction that certain forms of behaviour were incompatible with what it means to be a human being. Michael Sandel gives another one. A man in Germany advertised for someone who would be willing to be killed and eaten. 200 people answered the advert, and four were interviewed. One person was killed, cooked and eaten. German law could not convict the person of murder, for it was totally consensual, though they did find another way of convicting and imprisoning the man. But whatever the law says, most people would find such an action deeply abhorrent and something which society should not allow, however consensual. Again, issues of value emerge, not just for the individual, but for the kind of society which we want.

When we begin to reflect on the kind of society we want, then we cannot avoid asking the question about what society is for. The same question is raised in relation to every institution. What is a university for? What is a school for? Until you answer that question you cannot begin to think about what it is that the institution should value, and indeed on what basis people should be allowed to enter it. We are in fact back with Aristotle, who taught that we must decide on the purpose of something before we can decide what is good. The good is what fits the purpose. If a university exists to foster intellectual excellence, then this is what it will honour, and it is on this basis that people will be allowed to enter.

This again takes us back to the kind of choices we make. The hugely influential modern philosopher Alastair MacIntyre argued that we do not make our choices in a vacuum, but as part of a moral tradition. We are born and shaped by a moral tradition, and until we opt for another one, we make our choices within the parameters it provides. This moral tradition will be inseparable from a particular understanding of what it means to be a human being. Or to put it another way, we find ourselves part of a communal story, a story which has a particular understanding of the goal and purpose of human life. The choices we make when young are shaped by the tradition, we have been brought up in. So, our freedom is not a naked one, shorn of all that is distinctive about me as a citizen of a particular country and religion at a particular time, it is a choice to be made within that continuum. We are not only embodied as individuals, we are embodied in communities, and these help to give us our identity. So for Christians our choices are made within the body of Christ, within the community of Christians, shaped by the past and looking to the future, including a future beyond space and time.

Against the background of these considerations, what kind of society should a Christian desire? Of course, there will always be disagreements about the nature of that good, but as Michael Sandel has written:

To achieve a just society, we have to reason together about the meaning of the good life, and to create a public culture hospitable to the disagreements that will inevitably arise.[4]

T.S. Eliot described the society he wanted in these words:

It would be a society in which the natural end of man-virtue and well-being in community-is acknowledged for all, and the supernatural end-beatitude-for those who have the eyes to see it.[5]

This is a very appealing description which I could certainly live with. Nevertheless, I think it needs to be put somewhat differently today. First, the phrase 'virtue and well-being' does not reflect the emphasis on growth and development which we now regard as desirable. Secondly, the world virtue has for many people too moralistic a tone to it, as well as being focused on morality, whereas in the modern world we are concerned with the development of the whole person, body, mind and spirit as a unity. So instead of 'virtue and well-being' I would prefer 'the development of gifts and character'. Then, thirdly, the phrase 'in community', though welcome, does not quite do justice to the essentially polar nature of person and community. It is not just that persons live in community, without human community there could be no persons. Furthermore communities, like persons, have qualities and character and are open to change and development. They need to be seen together. So although I cannot devise as felicitous a sentence as Eliot, the first half of my understanding of a desirable society would be:

It would be a society in which the natural end of human beings-personal and communal development of gifts and character is acknowledged for all.

What about the last half of Eliot's statement 'the supernatural end-beatitude-for those who have eyes to see it?' The contrast between the two halves of the sentence between what is acknowledged for all and what is there for those with eyes to see it, is one with which I am in sympathy. It reflects the conviction of traditional natural law theory, that there are morally desirable states and qualities which all can see and to which all are called to respond, whether someone is a religious believer or not. We can see the force of this by thinking about any good school we know. Such a school will seek to have an ethos in which there is mutual respect, a concern for others both within the school and outside. It will be inclusive in the sense that it will want every pupil to develop their particular potential and talents. All schools will have some such ideal, however they might be failing at any one moment, and whether or not they are faith schools. Furthermore parents who send children to schools will want the school to have some such ideal. In short this is a natural ideal, whether it is for a school or society as a whole.

Furthermore, on Eliot's formula, the religious dimension is in no way imposed. It is simply there, as part of the history and culture for those with eyes to see it. Nevertheless, the world 'beatitude' needs a little unpacking. It could just convey the idea of an individual soul's relationship with God. In fact, as the collect for All Saints Day puts it, we are 'knit together in one communion and fellowship in the mystical body' of Christ. We come before God, now and in eternity, as members of the body of Christ. This body, like earthly human communities, is open to growth and development, not just of gifts and character, but in the knowledge and love of God. Or to put it another way, we have been made in the image of God, but are called, within the mystical body, to grow into the divine likeness. This is what is meant by 'beatitude'.

Like Aristotle Christians begin not with the question about what is right, but what is the good. For us, God is good, all good, our true and everlasting good. The end or goal of human life is to grow into that likeness, not as solitary individuals, but with the mystical body of Christ. Whilst we are on this earth, there is a counterpart to this in our human communities of all kinds, including both civil society and the body politic. As I formulated it above:

It would be a society in which the natural end of human beings-personal and communal development of gifts and character is acknowledged for all.

This is an understanding of the common good which I believe we should try build into and shape our life together, whether it is at a local, national or international level. It is in and through the process of doing this that we find our individual identity.

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[1] Reinhold Niebuhr, *Moral Man and Immoral Society*, Charles Scribner's, 1932, p.91-3

[2] Timothy Garton Ash, *The Guardian*, March 13, 2008

[3] *Peacemaking in a Nuclear Age*, A Report of a Working Party of the Board for Social Responsibility of the Church of England, Church House Publishing, 1988, p. 47

[4] Michael Sandel, *Justice: What's the right thing to do?* Allen Lane, 2009, p.261

[5] T.S. Eliot, *The idea of a Christian Society*, Faber, 1982, p.62