

# Mennonites, Theology and Nationalism

A. James Reimer, *Conrad Grebel College, University of Waterloo*

## I. Introduction

### *Definitions*

Modern nationalism is a response to modernity. A response to the loss of cohesion. A theology that intends to deal adequately with the issue of nationalism, therefore, will need to address this crisis—the fragmentation and disintegration of communal life in the modern and post-modern world.

The first difficulty one faces is a definitional one: What are “nationalism” and “theology?” How does the term “nationalism” relate to other terms such as “nationality,” “nation,” “ethnicity (*ethnos*),” “*Volk* (a people)?” These are all related although not synonymous concepts, and deserve to be carefully defined if one wants to do justice to the moral, ethical and theological issues involved. I find helpful Paul Tillich’s way of speaking about this group of terms; he goes behind them to a common root: the notion of the “powers of origin”—nature, soil, blood, family, tribe, nation.<sup>1</sup> These are the biological powers that give us individual and group identity and tie us to nature and being (space) in contrast to those which tie us to history, history-making and becoming (time). All these concepts are related to each other; yet it is important that we not equate all respect for powers of origin (like ethnicity and nationality) with nationalism, or with their demonization in certain forms of nationalism.

Christian theology is “faith seeking understanding” concerning God, and all

things in relation to God; premised on faith in God as transcendent mystery of the world, made known historically in the Christ-event, and immanently present as dynamic power in the Holy Spirit; in the light of the Scriptures (first), the church's historical confessions (second), and (finally) insight from all areas of human knowledge and experience, past and present. As a theologian I am particularly interested in looking at the issue of nationalism in relation to the Christian doctrines of God, God's creation of the world, and God's providence and preservation of the world.

### *The problem identified*

Contemporary theology is faced with a conundrum. Ever since the triumph and demise of National Socialism in the 1930s and 1940s, with its accompanying atrocities, many have equated nationalism (and related concepts) with unChristian bigotry and injustice. Can one so easily, however, identify a concern for elements of origin, like ethnicity and nationality, with reactionary politics and oppression in the present situation? Is there not a sense in which the dynamic "myths of origin"—such as nature, soil, blood, family, tribe, and nation—are positive and defining characteristics of what it means to be human and, therefore, to be affirmed? The dilemma faced by contemporary theology, in short, is the following: Is nationalism (or nationality) to be rejected theologically as a *negative power* driving peoples to ethnocentrism, intolerance, racism, and barbarism? Or can it be a *positive force* for understanding oneself, for the liberation of oppressed peoples, to be theologically supported on the grounds of justice, autonomy, the right to dignity and self-determination? Are nationality, ethnicity, and family not intrinsic goods of creation?

### *Structure and methodology*

I will first look at historical lessons to be learned from the experiences and debates on these very questions in Germany in the 1920s and 1930s; then examine the contemporary revival of nationalism both on the right and the left, illustrated most dramatically in the nationalistic wars in eastern Europe, particularly in Yugoslavia. Finally, I will look at Mennonites, theology and nationality.

## **II. Historical Lessons:**

### **German theology and nationalism in the 1920s and 1930s**

My own doctoral work was in the area of German nationalism in the 1920s and 1930s. I concentrated in particular on two "political theologians" of the period: Emanuel Hirsch on the right and Paul Tillich on the left. My research was published in a book entitled: *The Emanuel Hirsch and Paul Tillich Debate: A Study in the Political Ramifications of Theology*.<sup>2</sup> Hirsch and Tillich came from similar Lutheran pastors' homes, both studied theology under liberal professors

in Berlin, where they first met in 1907. Both were ordained as pastors. They quickly developed a close friendship and wrote a play together. Hirsch fell in love with Tillich's sister, and they shared many similar theological ideas, with a life-long interest in each other's books and careers. However, World War I changed them radically. Hirsch became a passionate national Lutheran and Tillich became an ardent defender of socialist Christianity in the form of "Religious Socialism."

Throughout the 1920s they had extensive personal contact with each other and exchanged substantive correspondence. The final rupture between them occurred in 1933. Hirsch became a strong believer in Hitler and National Socialism as the God-ordained destiny for Germany and Protestant Christianity. Tillich was attracted to some aspects of National Socialism but ultimately rejected it and together with Jewish friends was on the first list of those who lost their jobs at the University of Frankfurt. He moved to New York where he began a brilliant theological career in North America. Hirsch became a leading protagonist in the German church struggle on the side of the pro-Hitler "German Christians" and as dean of the theological faculty at the University of Göttingen. He wrote many books during this period and after 1945, when he resigned from the University and lived virtually in exile in his own country until his death in 1972. Tillich died in 1965. The controversy between Hirsch and Tillich raises most of the central theological issues concerning nationalism.

#### *Hirsch: A theological defense of nationality*

The case of Hirsch illustrates my thesis—that modern nationalism is a way of coming to terms with the legacy of the Enlightenment. Hirsch was deeply disillusioned with the Enlightenment while accepting much of what it stood for. Theologically, on the one hand he rejected conservative traditional Lutheran orthodoxy and confessionalism in the face of modern critical thought. On the other hand, he also rejected just as strongly the individualism and loss of authority and moral discipline that he felt characterized 19th century liberal Cultural Protestantism. He regarded National Socialism and a theology in tune with National Socialism as a third way—a way into the future. He was one of several prominent theologians in Germany who in the War and post-world War I period had re-discovered the concept of *Volk* as central for their theological work. It was a concept which for them served to counter the individualism of 19th century liberal theology in favor of the virtues of community, solidarity, commitment and self-sacrifice for the sake of the common good. *It was a contextual theology, in which theology was seen always to be in the service of a community—the national, ethnic community within which one finds oneself.*

In order properly to understand Hirsch's perspective one has to understand what he means by nationality. Hirsch distinguishes between "*Volk*" and "Nation." *Volk* is a concept prior to nation, and refers to a group of people with a common biological-racial, cultural, ethnic, linguistic, and religious heritage. It is more than a biological-racial entity but blood-relatedness is an important

aspect of its group identity. It is family or tribe writ large. The word “nation” refers to this people (*Volk*) having become conscious of its group identity in social, political, and historical terms. Human beings, he says, do not grow like wild flowers—isolated and mixed-up. According to Hirsch, humans are not like such wild flowers, but are born into and grow up within a national community, or more accurately, self-conscious “peoplehood” (*Volksgemeinschaft*). This is a historical fact which powerfully shapes individuals and which they experience as law-defining and binding them. The individual receives his/her external fate and inner being from this inescapable fact. This is why any conversion from one nationality to another is a slow and painful process that can be completed only in succeeding generations, for the character of one’s nationality shapes one’s soul or personality.<sup>3</sup>

Hirsch calls this the God-given boundary which we dare not cross, the “hidden sovereign” which is the ground for every healthy nation-state. Such national-consciousness (*Nationalgefühl*) is a pre-Christian good, an order of creation.<sup>4</sup> It is a good which must be respected within the temporal order. As long as the sun shines there will be such distinctions between different national and ethnic groups. Only in the eternal spiritual realm are these distinctions transcended and the Christological norm of unity between all applicable. Only spiritually can one speak of a universal human community. Anyone who, like Tillich, avoids commitment to particular historical communities in favor of a universal human community is mixing up apples and oranges (the temporal/external and the eternal/spiritual); and has a faulty understanding of what it means to be human and what it means to be morally and ethically responsible within a given historical context.

Hirsch maintains that the holy boundary of nationality cannot be crossed. One’s nationality—not synonymous with but certainly including biological, material, racial as well as spiritual qualities—is the highest earthly communal bond, created by God, to which one must submit oneself and be obligated if one is to find meaning within human existence. Hirsch is tragically aware of the origin, givenness, and inescapability of one’s own historical situation. I find much that is persuasive in Hirsch’s treatment. In the end I must, however, reject it; for by giving such a high status to nationality, and, further, by linking it so closely to the legal, political and coercive arm of the state, he makes nationality into an untouchable entity. Because it is part of the created order, nationality remains beyond and outside of the realm of rational and theological critique, public discussion and open questioning. Nationality is a historical given which cannot be challenged. It is true, Hirsch believes that nationality ought not to be absolutized (that is why he does not like to be called a nationalist). Nationality is a temporal reality and therefore subject to change and evolution and stands under the judgment of God—a fact born out in the birth, growth, power, decline and defeat of nations, most dramatically manifest during times of war and crisis. This, however, is God’s doing. Even though Hirsch was less strident than many in his comments about Jews, and even spoke warmly of individual Jews, he

nevertheless did not shrink from drawing certain objectionable but logical conclusions from his basic assumptions. He declared that Jews and Germans were racially distinct and therefore ought to be kept separate from each other. Jews ought to be given "guest status" in Germany;<sup>5</sup> they were not inferior, just different.

*Tillich: In Defense of Internationalism*

Tillich saw more clearly than most how the preoccupation with national identity in National Socialism and among "German Christians" such as Hirsch was a contradictory attempt to meet the challenges of a modernity in crisis. It was an attempt by people who had been profoundly shaped by modern consciousness to create an artificial pre-Enlightenment-type of national cohesion. Tillich too found a place in his theology for nationality but in a way that he felt remained faithful to modern experience.

Like Hirsch, Tillich began as a strong German patriot and nationalist volunteering enthusiastically in 1914 to fight for the fatherland. He was appointed army chaplain on the Western Front. The war experience, however, soon radicalized him. It was not long before he became disillusioned with the usual conservative interpretation of the war as nations fighting each other for survival. He became a convinced Religious Socialist and internationalist, rejecting the Lutheran two-kingdom doctrine, espoused by nationally-oriented Christians like Hirsch. He was also, however, critical of liberalism (the spirit of capitalism) as well as doctrinaire Marxism for destroying all communal relationships in family and nation through the pure rationalization of existence.<sup>6</sup>

He conceded a certain legitimacy to groups committed to national renewal but ardently protested against any unmediated identification of Christianity and the nation, the cross and the swastika. Christianity must always exercise a critical function over against nationality. He calls for a genuine socialist decision in which National Socialists take seriously the second part of their name. Tillich's argument rests on his analysis of the two roots of political thought: the consciousness directed to the myth and powers of origin (nature, blood, family, tribe, race, nation) is the root of all romantic and conservative thought. It is the *priestly-sacramental* view of reality which says yes to being, to the wherfrom of existence, to the ground of reality rooted in nature. It stresses the past and the present. The second root is the consciousness of the whereto of existence, the future, the ought, not being but becoming. It is the *prophetic-eschatological* emphasis of the Hebrew prophets working toward a just social order—a universal, international human community.<sup>7</sup>

The crucial point, for Tillich, is that both of these (the priestly-sacramental and the prophetic-eschatological) must be emphasized. Liberals and Marxists have tended to empty history of all religious, sacramental substance and emphasized pure prophetic form. Conservatives (both romantic and revolutionary) have stressed the sacramental to the exclusion of the prophetic. Religious Socialists, he says, recognize the importance of the powers of the origin but only

as ultimately subordinated to the prophetic. Another way of putting it: while nationality is an important ingredient in what makes us human, it must ultimately be the means toward the universal human community, which in the final theological sense is the Kingdom of God. Tillich uses a wonderful analogy of emigration (physical and spiritual emigration) to describe the Christian's relation to nation. Shortly after his emigration to the United States he addressed the "American Committee for German Christian Refugees" and made the following appeal:

I would like to close with an appeal to support emigration, be it for the sake of Christian love, moral indignation, or political conviction. But behind all these reasons there should be the recognition that *emigration is a religious category*, which applies to every Christian; for it points to the majesty of God and the exclusiveness of his demand that people at certain times ought to tear themselves away from home and family, homeland and nation, and all other things on this earth.<sup>8</sup>

In a series of broadcasts to the German people during the war years he encouraged the German people to emigrate spiritually while remaining physically within Germany. This metaphor of emigration to describe the whole of life, the existence between one's own and that which is foreign to one, what Tillich frequently calls standing "on the boundary," "on the frontier" between two equally alluring alternatives, is what perhaps most clearly separated him from Hirsch's unqualified allegiance to one's own family, nationality, and country.<sup>9</sup>

In a remarkable 1933 article (Hitler came to power in January, 1933), entitled "Das Wohnen, der Raum und die Zeit (Habitation, Space and Time)," Tillich gives positive value to all three concepts.<sup>10</sup> To live in a house, to have a home, to create space for oneself is the way everything that lives comes into existence. Space for Tillich takes on a primal and holy quality, especially that space which has the character of preservation and grounding of life. One's own house, the neighbor's house, village, city, country, and *Volk* all participate in the sanctity of space which makes possible human existence. In the end, however, time (or history) takes precedence over space—we have again and again to forsake present space for the sake of the future. Abraham, of the Old Testament, in the leaving of his living space (*Lebensraum*) for an unknown future becomes the archetype for all of humankind. Physical and spiritual emigration (time) have greater theological significance for Tillich than allegiance to one's own (space).

### *Lessons to be learned*

There are a number of lessons that can be learned from the German experience of the 1930s. First, the powers or myths of origin (including ethnicity and nationality) have a primal power that can hardly be over-estimated. They shape peoples' identity and are a fact of human existence which cannot be denied without grave consequences. Second, in the modern and post-modern period a static, or pristine national-ethnic homogeneity is no longer possible; we live in a fragmented world—a world in which the powers of origin have been broken. To

presuppose a communal society composed of a cohesive ethnicity is an illusion; and to enforce coercively such uniformity as fascism and nazism endeavored to do is to sink into barbarism. Third, the only possible alternative is to view ethnicities as dynamic kleidoscopic configurations which are in constant flux. I believe that the powers of the origin—that is, those dimensions of human existence which root us in nature—are defining characteristics of what it means to exist as human creatures, both as individuals and as groups. It is that which ties us to nature and to fellow human beings and, therefore, is to be taken with utmost seriousness in an age of technical reason which uproots us from our origins. The root cause of injustice I propose is not the affirmation of nationality/nationalities as such but rather the domination by one configuration of the powers of origin over another. In short, the political and moral “ought” has to do not with overcoming or denying nationality or ethnicity but with the breaking of the domination of one nationality by another. Nationality has to be relativized and put in its rightful place.

### **III. Contemporary experience: religion and the renewal of nationalism**

The media have brought home to all of us the fact that the widely accepted thesis that we live in a disenchanted secular global society does not stand up to careful scrutiny. We live in an age of “religious” renewal throughout the world. Ironically, this renewal is taking place most blatantly in former socialist countries—societies that until recently prided themselves in gradually overcoming religion. Along with the renewal of religion—frequently fundamentalist religion—has come a renewal of nationalism. Here too, ironically, the forces of nationalism seem to have been the most powerful in societies that have for decades de-emphasized the importance of a national in favour of a class analysis of human societies. The two—religious renewal and national renewal—are frequently intrinsically linked. This is all-too-evident in what used to be Yugoslavia.

In the past 16 years I have visited the former Yugoslavia six times and have come to understand at least partly the political, national and religious landscape of this beautiful and diverse country. My association with Yugoslavia began in 1977 in connection with an annual course on the “Future of Religion” at the Inter-University Centre for Postgraduate Studies in Dubrovnik. Out of this involvement has come a recent volume of essays edited by myself.<sup>11</sup> All of the essays address the question of the nature and role of religion in the modern world, and a number deal specifically with the relation of religion to nationalism. In the Fall of 1992 we had the opportunity of assisting a Yugoslav family—Marinko and Djurdja Cvjeticanin and their two children Dina and Srdjan—to emigrate to Canada. Marinko is Serbian, from the Serbian minority community within Croatia, and Djurdja is Croatian. They have deliberately avoided com-

municating to their children their own national backgrounds and an awareness of organized religion. Marinko is a sociologist of religion who taught for the University of Zagreb in Osijek, and was a therapist with a private practise. He has a thorough grasp of the political, national and religious contours of the former Yugoslavia and a profound insight into the human psyche in search of national and religious identity. My reflections in the following pages are based mainly on my own experience in Yugoslavia, and what I have learned from my many personal "Yugoslav" friends.

#### *Nationalities in former Yugoslavia*

The modern Yugoslavia, largely the legacy of World War I, consisted of six Republics: Slovenia, Croatia, Bosnia/Herzegovina, Montenegro, Serbia and Macedonia, and two independent provinces: Vojvodina and Kosovo. According to a 1981 census, the former Yugoslavia was made up of seven major nationalities: Serbian (36.6%), Croatian (19.7%), Moslem (8.9%; most of them converted Serbs and Croats), Slovenian (7.7%), Albanian (7.7%), Macedonian (5.9%), Montenegrin (2.9%), not including 5.4% identifying themselves simply as Yugoslavian, 1.9% as Hungarian, and 1.0% as Other.<sup>12</sup> The same census identifies the distribution of nationalities as follows: Slovenia the most homogeneous with 90.0% Slovenes; Serbia, the second most homogeneous with 85.4% Serbs; and Croatia the third most homogeneous with 75.0% Croatians and 11.5% Serbians; Montenegro the fourth most homogeneous with 68.5% Montenegrins, 13.3% Moslems and 3.3% Serbians; and Macedonia the fifth most homogeneous, with 67.0% Macedonians, 19.7% Albanians, and 4.5% Moslem Turks. The most complex and therefore also the most war-torn is Bosnia/Herzegovina with 39.5% Moslems, 32.0% Serbians and 18.3% Croatians. The point is that the 19th century concern for nation-states, in which political/geographical boundaries would be ideally drawn according to homogeneous ethnic-nationalistic lines has been far from successful and is virtually impossible, as the Balkans demonstrate. According to Marinko, one-third of all children in the former Yugoslavia come from mixed marriages. There is virtually no extended family which does not have mixed ethnic blood in it. This means that frequently two brothers will choose to fight on opposite sides depending on whether they identify with their father or mother. For most it is not clear where their national-ethnic identities and loyalties lie. Nationality has become an ambiguous notion within modernity even while it is being defended and fought over more aggressively than ever. This confirms my thesis that any claim made on behalf of a large-scale cohesive ethnicity is illusory; and that the desire and need for community in the contemporary world (*Gemeinschaft* rather than just *Gesellschaft*) will need to be satisfied in some other way.

#### *Religion in the former Yugoslavia*

The most important fact for us to consider in this context is that historically religious identity and national identity have been intrinsically linked in the

Balkans. The three major religions in former Yugoslavia are Roman Catholicism, Orthodox (Serbian and Macedonian), and Islam, coinciding remarkably closely to the ethnic/national make-up of the various Republics and Provinces: Slovenians and Croats predominantly Catholic; Serbians, Montenegrans and Macedonians primarily Orthodox; and Muslims Islamic. This historical identification of religious identity with national identity has in effect made Balkan wars into "holy or religious wars." It is for this reason that the initial post-revolutionary socialist government of Josip Broz Tito was characterized by all-out hostility toward religion.<sup>13</sup> Religion had historically played a reactionary and oppressive role in Yugoslav society. This fact largely motivated the socialist disenfranchisement of public religion.

Since the demise of the Socialists, the renewal of national independence movements has brought with it once more also a renewal of public religion. In the words of Paul Mojzes, "The role of religion has changed drastically. No longer treated under a Marxist formula the churches and religious people are no longer discriminated against due to ideological considerations. Rather the large Orthodox, Catholic, and Muslim religious establishments have gained in importance and have become among the most important players as the ethno-religious mix typical of Eastern Europe propels them into defenders of nationhood."<sup>14</sup> Beside the three major religions, there were by the late 1970s more than 30 different smaller religious groups in Yugoslavia, including Lutheran, Baptist, Pentecostal, Methodist, Nazarene and so on. In fact, it seemed that these small Protestant groups, who were not nationally identified, earned special respect within the socialist period. Peter Kuzmic, president of a Pentecostal Bible Institute in Osijek, whom I visited in 1990, was highly respected by politicians and had high-level political contacts. A Mennonite, Gerald Shenk, has been involved with this Biblical Theological Institute of Osijek and Zagreb for some 15 years. In his article, "The Protestant Experience in Yugoslavia: Response to Modernity," Shenk persuasively argues for the social and political significance of the dissenting traditions in modern societies such as Yugoslavia. Their significance lies in their emancipatory potential—liberating persons from old cultural, religious and ethnic obligations in favor of a free Gospel, offering in place of older national and religious identities "a smaller-scale intimacy of family, and immediate community on a face-to-face basis."<sup>15</sup> In a prophetic statement, Shenk says in 1988:

Across the country we see some evidence that the society itself is showing a new openness to the contribution of small Protestant communities. There is a potential for social reintegration on the local community level that will be more and more needed as this country attempts to recover from deep and debilitating social crisis. In particular, as nationalism becomes more and more divisive, these groups are a model of integration across lines matched only by the Army and (originally) the Party, but on a completely voluntary basis.<sup>16</sup>

### *Lessons to be learned*

The fact is that around the globe today there are major political liberation

movements that perceive themselves as struggling for the rightful place of soil, blood, family, tribe and nation. The Black majority in South Africa, the minority native population of Canada, French Quebecers, Arabs and Israelis in the Middle East, a variety of national groups in the former Soviet Union, not to mention the Republics in Yugoslavia, all of these point to the significant role which the powers of origin play in the contemporary struggle for historical freedom and justice around the world. It is frequently not clear whether these are reactionary or progressive movements. Frequently, religion functions as a powerful factor in these struggles. This brings me back to my original question: Is nationalism to be rejected theologically as a negative power driving peoples to ethnocentrism, intolerance, racism and barbarism? Or is nationalism a positive force for the liberation of oppressed peoples, to be theologically supported on the grounds of justice, autonomy, the right to dignity and self-determination, and the notion that nationality, ethnicity, and family are intrinsic goods of creation?

#### IV. Mennonites, Theology and Nationality

##### *Mennonites and Nationality*

I recently heard someone call a convert to the Mennonite church a non-ethnic Mennonite. What was meant was that she was a non-German or non-Swiss ethnic Mennonite. In fact, there is no such thing as a non-ethnic. We are all defined ethnically to a lesser or greater degree. We are defined by the language we speak, by the food we eat, by the rituals we perform, by our cultic behaviour and by other customs we inherit and live by. To use Tillichian language, to be human is to be defined by both space and time. Mennonites as an ethno-religious people are also defined by both space and time; in fact, as a group we have perhaps more than many other groups lived with a tension between space and time: sometimes defining ourselves primarily spatially (that is, by ethnic, national, characteristics), at other times in terms primarily of time (as a pilgrim, emigrating, non-territorial people, identifying ourselves historically and religiously).

Anabaptist historian Werner Packull maintains that in the diversities of the 16th century Anabaptist movement ethnic differences played a significant role. The three major linguistic groups were the Swiss, German and Dutch, but within these there were local variations having to do with differences in dialect, eating habits, dress and so on. These differences led to conflict and splinter groups. It is of interest that Anabaptist groups in what is now Czechoslovakia maintained their German or Swiss dialects and did not adopt the Slavic languages. How important this is theologically is not clear, but that religious beliefs and ethnic-cultural factors cannot be easily separated I think is indisputable. What is important about the early Anabaptists, however, is that because their ethnic differences did not take on self-conscious political-institutional form (they were

a non-territorial church) there was a universalistic possibility within the movement. This universalistic possibility, ultimately grounded in their reading of the biblical text, finds most potent expression in “free church” ecclesiology—the conviction that church membership is not to be determined by territory, political allegiance, family ties, but by personal confession of faith and a moral, regenerated life. This universalistic impulse has, however, again and again been frustrated by historical Mennonite religious and ethnic sectarianism. This happened already in Holland in the 16th century, in Prussia in the 17th and 18th centuries, in Russia in the 19th century, in North America and Latin America in the 20th century. The fact that we have moved from one country to another, shows that we are a people of time and the diaspora; but again and again we have become a people of space, and one of nation-states within states (e.g. the colonies in Russia).<sup>17</sup>

The reason for this I would argue is that to be human is to be bound in some sense to space—in this sense Emanuel Hirsch is right. We are defined by how we come into this world: gender, colour, race, language, customs. The liberation movements throughout the world—Black, Hispanic, African, Quebecois, Arabs, Jews, Feminist, Lesbian and Gay, and so on—all are ample proof of this. The passion with which French Mennonite Sonia Blanchette, in her recent visit to four Mennonite schools in Ontario, defended the notion of French separatism and her own identity as Quebecois rather than English Canadian illustrates this fact. She refused to “equate God’s unity with Canadian unity” and stressed that God’s grace operates not independent of but *through* culture and nationality.<sup>18</sup>

### *The Bible and nationality*

My own theological proposal at the very end of this study emerges out of a survey reading of the biblical understanding of the nations, to which I now turn.<sup>19</sup> At the end of the Bronze Age (13th-century B.C.), at about the beginning of the biblical period (the Iron Age), the tribal element took on new significance with states beginning to define themselves along lines of tribal kinship (people linking themselves together in terms of blood-ties, common traditions and languages). The movement from the Patriarchal period to the Judges is the movement from tribe to state, from “pastoral groups” to a larger unity, which might be called a “nation,” with common leaders, a political structure based on kinship relationships and the worship of a national god: Yahweh. By about 1000 B.C. this development culminated in a larger kingdom or centralized monarchical state inhabited largely by Israelites but not exclusively. With the Babylonian exile, ironically, national consciousness takes on a new intensity. With the return to Palestine there is a strong push for national political recovery with racial overtones (the forbidding of mixed marriages), and the desire to re-establish, largely unsuccessful, “the myth of a lost national identity and history.” But also, to quote Mario Liverani:

From the model of the national state emerged that of a religious community....devoid of any political power and competence, and re-using the previous projects of

national recovery as a metaphor for the eschatological salvation. The 'national' origin of the Jewish religious community kept important features, however, in the ethnic and racial limitations of its membership--to be eventually overcome by 'universalistic' character of Christianity (under the impact of the Hellenistic-Roman cosmopolitanism).<sup>20</sup>

This dialectic between a narrow nationalistic self-interest and a universalistic salvation runs as a theme throughout the Hebrew Scriptures.<sup>21</sup> After the Flood, humanity is divided into "families, languages, lands and nations."<sup>22</sup> In Genesis 10 we have some 70 different racial-type groups listed, a listing without parallel in the ancient world, indicating the importance the Bible places on history and nations as a vehicle for God's revelation. Genesis 11 and the tower of Babel story identifies this division into many nations and languages as a punishment for human pride: "then the Lord confused the language of all the earth; and from there the Lord scattered them abroad over the face of the earth" (Gen. 11:9).

The Hebrew scriptures are to a large extent a record of the Jewish people, defining themselves over against other peoples and nations. A large portion of the prophetic literature is devoted to oracles against other nations. Yahweh is frequently depicted as a divine warrior miraculously delivering the Hebrews from their enemies. But with the destruction of Jerusalem in the 5th century B.C. there is a turning to a more universal eschatological and messianic hope. Yahweh is seen as the God of all nations, and pagan empires are envisioned as gathering in Jerusalem to worship the one God. Anticipating the Pentecost coming of the Spirit of God on all people alike (Acts 2) Zechariah prophesies: "In those days ten men from the nations of every tongue shall take hold of the robe of Jews, saying, 'Let us go with you, for we have heard that God is with you.'" (8:23); and Zephania says: "Yea, at that time I will change the speech of the peoples to a pure speech, that all of them may call on the name of the Lord and serve him with one accord." (3:9).

This tension within the canon between a narrow nationalistic view and a universalistic perspective is represented dramatically in the contrast between Jonah-Micah, on the one side, and Nahum-Habakkuk, on the other. In Jonah, God shows compassion on the wicked city of Nineveh, capital of Assyria. In Nahum, God destroys Nineveh. In fact, the Jewish covenant community was open to the foreigner and the stranger from the start, as narrated so powerfully in the book of Job and the book of Ruth. The universalistic principle is a logical conclusion of monotheism, which affirms the unity of the cosmos and sovereignty of the one God over all nations. This universalism becomes the fundamental theme in the kerygma of the New Testament. The earliest Jewish-Christian community saw the messianic age as having come upon them in Christ; and the most definitive aspect of that age was its inclusiveness. The message of John the Baptist, of Jesus, Paul, Peter and all the Apostles is that the old walls of partition have been broken down. At Pentecost in Jerusalem, "devout people from every nation under heaven" began speaking in tongues other than their own. "There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor

free, there is neither male nor female; for... [all are] one in Christ Jesus" (Gal. 3:28).

John Miller, in a soon to be published study of how the Hebrew scriptures came to be collected, ordered and canonized devotes considerable space to the concept of the nations in Hebrew literature. From the early chapters of Genesis the disparate linguistic, ethnographic groups and nationalities remain a central theme. The covenant God makes with the Hebrews is that they will become a great nation through which "all clans on earth" will be blessed and come to know Yahweh the true God. Again and again Israel fails to live up to its calling. Miller agrees that "the architecture of the Law and the Prophets has been very deliberately shaped in its final redaction to convey the message of an overarching plan of God for the world of nations." It is the world vision and mission to all nations foreshadowed in the Law, the Prophets and the writings that is taken up by the Spirit-inspired Church of Jesus Christ.<sup>23</sup>

#### *A theological summing up*

Theologically, I take the powers of origin (sexuality, family, tribe, clan, peoples, nationality, race) to be part of what defines us as human beings. I understand these as falling under the Christian doctrine of creation, including God's providence and preservation of the world. That is, they are givens, facts of existence that we do not freely determine. Using Heideggarian language, we are thrown into existence this way. Having said this, however, I would draw the following distinctions and conclusions.

First, these powers of creation are not fixed orders of creation the way theologians like Hirsch tended to view them in the 1930s. Although the powers of origin have a certain enduring quality and intransigence to them, they are not totally in the realm of inevitability and necessity. They are dynamic powers and there is an element of human freedom and accompanying moral responsibility in how the contours of these powers of origin take shape and then function in societies. Dietrich Bonhoeffer also rejects the notion of orders of creation and uses the term mandates for them. This, in my opinion, puts them too easily into the realm of moral freedom. There is a created givenness to them which is not quite so easily at our moral disposal. If one were to use a metaphor it would be, I suggest, that of the scrabble game in contrast to the jigsaw puzzle. The dynamics of the scrabble game I think best describe God's providence in this regard (the limits of the board, the luck of the continued picking up of letters, one's own vocabulary and skill in playing, one's dependence on other players, and the ultimate design which emerges (always unique) through the interaction of all these factors.) Ethnicities in fact change and develop in this way rather than being totally predetermined as in the jigsaw puzzle. This is another way of saying that creation needs to be understood not only as original creation but also as *ongoing creation*.

Secondly, I believe distinctions need to be made between 1) ethnicity (small group identity through local kinship ties, ritual behaviour, eating habits, dress

and most important dialect); 2) nationality (larger group identity in which ethnic ties are expanded, a common language increases in importance, and above all the group becomes self-conscious about itself); and 3) nation-state (the politicization of the ethnic-national concept so that political boundaries are made to coincide with ethnic-national borders). Historically, the nation-state, and also to a lesser degree nationality, is a modern 18th and 19th century romantic notion which is politically and theologically highly problematic. Politically it is problematic because it flies in the face of the absence of such homogeneity and coherence in the modern and even more so the post-modern world. This means that any attempt to create such a state is based on an illusion and must be done by force; exactly what happened in Germany in the 1930s and 1940s and what is happening now in the former Yugoslavia. Ethnic and national differentiation I believe to be assumed in the Bible and theologically defensible as human givens—factors which give us a natural sense of communal belonging and rootedness, to be encouraged in the contemporary deracinated world. But the nation-state defined along ethnographic lines, especially when shored up by civil religion and a political theology, in my view leads to the intolerance and “ethnic cleansing” that continues into the present.

Finally, I would like theologically to defend the ethnic and nationally-polymorphic state in which ethnically-defined groups are treated equally and fairly on the basis of a shared humanity. In other words, the powers of origin are taken seriously and treated with respect as created goods that define us as humans but are not given absolute political or theological status. Politically, they are relativized by a higher good: the shared humanity between all humans represented by transnational institutions and constitutions. Theologically, they are relativized by the affirmation of the unity of all as created in the image of God, redeemed in Christ, and unified in Holy Spirit within a voluntary church community. This is what I take to be the biblical vision of the Kingdom of God, which all human societies including the church can always only imitate by analogy.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup>Cf. Reimer, "National and the Myth of Origin in Paul Tillich's Radical Social Thought," in *The Influence of the Frankfurt School on Contemporary Theology: Critical Theory and the Future of Religion; Dubrovnik Papers in Honour of Rudolf J. Siebert* (Lewiston/Queenston/Lampeter: The Edwin Mellen Press, 1992), pp. 283-295

<sup>2</sup>Reimer, *The Emanuel Hirsch and Paul Tillich Debate: A Study in the Political Ramifications of Theology* (Lewiston/Queenston/Lampeter: The Edwin Mellen Press, 1989).

<sup>3</sup>Emanuel Hirsch, "Die Liebe zum Vaterlande," *Pädagogisches Magazine*, Heft 975 (Langensalza, 1924), pp. 9-12.

<sup>4</sup>See Hirsch, "Ein christliches Volk," *Der Geisteskampf der Gegenwart* 54, 7 (1918), pp. 163-166.

<sup>5</sup>Hirsch, "Theologisches Gutachten in der Nichtarierfrage," *Deutsche Theologie* 1 (May, 1934), pp. 182-199.

<sup>6</sup>cf. Paul Tillich, "Christentum, Sozialismus und Nationalismus," *Wingolfs-Blätter* 53 (1924), pp. 78-80.

<sup>7</sup>Tillich, *The Socialist Decision*. Translated by Franklin Sherman with an introduction by John R. Stumme (New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1977), pp. 3ff.

<sup>8</sup>Tillich, "Christentum und Emigration," *Gesammelte Werke*, Vol. XIII. Edited by Ranate Albrecht (Stuttgart: Evangelisches Verlagswerk, 1959-1972), p. 190.

<sup>9</sup>See Tillich, *On the Boundary: An Autobiographical Sketch* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1936).

<sup>10</sup>Tillich, "Das Wohnen, der Raum und die Zeit," *Die Form* 8 (1933), pp. 11-12.

<sup>11</sup>Reimer(ed.), *The Influence of the Frankfurt School on Contemporary Theology: Critical Theory and the Future of Religion; Dubrovnik Papers in Honour of Rudolf J. Siebert* (Lewiston/Queenston/Lampeter: The Edwin Mellen Press, 1992).

<sup>12</sup>Srdjan Vrcan, "Religion, Nation and Class in Contemporary Yugoslavia," *The Influence of the Frankfurt School in Contemporary Theology*, p. 91.

<sup>13</sup>Paul Mojzes, "Religion and the Left in Yugoslavia," *The Influence of the Frankfurt School on Contemporary Theology*, pp. 83ff.

<sup>14</sup>Mojzes, *Ibid.*, p. 81.

<sup>15</sup>N. Gerald Shenk, "The Protestant Experience in Yugoslavia: Response to Modernity," *The Influence of the Frankfurt School on Contemporary Theology*, p. 142.

<sup>16</sup>*Ibid.*, pp. 143-44.

<sup>17</sup>See Peter J. Dyck, "Are They Dutch, German or Mennonite?" *Festival Quarterly*, p. 33..

<sup>18</sup>See "Quebecer stirs strong emotions at Mennonite schools," *Mennonite Reporter* Vol.22, No.20 (October 19, 1992), pp. 1-2; and "MCC hears moving stories: Quebecer explains her faith and politics," by Wilma Derksen, *Mennonite Reporter*, (February 10, 1992).

<sup>19</sup>cf. Mario Liverani. "Nationality and Political Identity," in *The Anchor Bible Dictionary* (New York: Doubleday, 1992), Vol. 4, pp. 1031-1037.

<sup>20</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 1039.

<sup>21</sup>For the following see "Nations," *The Anchor Bible Dictionary* Vol. 4, pp. 1037-1048.

<sup>22</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 1037

<sup>23</sup>John Miller, *From Crisis to Reform: The Hebrew Scriptures of the Christian Bible*. Chs. 8 and 11. Forthcoming book to be published by Paulist Press.