Doug Gay, *Honey from the Lion: Christianity and the Ethics of Nationalism* (London: SCM, 2013)

This book comprises a Christian apologia for nationalism in general and for Scottish separatist nationalism in particular. It is only fair that the reader should know that its reviewer is an Anglo-Scottish unionist.

Doug Gay's perspective is, by his own account, "Reformed and ecumenical" (xiii). It is Reformed especially in its Calvinist confidence in the possibility of remodelling society by way of social 'discipline' (31) and in its "democratic leanings and federating dynamics" (49). Yet it is also ecumenical in its adoption from Catholic social teaching of the principles of human dignity and the common good, and from the Radical Reformation's tradition of the importance of the Christian community's witness through its "distinctive and exemplary corporate practice" (32). (Anglicans—such as T.S. Eliot, R.H. Tawney, and Vigo Demant—are mentioned, but never, as far as I can tell, as such.) More particularly, the author admires the ecumenical engagement with concrete policy issues exemplified by the 1937 Oxford Conference on Church, Community, and State (38). In contrast, he tells us, "[n]ot enough contemporary political theology is also practical theology, because it operates at a level of remoteness and abstraction from the lived experience of the societies within which it is produced" (129). I heartily agree and I applaud Gay's intention to wrestle with the messy, contemporary particulars.

I also applaud his decision to articulate what he thinks in unapologetically biblical and theological terms, and yet still to offer it as a contribution to public deliberation (xii). I think that it should be possible to be both 'confessional' and secularly intelligible, provided that non-religious citizens are sufficiently liberal to expose themselves to ideas that are seriously different, and provided that the confession is sufficiently sensitive to the secularity of its audience. If the plaudit from the nationalist Member of the Scottish Parliament on this book's back cover is to be believed, then this is indeed possible and *Honey from the Lion* has succeeded.

My third round of applause breaks out at the end of Chapter 1, where Gay seeks to define nationalism and to 'normalise' it. He is right, I think, to insist—using a characteristically memorable, down-to-earth metaphor—that "'democracy incarnate' has an address, has majority languages and accents" (14), and to endorse Jonathan Hearn's claim that nationalism is quite properly about "the demand to be ruled by people who share one's moral values and beliefs" (15). He is honest in acknowledging that the formation of national identity inevitably involves a process of inclusion and exclusion. What is more, he is correct to contend that "[t]he problem is … not in the othering per se, since all distinction involves othering; it lies in what is claimed through the othering and how" (7-8); and that the moral quality of nationalist claims depends "on the 'stories of peoplehood' that are invoked" (16). Indeed it does, and I shall return to this point later.

It is perhaps methodologically dubious that the business of defining and normalising nationalism is conducted in this chapter almost entirely with reference to non-theological literature and *before* the terms of Christian ethical evaluation are articulated (in Chapters 2 and 3) and applied (in Chapter 4). It is dubious because the definitions of phenomena like nationalism are seldom value-neutral. Nevertheless, it is fair to presume that the theological intelligence of the author is already, if covertly, at work here; and I myself did not notice anything objectionable.

In Chapter 2, Gay lays out the ecumenical range of the social ethical resources upon which he draws, and in Chapter 3 he proceeds to describe the characteristics of a

Christian society. Since he allows himself under thirty pages to explain what amounts to a comprehensive social ethic, the result is inevitably sketchy. The ethical features that bear most directly on the matter of Scottish separatist nationalism are: democratic participation, human equality, the duty of government to 'discipline' markets, the just distribution of land (e.g., via social housing), and the 'consociational' distribution of political power away from the central state and across civil society. With these norms I have no quarrel.

In the light of his Christian social ethic, Gay proceeds in Chapter 4 to give a theologico-ethical account of nationalism. Much of this takes its cue from an anti-imperialist reading of the biblical story of the tower of Babel in Genesis 11, according to which "the gifts of linguistic and cultural diversity … become resources that enable resistance to imperialism" (70). Gay quotes approvingly Mario Liverani's assertion that Israel's national self-identification was achieved in reaction to conditions tending "to destroy any national feeling in the melting-pot of the imperial state" (79-80). Accordingly, the vocation of a nation, he tells us, is to protect those most likely to become the victims of "totalizing and homogenizing empires" (71). He concludes that the only kind of nationalism that a Christian may support is one that renounces, in addition to "essentialism" and "absolutism", "imperialism"; and to renounce imperialism, he tell us, is "to renounce domination and to practise recognition of the other" (81). Here my applause begins to fade, for reasons that I shall make clear shortly.

This anti-imperialist theme continues in Chapter 5, where the author gives a potted history of Scottish nationalism up to the restoration of the Scottish parliament in 1999. Thus we are told that in the 19th century Scotland failed to follow the "emerging nationalist script" largely because of "the economic benefits of Union and Empire to aspirational Scots and the unwillingness of the Scottish middle classes to jeopardize their stake in British imperialism at the height of its power and influence" (84-5). Gay describes this in terms of "co-option" to the projects of Union and Empire (86), which could carry the pejorative connotation of seduction, desertion, and moral lapse. That it actually does so is confirmed by the author's earlier statement that in Scotland the Reformed understanding of stewardship was "*debased* in the context of British imperial expansion, which saw large numbers of Scots/Calvinists/ Presbyterians *on the make*" (31, my emphases).

In the wake of the dismantling of the British empire after the Second World War, however, the problem with imperialism changes—indeed, it stands on its head. It is no longer that Scots are seduced into being the agents of imperialism; rather they have become its victims. Here Gay cites, without demur, analyses of Scotland that draw on Frantz Fanon's post-colonial theory, especially his idea of "inferiorism", whereby the colonized internalize an image of themselves as inferior to the colonizing power (105). Later he implicitly blames the English for this when he refers to "the continual tendency to equate England with Britain and or the UK" and comments that "[t]he daily irritation caused by this to those with ears to hear and eyes to see should not be underestimated…. Such examples of language and speech encode and display power. They make some visible and others invisible" (144). Shortly afterwards he mentions "the psycho-social costs of being a minority partner within the Union" (145) and itemises the injuries in a footnote:

> From the continual naming of the UK central bank as the Bank of England, to the complacent domination of coronation rituals and second-chamber representation by the Church of England, to designating Queen Elizabeth as the Second, to the appropriation of God Save the Queen and the Union flag by

> English sporting teams, the list of cultural mistakes is extensive and ongoing. (145n.20)

In the last three chapters of his book, the author lists the successes and failures of the devolution of power to Scotland within the Union from 1999-2014, explains why Scottish independence is desirable, outlines a transformative vision for an independent Scotland, and addresses a number of constitutional issues. In particular, he claims that, while devolution has reduced the 'democratic deficit', it has not eliminated it: Westminster's control over reserved matters means that policies opposed by a majority of Scottish voters at a General Election can be imposed by a UK Government (116). More deeply, he judges that the UK is increasingly unable to accommodate the more left-wing preferences of the Scottish electorate (147). So he concludes that "[t]he record of 50 years in which a majority of voters in Scotland have voted consistently for one or other social democratic parties gives me some grounds for hoping that an independent Scotland could become a more equal Scotland, with significantly lower rates of poverty" (151).

However, for Gay, it is on the issues of defence and, more broadly, international relations where the difference between the present UK and a future independent Scotland really opens up: "the question of defence displays the contrast between unionism and independence like no other issue" (164). As he sees it, Britishness is "intimately … bound up with imagining and legitimating our history of mobilizing for attack and defence" (165). He notes that Britain's chosen role in "the sad saga of post-1945 armed conflict" has almost always been to act alongside the USA, and that her "commitment to costly involvement in international conflicts" is "ongoing" (165n.10). While he does not exactly state his disapproval, it is clearly implied by the vision that he entertains for an independent Scotland's future: "Independence would involve a radical re-imagining of Scotland's role in world affairs. In contrast to having a key role in this global policing function, pro-independence campaigners openly speak of shifting to a more 'Nordic' role in international affairs …. The disciplines of independence would therefore involve an abrupt end to the Scottish stake in maintaining British exceptionalism" (165). He acknowledges that "[i]n becoming militarily small, Scotland may or may not take the RUK [Rest of the UK] down with it, but RUK's sense of itself would never the same" (165). More exactly, Scottish independence might, as its critics fear, hasten the final demise of Britain's global influence and lead to the loss of the UK's permanent seat on the UNSC (164-5). However, since he regards Britain's evolution out of empire as "a long and reluctant journey of repentance" (138), Gay would not regret this—which is one reason why, I presume, he reckons independence "the better option for Scotland (*and England*)" (193, my emphasis).

There, as best as I can capture it, is Doug Gay's argument for Scottish independence. What should we make of it? By way of preface, let me say that I think that secession from a political union can be morally justified, where independence is necessary for a people to build a significantly better society, where the prospective benefits are more real than imaginary, and where the risks and costs—not only to itself, but also to other peoples in the union and beyond it—are not manifestly disproportionate. Thus, were it true that the policies of the government in London were seriously and consistently at odds with the more equitable kind of society that the Scots want for themselves (and are willing to pay for), then that would indeed be an important ground for independence. However, as the doyen of Scottish political scientists, John Curtice, has observed, the difference in political culture between Scotland and England is not nearly as great as nationalist politicians are wont to

claim. According to analysis of the British Social Attitudes survey of 2010, "it seems that Scotland is not so different after all. Scotland is somewhat more social democratic than England. However, for the most part the difference is one of degree rather than of kind—and is no larger now than it was a decade ago. Moreover, Scotland appears to have experienced something of a drift away from a social democratic outlook during the course of the past decade, in tandem with public opinion in England."[i] On this point, it is notable that the current nationalist government in Scotland has declined to use the power that devolution already gives it to raise the rate of income tax, in order to increase funding for public services. It is also notable that one of the main economic levers that nationalists claim independence would give them—the power to lower corporation tax rates, in order to attract inward investment as the Republic of Ireland has successfully done—Gay himself has moral doubts about (159).

It is true that Scotland has always had to fight for its status as an equal partner in a Union where it usually lies in the shadow of its much larger and more powerful neighbour; and it is true that many English are annoyingly oblivious of the non-English parts of the UK. (Some are pretty oblivious to other parts of England: ironically, one of the back-cover plauditeers of this book, who displays a shaky grasp of history in his reference to "the centuries-long struggle between Scotland and England", once told me that he thinks of himself, not as British at all, hardly even as English, but just as a Londoner.) This is indeed irritating, but it is an instance of the perennial plight of small countries adjacent to larger neighbours: we can be sure that Berlin will have less political reason to pay attention to an independent Scotland than London now does to (a semi-independent) North Britain. I do not say this to excuse thoughtless slights against equal dignity, and I hope that the current debate about Scottish independence debate might be used to induce English institutions to make some appropriate adjustments. Of complacent Anglican domination Doug Gay despairs too readily, telling us that there is "little sign so far" that anyone is attending to the urgent matter of avoiding a repeat of the "ecumenical disaster" of the 1953 coronation service (171). On this I am glad to be able to correct him, since I raised this issue as a matter of some urgency with the Dean of Westminster Abbey over a year ago, and he replied that he had already had very positive conversations with the Church of Scotland about it. What is more, the Church of England now fully accepts that, should its bishops survive into a reformed House of Lords, they will sit alongside the representatives of other churches and faiths. That said, it is not uncommon for Scottish irritation to be let fester into the imagination of needless offence. Thus, while it might be anachronistic that the UK central bank is still named the Bank of England, the reason for it is innocuously chronological: it was founded (by a Scot) over a decade before the creation of the Union. Victims, too, have a responsibility to keep their resentment within the bounds of justice.

With respect to the issue of national esteem, it is notable that Gay reports a healthy renewal of Scottish national culture, with its roots as far back as the 1950s. In particular "Scotland's folk and trad scene", he tells us, "grows in confidence and ambition" ("148). The significance of this, of course, is that the renewal of cultural self-confidence, which is so obvious to visitors to contemporary Scotland, has taken place *within the Union*—just as it did in Ireland before the Easter Rising and the War of Independence. That is to say, the British connection has evidently been host, not hostile, to a revival of national culture in Scotland.

By his own account, however, it is on defence and international relations that a dramatic difference opens up between an independent Scotland and its present

position within the UK. My objection here is that the difference achieves its drama by essentialising and caricaturing the Scottish nationalist's 'other', namely, the British empire and its lingering spirit in the UK's liberal interventionist foreign policy. For Gay this is something only to be repented of, since it was and is culturally homogenising, economically "on the make", and militarily aggressive. Unfortunately, his reading of past and present reality is clouded by the ideological abstraction of 'imperialism' and is thereby rendered both untrue and unfair. As a rule the British empire, unlike the French, was not culturally homogenising—much to the frustration of Christian missionaries and apostles of liberalism—and nor, judging by Ireland's cultural renaissance in the late 19th century and Scotland's present cultural vitality, is the British Union.

For sure, the empire in the past, just like London today, attracted lots of Scots, Irish, Welsh, and English "on the make". Some of them were (and are) ruthless and greedy. Others aspired to build new and better lives for themselves and their families, and even for the communities in which they settled. Yes, sometimes their own ambitions led them to abuse and injure the natives of the foreign countries in which they traded, farmed, mined, soldiered, taught, healed or preached. But sometimes they fell in love with the natives, married them, learned their languages, wrote their histories, and painstakingly recorded their flora and fauna and gods.

Often the imperial British were convinced of the moral superiority of their own culture, which is sufficient to damn them in the eyes of many, including, I infer, Gay, who, considering the issue of immigration, stipulates that "the expectations of the host must not be predicated on assumptions of cultural or ethnic superiority or be such as to violate the integrity of my cultural identity as guest" (141-2). This is facile. I doubt that Gay himself approves of cultural customs and social institutions such as female genital mutilation, forced marriage, honour killing, the self-immolation of widows, or slavery. In that case, he presumes to stand in moral judgement upon cultures that do. Then arises the question of whether or not to tolerate such appalling practises in one's own national community. I would not tolerate them, and I doubt that Doug Gay would either. If so, the further question arises of why we should tolerate among others what we will not tolerate among ourselves. This is a morally complex matter, but if the decision to intervene is a morally fraught one, then so is the decision to turn a blind eye. Christian and liberal imperialists sometimes decided to take the risks of intervening and I, for one, admire them for it. Ideological multiculturalists and anti-capitalists might want to repent of David Livingstone's efforts to encourage the production of cash crops in central Africa. Others, however, will be proud of him, when they learn that his motive was to enable the Africans to trade in something other than slaves. Yes, the British empire presided over the infamous massacre at Amritsar in 1919 and the outrages of the Black and Tans in Ireland in 1920-22; but it also pioneered the suppression of the slave trade in the 19th century and was the only opponent of fascism in the field from May 1940 until June 1941. The present fact of the Commonwealth is evidence that the empire's historical record is not simply execrable. Rather, it is morally mixed—as was Scotland's before the Union and as it would be after it.

As with the imperial past, so with present global policing: Gay would be happy to see Scotland (and England) withdraw from it. What is not clear is whether he thinks that it does not need doing or that others would do it better. Unless he has exchanged a sunny Enlightenment anthropology for a more sober Christian one—which would be odd for a Calvinist—he will acknowledge that nation-states (like empires) can sometimes do terrible things. And unless he is a pacifist—and while

endorsing the Radical Reformation, he does not say that he is—he will also acknowledge that sometimes terrible things must be stopped by force. Perhaps Gay thinks that the UN should do the policing—but the UN has only as many regiments as nation-states choose to loan it. No doubt an independent Scotland, like Ireland, would lend its modest troops for peacekeeping purposes. But who, then, would fight the wars to *make* the just peace to be kept? Perhaps it is not that Gay wants the US and the UK to stop making war altogether, but rather that he wants them to make it only when authorised by the UN—as he implies by referring disapprovingly to British 'exceptionalism' (165). If so, he would be content for the enforcement capacity of the UN to be at the mercy of the threat of veto by Putin's Russia and the Communist Party's China, neither of whose records of humanitarian concern are famous. He would also join Alex Salmond in condemning NATO's 1999 military intervention to end ethnic cleansing in Kosovo—an intervention led by a US reluctantly persuaded by Tony Blair's UK. Thereby, he would align himself against the then UN Secretary General and most international lawyers. The truth is that there is no evidence in *Honey from the Lion* that Gay has given much thought to these matters. And that serves to confirm my impression that, notwithstanding easy claims to internationalism, Scottish separatism actually has a narcissistic quality.

When all is said and done, what is remarkable about Doug Gay's argument for Scottish withdrawal from the Union is the modesty, even tentativeness, of its conclusion: "My judgement is that, on balance, [an independent] Scotland would be no more at risk of things turning sour than it is now and that in key areas opportunities for sweetening our society would be enhanced" (128). Also remarkable is the absence of any awareness that separation might put good things at risk. Quite apart from the permanent damage to the UK's international prestige and power (which Gay sees as no loss), there is the risk of a serious souring of relations between the Scots and the English. Contrary to what panglossian separatists pretend, while the Scots alone could choose separation, they alone would not dictate its terms. Nor would the interests of an independent Scotland and the RUK be identical. It is a practical certainty, therefore, that the separating Scots would not get all that they want, that they would be frustrated, and that their traditional resentment of England would deepen. Moreover, given recent evidence that the complacent mood in England is changing toward alarm at the prospect of the UK's break-up, it is also likely that English resentment of the Scots will be kindled as never before. Perhaps the mutual alienation would only last a generation or two, perhaps no blood would be shed—but perhaps not. One of the nobler intentions of the Union was precisely to end "the centuries-long struggle" between Scotland and England, and it has been one of its finest achievements to make bloody conflict so unimaginable as to appear impossible. But appearances deceive: imagination is no measure of possibility. Contrary to appearances, Anglo-Scottish peace (like European peace) is a vulnerable historical achievement—not an immortal part of the cosmic furniture. The process of separation carries real risks, which this book ignores.

In sum, Doug Gay has performed a valuable service to both the Church and the wider public in Scotland in articulating a clear, well written, thoughtful, and measured Christian argument for Scottish independence. For reasons I have stated, however, I do not think that the argument stacks up. Or, rather, it only stacks up by focussing on the modest gains and ignoring the considerable risks, by failing to think realistically about global policing, and by 'othering' the history of Britain and the meaning of Britishness into an unjust caricature.

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[i] John Curtice and Rachel Ormston, "On the Road to Divergence? Trends in Public Opinion in Scotland and England", in *British Social Attitudes 28*, ed. Alison Parks, Elizabeth Clery, John Curtice, Miranda Phillips, David Utting at the National Centre for Social Research (London: Sage, 2012), pp. 33-4. While published in 2012, the data was collected in 2010.