National Identity and International Community

By A.M. Allchin

1946 was the year when I first came to Denmark. Even a school-boy coming from England found himself sharing in the renown of his fellow countryman, Winston Churchill, and was aware of the reality of international community as well as of differences of national identity.

Already on that first visit, I heard about Grundtvig. I was taken to visit the Minde-Kirke in Bispebjerg, and was greatly impressed by its size and its newness. I learnt something which surprised me. Grundtvig was a jolly man. Although at that time I knew very little about clergymen, I knew they were supposed to be very serious, if not gloomy.

But I also learned other things on that first visit. I was aware at once of living in a country in which class distinctions were less important and less divisive than my own. 1946 was the year after the election of the post-War Labour government in Britain. We were in process of inaugurating a welfare state. My school-boy enthusiasm for the project was deepened and confirmed by what I saw in Denmark. I think already on that first visit I learnt one line of Grundtvig, a line which celebrates a nation where few have too much and fewer have too little. It was an aim which seemed to me admirable then and still seems to me admirable today. Indeed the experience of living for the last thirteen years in a country, in which the divisions between rich and poor have steadily been growing greater, and in which as a result the bonds which hold society together have been weakened, has greatly strengthened me in my preference for a Grundtvigian vision of society.

I came to Denmark again in the 1950s and to Aarhus for the first time in 1958. By this time something about the jolly theologian had begun to attract my attention more seriously. It was about this time that the meaning of one or two lines of Grundtvig's hymns dawned on me and fascinated me so much that I determined to acquire at least a reading knowledge of the Danish language. Here I felt already was a man whose work deserved to

be known internationally, a man every bit as remarkable as his fellow countryman Søren Kierkegaard, whose works were at that very time constantly appearing in English translations.

The links which I made with Denmark in the 50s were never altogether broken, though there were interruptions from time to time. In more recent years it has been a great joy for me to be more and more linked with this university and in particular with the faculty of theology. I am especially grateful to the founders of the Centre for Grundtvig Studies, for the support and encouragement they have given me. But the welcome which I have received from friends and colleagues in the various institutes of the faculty, the ready collaboration I have found among historians, sociologists, literary scholars, biblical experts has been a constant stimulus to my own work.

I hope you will forgive me for beginning in this highly personal way.

The subject I have chosen, National Identity and International Community, is one which has been suggested to me by the forty-six years of my own connections with Denmark and by the way in which I have been lead into a deeper study of the work and personality of one of the greatest of your compatriots, N.F.S. Grundtvig. For Grundtvig was emphatically aware of himself as a Dane. He had no doubt as to his national identity, nor as to the value of that national identity. But he was anything but an isolationist. He saw Denmark in the context of *Norden*, a word which for him meant more than Scandinavia, a term which always included Iceland and often England as well. For him, national identity and international community went hand in hand. Nations, like individuals, only discover themselves and understand themselves in relationship with other nations. National identity and international community go hand in hand.

It is evident that we have here a subject of the utmost importance at the present time. We are all aware of the pressures which are bringing us together into some form of united Europe. But at the same time we are becoming aware of the continuing strength and resilience of the sense of national identity. This also is a factor which has to be reckoned with in the new Europe.

It is not for me to comment on the internal factors which lead to the »NO« vote in your referendum in 1992. But I think

it may be worth saying that in Britain many of those who are in favour of European unity, amongst whom I number myself, were grateful for that vote, if only because it made us pause, think more deeply, consider more carefully the steps towards unity which we seem called to make.

Much of our European experience of nationalism in the twentieth century has been so wholly destructive and negative that in Britain at least many people seem reluctant to think about the question of national identity at all. But in face of the destructive and exclusive forms of nationalism which characterized Germany during the Nazi period and which are reappearing in Eastern Europe today, we need to place, not a bland superficial internationalism, but a constructive vision of the meaning and value of national differences, a sane and balanced nationalism where the differences between nations will be seen in proportion and set within a network of relationships with other nations.

For if on the one side this obstinate sense of national identity can lead to violent conflict and blind hatreds, on the other side it can play a more constructive role in human affairs and has in fact done so in very recent times. It contributed in no small measure to the downfall of the Communist ideology which for so long held the peoples of Eastern Europe in a kind of social and political paralysis. We think of the part played by the Baltic countries in the earlier stages of the break up of the Soviet Empire, and we are lead to reflect on the fact that nations which are numerically small, may yet remain deeply determined to maintain their own identity and may at times have an unexpected influence in international affairs.

What are the distinctive characteristics of a nation? No definition is entirely satisfactory, but in almost every case we can see the interaction of three factors. There is the conjunction of a particular territory, a land with a particular language with its own literature, and a particular people who have a common memory and a common history, sharing their own unique experience over many generations of the fabric of human life. This interpenetration and interaction of people, place, and language, goes to make up the distinctive character of a particular nation. This diversity of people and place reveals something of the potential wealth of human culture and creativity. In a theological perspec-

tive one could say that it reveals something of the richness of the creative energies of God.

Nations, like persons, have different experiences, different strengths, and different weaknesses. Nations that have suffered much, for instance, have access to insights and wisdom hardly attained by nations whose history has been largely one of success and expansion. The discovery that the outer loss can be the inner gain is something of no small significance. Furthermore, small nations have an inner cohesion which in our highly pluralistic world often eludes larger nations in which pluralism easily turns into fragmentation.

The contrast between the situation and character of small and large nations confronts us directly in the island of Britain. Because the English are the great majority of us in Britain, it is easy for an Englishman to think that Britain and England are more or less synonymous. That is not a mistake which is likely to be made by someone from Scotland or Wales. The fact that for three centuries Scotland has been ruled from London, and that for seven centuries this has been the case in Wales, has not destroyed the sense these peoples have of being distinct nations with their own tradition and their own language. Both are peoples whose very existence questions the tyranny of numbers and leads us to think of quality rather than quantity.

This is true in a special way of the linguistic and literary tradition of Wales. Although the Welsh have never been a numerically large nation, and although today only about twenty percent of the population, that is to say half a million people, speak the Welsh language, that language shows an unexpected power of survival. In it, there is an unbroken literary tradition going back to the sixth century, a tradition which has known a remarkable and quite unpredictable renewal in the twentieth century. The gifts of vision and of song which go to make up such a poetic tradition are not shared out according to statistical norms. Rather it seems they may flourish in a small linguistic community which cherishes its sense of history and its corporate memory.

In some cases, as in that of the sagas of Iceland, on account of the chances of translation, the riches of a small nation can come to be known throughout the world. In other cases, as in

that of Wales, not much has yet passed the language barrier. As I have gradually got to know the Welsh tradition in the last thirty years I have felt at times astonishment, then delight, then gratitude at what I was discovering, but at times I have felt anger and frustration at the lack of concern for and understanding of this tradition in the nation nearest to Wales, my own country of England. For a minority language to survive and flourish in the twentieth century certain conditions need to be met. In Britain as in other parts of western Europe, too often those conditions are lacking. As our ecological consciousness develops we begin to become aware of the gravity of losing particular species of plants and animals, but we remain remarkably unconcerned about the possible death of languages and the cultures they express.

All these reflections are likely to occur to someone who is studying the thought of Grundtvig and they have been coming to the fore in my mind as the work of the Grundtvig Centre at the University of Aarhus has developed and as its Grundtvig and England project has been getting under way. Here is a particular case that reveals the size and complexity of the problems involved in transferring the work and ideas of a man of Grundtvig's stature from one language to another. Grundtvig's work resists the efforts of a translator. Much of his profoundest insight is to be found in poetry, which is always difficult to translate. His prose is sometimes almost as difficult as his verse. Here are challenges which have to be taken up. Furthermore, Grundtvig was a many-sided man. His life touched that of his nation in a great variety of ways. Perhaps his manysided universality is due, to some extent, to the smallness of the nation in which he lived. Would an Englishman or a German in the nineteenth century have been able to be involved in so many different spheres of activity?

But if the project presents problems, there are also strong incentives to proceed. Grundtvig is saying things that we need to hear. He is constantly holding together things which too often we separate; interest in the past and commitment to history, with an equal commitment to the present and a willingness to look to the future; the ceaseless activity of an inquiring, probing mind, together with the intuitive sympathies of the heart and the

esemplastic capacities of the imagination; a respect for both the church and the school, for faith and reason, for the gift received from beyond and for the search pursued from within. Above all in our context, there is his urgent sense of the uniqueness and value of what is Danish together with his constant desire to see that heritage within the context of world history. No one was less parochial in the narrow sense of that word, than Grundtvig. He tells us how at the age of five he was thrilled to hear that the Russians might be in Constantinople by Easter.

If we begin to reflect in the spirit of Grundtvig on the theme of our lecture, what do we find? To speak in more theological terms, we find the need to underline the importance of diversity in the Christian understanding both of creation and redemption. In the Christian tradition as a whole, there has been such a strong emphasis on the aspects of unity, coherence, regularity and order that we have often failed to allow sufficiently for the elements of diversity, spontaneity, the unexpected and irregular which in fact characterize our world and our experience of God's action in it. But when we turn to the Scriptures themselves, to the Old and New Testament, there seems to be a better balance. We find in the last chapters of the book of Job, for instance, a wonderful poetic evocation of the immensity and irregularity of creation. In the story of Pentecost or in St Paul's account of the early Christian community we find a constant stress on diversity as well as unity. Through the work of the Holy Spirit each one hears the Gospel spoken in his or her own tongue, each one has his or her own particular gift with which to glorify God.

In such a context we may be able to give more value to the God-given quality of such things as language and culture; to see the death of a language as an affront to God as well as an impoverishment of humankind. For Grundtvig the Holy Spirit speaks through the life and poets of every nation. The texts which embody the memory and experience of a whole people are in their own way also sacred texts. If we begin to allow such thoughts to influence us we may start to allocate our resources of money, time and intelligence in unexpected ways. The study of numerically small cultures and languages will receive a new impetus.

At the same time if we put our search for European unity into an historical context we can hardly fail to recognize that all the nations of Europe have been shaped by their shared Christian inheritance. But this inheritance itself is diverse as well as one. We need to bring together Protestant north, Catholic south, and Orthodox east into a new conversation and a new collboration. Do not the churches which are still in some sense national churches have a special responsibility here?

In face of such questions the churches often seem almost paralyzed, but not always. When they profit from the momentum of the movement towards unity which has built up in this century, then they can contribute significantly to the coming together of peopes and cultures. I think, for instance, of a great public event like the meeting sponsored by the European Council of Churches in Basel in the summer of 1989. I think of small private unpublicised groups of Catholics and Protestants meeting in places like Belfast and gradually undermining the walls of suspicion and fear. There is one thing on which all those who have committed themselves to the movement toward Christian unity in this century are agreed, the unity which we seek is a unity in diversity, not a uniformity. What does that mean? How positively can we enhance and appreciate the different gifts which are given to individuals, to nations, and to church traditions?

More than sixtyfive years ago, at the Stockholm Conference of 1925, Nathan Söderblom, Archbishop of Uppsala, looking to the representatives of the Protestant and Orthodox churches sitting before him in the cathedral said, »Paul is here and John is here, Peter still tarries«. Now Paul and John and Peter can, if they will, work together to find a way forward into a world where technology will serve rather than destroy the diversity of human life and the variety of the living environment of our planet. That would be a world in which the values of heart and mind, the values of the human spirit established and confirmed in the divine Spirit would become paramount over the lust for power and the lust for money, a world where few would have too much and fewer too little, a world marked by justice, peace, and the integrity of creation.