



Freedom and Faith

Donald Smith

Saint Andrew Press, 137pp

Honey from the Lion

Doug Gay

SCM Press, 223pp



To introduce these books may require a little background. Just when everybody was saying that popular participation in British politics is dead Scotland has burst into unprecedented life. At packed public meetings daily across the land a massive debate is being conducted around the referendum that will, on 18th September, determine whether or not to remain a part of the Union that constitutes Great Britain.

The motive force for this are cultural differences that reflect in political colour. In the eighteen general elections since the Second World War, only twice, in 1964 and 1974, has the Scottish vote tilted Labour to a ruling majority. Set against that is the asymmetry by which my children's generation, now in their early thirties, have seen the greater part of their lives ruled by Conservative governments for which their compatriots never voted. Indeed, the last general election returned but a single Conservative MP from the whole of Scotland.

Scotland holds itself to be a nation, not a province or a region; one that entered into an equal partnership with England in 1707. We have now overwhelmingly voted for a Scottish National Party government in Edinburgh that pledged to hold a referendum on this settlement. The rest of the UK (rUK) has recognised the constitutionality of this process: after all, it would no more make sense for rUK to control our future than it would for France or Germany control whether or not the English should be allowed to vote on separating from the EU. The Scottish Government is very clear. It is not our social union with rUK that is under question: it is our political union. If we choose independence we would no more see the need for physical borders, or even a different currency, than France and Germany do within the European framework.

Both of these books build on past theological studies such as William Storrar's *Scottish Identity: A Christian Vision*, Ian Bradley's *Believing in Britain* and David Fergusson's *Church, State and Civil Society*. Donald Smith is a theologically trained ethnographer who directs the Scottish Storytelling Centre and Doug Gay lectures in practical theology at Glasgow University. Smith's work, subtitled *A Question of Scottish Identity*, provides a first rate starting point for those who are new both to the political debate and its gospel basis in Christian political thought. In more of a documentary storytelling mode than in formal academic terms he charts Scotland's political and religious history, explaining how they are constitutionally embedded in both the Union with England Act (1707) and the Church of Scotland Act (1921). The former safeguards Presbyterian church governance in Scotland's national church while the latter affirms that "the Church and the State owe mutual duties to each other."

Smith's distinctive contribution is his cultural insight. He suggests that many Scottish artists and social thinkers embody an applied spirituality of mutual interconnection and creative freedom that is "intimately linked

with personal and social wellbeing." This cross-fertilises religion, thus the life work of such a figure as Richard Demarco lays out a visionary agenda "pointing to the remaking of religion as the spiritual dynamic of culture"; one that is profoundly about how to inhabit place, "and to love everything that this inhabiting does and could mean for Scotland, Europe and the wider world." The tilt towards Scots internationalism is deliberate; idealistic, perhaps, but undoubtedly the daily bread and plainsong of Scotland's (overwhelmingly Europhilic) artists, poets, musicians, writers, and most of her contemporary theologians.

If Smith's book is for the undergraduate course, Gay's work, subtitled *Christianity and the Ethics of Nationalism*, is decidedly postgraduate. His constellating text — 'Out of the strong came something sweet' (Judges 14:14) — provides the springboard from which to ask whether the lion of nationalism can yield forth sweetness. Gay approaches his task from an explicitly Augustinian-Calvinist Reformed emphasis on sovereignty with its recognition of the need for spiritual checks on state power. The sovereign, he reminds his readers, holds both sword and orb. Thus "everything is political, but politics is not everything." Politics needs a spiritual backdrop because "the state is not a self-sealing, all-encompassing sphere, but ... has limits that can and must be thought beyond ...". Secular constitutions and the language of human rights are all very well, up to a point, but there comes a point that additionally calls for 'ways of bearing witness to the "outside" of politics, to the power of God and the sovereignty of the good.'

Gay concludes: 'Those who deplore nationalism need to explain why the ambitions of colonized people to secure independent statehood are philosophically incoherent.' That said, he cautions that 'claims to identity, territory and jurisdiction ... need to be subjected to a hermeneutic of suspicion' — to the refining fire of inquiry. As such, it is imperative that our political theology deepens its traction — in his case, 'being a Reformed Christian, informed by [Roman] Catholic social teaching and inspired by Anabaptist practice' but with 'friends and whisky to help with sorting out the contradictions!'

Where does all of this leave rUK and, specifically, England? I was raised in Scotland, of a Scottish father, having been born in Doncaster of an English mother. As an adult I chose the Quaker faith which is just about the sole intact remnant of those great radical 17th century English movements of which the English tend to be, themselves, so curiously uninformed.

I yearn to see an England freed from such ongoing imperial pretensions as when Boris Johnson, in his recent 'Spirit of Envy' lecture to commemorate Mrs Thatcher, suggested that Britain's history of having invaded ninety percent of the world's countries is what made us 'great'. Imagine if reciprocal sentiments had been expressed by a prominent Moslem!

Well, here's some news. Trident has gone off. Not exploded, but imploded on the very political mindset that it was designed to protect. But whether Scotland votes Yes or No, here, too, is a paradoxical request. Seek, dear England and rUK, to understand us and stand with us. This is about respecting difference. This is a call to every corner of the UK to make the spiritual and political space to hear the call of our respective destinies in this, the third millennium of our faith.

'A nation is a soul, a spiritual principle...' said Ernest Renan. We wrestle with 'the angels of the nations...' said Walter Wink. And in Scots mythology, Jacob's pillow stone became our Stone of Destiny after he had learned that to wrestle with an angel maybe wounds, but like honey from the lion, issues forth God's blessing. **Alastair McIntosh**