"But do we get our money's worth?" The Usefulness of Religion to the Nation Building Process in Australia and East Germany.

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Both the German Democratic Republic and the Commonwealth of Australia have had a curious fixation on the nation building process. In order to convince both their own citizens, but also other nations, both the GDR and Australia had to rely on preexisting symbols and narratives which on first glance seem surprising. However, what is most curious is that both nations used sport and religion in similar ways to build the nation. While this paper concentrates on religion, it is sport which provides the framework in considering the usefulness of religion to the nation building process.

This link between sport and religion, and the nation is a familiar story to many diasporic Irish Catholic families, particularly in the nations formed out of the British colonization process. I remember an old Irish Catholic priest in my suburban Australian childhood, Fr Greg Butler, exploring many times during sermons how faith and sport were interlocking metaphors, out of which grew a certain kind of unity between peoples. To me the idea of the nation was intimately linked to sport, and there was a special resonance whenever 'one of us' was doing well.

This feeling underscored the dilemma that although Catholics were a minority group in Australia, they constituted a universal imagined community – borrowing Benedict Anderson's phrase - based on shared rituals, beliefs, signs, words and images. The Catholic view of the world in Australia then encapsulated the belief that not only could there be a secular nation-state, but other communities of belief coexisted with, but also reached beyond, these national boundaries and allegiances. I was lucky to grow up in a time and place when allegiance or loyalty was rarely in question. I could dream of playing football for Australia, while also not having to consider that being Catholic would get in the way of this. But I knew that this feeling was a rare experience in both Australian and broader world history, particularly when my father's family all came form Northern Ireland.

In a curious coincidence Australia's first match at the World Cup (Soccer) Finals in 1974 was against East Germany (GDR). I remember as a 7 year old the excitement of reaching the finals for the first time, yet, now it seems incongruous that these two nations should meet in what was an auspicious occasion for both nations. For the GDR reaching the World Cup Finals also signified a certain recognition of the nation as legitimate. Yet, the more I look into this match searching for similarities, the more I find. For example, the GDR model of institutes devoted to rigorous training to ensure national glory, was replicated in many countries, including Australia. So while sport was the first element in common, what also stood out was the role that religion played in the nation building process in each country. Yet, as I will argue, it is better expressed that religion was 'used' in both the GDR and Australia as an instrument in building the nation.

While I am focusing on the building of a 'nation', for both countries, what was also at stake was the viability of the 'state'. The establishment of a functional state based on a national entity where none had previously existed, was a challenge for both a decolonized Australia bound into the British Empire in 1901 and the creation of East Germany under the auspices of the Soviet Union/Warsaw Pact in 1949. So, while my arguments may traverse both concepts my intention is to focus on the nation, rather than on the state.

This paper then considers not just that religion is useful, but asks the question whether it has delivered on this usefulness. In the case of the GDR, perhaps it was of less value than in the Australian context. My departure point is this concept of usefulness; by this I mean the extent to which religion played a role in the ongoing creation of the nation. I am not arguing that religion is either case was a determining factor, and it is clear that if the nation cannot exist for other reasons, then religion is not going to help. So, the subtitle is deliberately sober, almost utilitarian, shorn of any romantic imagery whether in the style of Fanon or Renan. I want to convey the point that religion in the two examples provided is often less about the rhetoric of transcendent belief systems, and more associated with the power of religious symbols, imagery, and structures in everyday society. So, I am arguing that the residual power of religion is more important because it lends prestige to

whatever social, political or economic project is at hand, To be more specific, its importance lies in the art and craft embedded within religious belief systems of persuading people to side with or support overtly or covertly, or at least be ambivalent to a certain position.

Recently, Robert Kunovich (2006) investigated the role of religion in the building of national identity. He provides three reasons why religion would be important to the nation (437-9): first, the overlapping nature of elements of identity common both to religion and the nation; second, religion acts to 'reinforce' certain characteristics which together help to build the national identity; and third in more political terms religion provides organizing structures which enable efficient 'group mobilisation'. Each reason alludes to the contingent nature of the relationship between the nation and religion, that while each views the other suspiciously as a contender for the same political space, both can recognize the self in the mirror.

In this paper I will investigate how the Nation (or at least the nation state) has used these elements of religion to further its own position. This paper is divided into two different sections following Kunovich's definition above, without dealing in any detail with his notion of group mobilization through institutional structures. First, both share a common discourse in that they are imagined (Anderson 1983) or invented (White 1981). Second, religion had already laid down a field of symbols, rich in power and reaching back into time, which were ripe for reappropriation by the nation.

Imagined and invented

Both Australia (1901) and the GDR (1949) can be categorised as relatively recent attempts at nation building. Benedict Anderson's discussion that the idea of the nation is a modern project or at least a result or modernization of relationships of power is compelling. It makes sense in trying to explain the demise of multinational empires or faith based states with the development of capitalist means of production in which the market becomes the determinant of value. Yet, I would like to work from Anthony D

Smith's (1992) contention that while the nation state is relatively recent, the nation draws on far older means that people have used to identify themselves, such as the 'etnie' or the Venerable Bede's 'gens Anglorum', or what the Romans referred to as 'natio'. We can see in these the prototype of the modern nation, which Eric Hobsbawm (1990, p46) referred to as the 'protonational feelings of collective belonging'. This is close to Smith's understanding of the sometimes unconscious feeling of collective belonging which characterized the will to build a nation. This definition is very close to my earlier assertion about the catholic community; it was collective, vast and deeply layered with some kind of mystical or intangible connection which kept it all together.

A better way of explaining this connection is to lean above all on Anderson's compelling idea that the nation is invented. As it is something we cannot experience by our own senses alone, we have to imagine its scope, and thereby its complexity. A further way of thinking about this notion is that by recognising that the nation is invented also helps to reveal the diverse and multilayered interests involved in building and maintaining a nation. Australian historian, Richard White (1981) has used a similar idea in his analysis of the images used to describe Australia as a nation. He writes of inventing Australia in the same way that the nation is an imagined community. The importance of this is that somebody or some collectivity must have done the imagining and inventing; that some agency is at hand. Additionally, the nation cannot be invented out of thin air, but out of the solid fragments of previous nation building activities.

This process can be seen in the origins of both the GDR and Australia. The rationale for the nation is not enough; it requires symbols to represent power, unity and other principles which underline the 'need' for the nation to exist. Fulfilling this need is precisely what makes religion useful. Religious belief systems have long filled this gap between the reality of everyday life and the longing for a certain kind of imagined community: the divine rights of kings; the chosen people; the manifest destiny; the white man's burden, have all being connected to some kind of religious practice. All these terms in some way imply that forces outside of humanity were at work in building the

nation and more importantly bestow a certain kind of legitimacy for why the nation is built here in this place and this time.

In Europe the doctrine of territorial religion arose from the ruins of the 30 Years War. The Treaty of Westphalia in 1648 used religion to create a certain kind of peace. In order to prevent further armed conflict on the basis of religion, each state gave preference to a certain form of religion; in time this partly led to the establishment of state and then national churches. What is important is that the foundation for the later evangelical 'Church in Socialism' in the GDR had already been laid. Furthermore, the attitude of various Prussian rulers in the 18th Century indicates that religion was less about practices of faith and more about using religious obedience to the end of building the nation, as indicated ironically by Friedrich the Great: "anything which kept the masses quiet was too useful to be discarded" (Craig 1970: 96).

What is a curious similarity between Australia and the GDR is the official attitude towards religious toleration. Both nations decided to 'tolerate' religious practice, and simultaneously prohibit the establishing of a national church or religion. To a considerable extent, this is a purely rhetorical position, as Australia is considered a nominally Christian nation, and the GDR as a secular state-socialist nation. Yet, the rhetoric holds some value in the debate over what kind of state to live in. Perhaps also what was occurring was to draw people away from a faith-based allegiance and direct them to one based predominantly on the nation:

Australian Constitution s116
"the Commonwealth shall not make any law for establishing any religion, or for imposing any religious observance, or for prohibiting the free exercise of any religion, and no religious test shall be required as a qualification for any office or public trust under the Commonwealth."

GDR Constitution
Religion and Religious Institutions –

Art 41.1 guaranteed freedom of religious belief and practice for all citizens

According to Sabrina Ramet (1998), who has researched the legacy of the Cold War and religion across Central and Eastern Europe, while Communist authorities in the GDR wanted to control religious associations, they employed a number of different means to compel these organizations to 'adjust'. Their usefulness to the nation building process depended on how they were categorised by the authorities: first, "legally recognized, co-opted associations", second, "legally recognized associations treated with distrust, kept at a distance but tolerated", and third, "proscribed organizations" (Ramet 1998, p.5). As noted by many scholars in this field, the state set out to use religion, as much through negotiation as compulsion. The church was often seen as a mediator between dissident groups and the governing organs; or as seen as a space in which dissent could occur but under the surveillance of the state. The government allowed religious ministers exceptions to the travel bans, used them as quasi-diplomats in development projects in Mozambique and Angola, were allowed to teach at universities, and had access to printing offices. Perhaps in the end it is accurate to assert that most religious figures had a stake in the status quo, and therefore argued for moderate change, rather than revolutionary change in 1989. Perhaps not surprisingly, the religious organizations were just as disapproving of the goldrush consumerism of 1989-1990 as the leftovers of the Communist state.

At first glance Australia seems a quite different place, but a similar form of pragmatism took root here in the colony of New South Wales. Perhaps there is no better example than the decision to reject the idea that the Church of England should be the official religion of the colonies. This decision also set the tone for the later separation of church and state in Australia. Rather what was agreed to by a perhaps far seeing Governor Bourke in 1840 was that the three major Christian denominations (Church of England, Roman Catholics, Presbyterians) would have equal status, and equal funding (Hirst 2005). Although practically the Church of England was the faith of the Crown ('Defender of *the* Faith'), the threat from Roman Catholics of a concerted religious/ethnic challenge was blunted. In a sense, John Hirst argues, the Catholics were co-opted into the far grander project of

building a new nation. He asserts then that this is an example of why the religious turmoil of Europe of the 18th and 19th century never found much fertile ground in Australia. Indeed, he maintains perhaps with some justification that this co-opting of Catholics (particularly Irish Catholics) into the mainstream by slightly changing the rules of the game which allowed a better deal than they hand in Ireland or Britain, set the tone of 'tolerance' for the building of a multicultural society post World War II. This agreement lasted until the 1870s under pressure from other religious groups, and in the light of negotiations for a national constitution a new formulation was proposed in which the church and state were to be separated and religion would be seen as either a private matter or one for each community to decide on for themselves rather than having a solution imposed by government.

Religion then becomes useful because it provides an already existing conceptual framework about how to think about an imagined community; as well as a model of exercising power and ensuring allegiance without having to do too much work. The explanation for obedience exists within faith itself.

The Symbols of Religion

It is often written that the symbols used by the nation are merely 'secular versions of religious symbols' (Weissbrod 1983). But it is not that they are simply substitutes carrying the same kind of emotional and political power. Rather such symbols are deployed to enhance a process of nation building which is already underway. It is as if the nation only has shallow roots and needs to call on the heavy duty deep rooted ties that religious symbols possess in order to convince its own people and others of the seriousness of its nation building project.

Graham Seal (2007) has researched widely about the significance of Anzac Day in both contemporary Australian society and in its contribution to the building of the nation. In effect, many of Kunovich's arguments could be equally applied to Anzac Day, particularly in the way that its mythologisation relies heavily on already existing religious

symbols, such as the ritualistic use of flowers on burial ground, memorial services, and a national holiday ('holy day' – once known as the 53ʳᵈ Sunday). As Seal writes lyrically that there is a quasi-religious service with "a prayer-like moment in which no prayer is uttered" (140). Seal is reworking ground already dug by Ken Inglis, CW Bean and other Australian historians, but gives this process a name: the sacralisation of the secular. Religious symbols are used because they are part of the cultural resources that Australia had already acquired by British-European traditions. In this sense religion lays out a blueprint similar to Edward Said's 'textual attitude' (1978). We know how to think about the importance of Anzac Day and its relationship to the nation because the symbols of blood sacrifice of the young and innocent, is familiar from Christian and non Christian mythology.

The symbols of the GDR also borrowed from that which was already known: the hammer and the compass bordered by a ring of rye were symbols of skilled labour: the blood and sweat of the worker, the intellectual and the farmer. Here the secular symbols became the ersatz religious symbols, as they were also designed to ensure the power of a common narrative. And importantly, this narrative was designed to be to be the antithesis of Nazi Germany in which mainstream German Christianity was complicit through silence. Additionally, the biblical injunction to turn swords into ploughshares as a transformation from war to peace was certainly an important discourse markers used by the new Socialist State. Less coincidently, this symbol was used as a name by a peace and environmental group in the 1970s established under the auspices of the Evangelische Kirche (Protestant Church) in the GDR. Perhaps it could be argued that these symbols of the nation became important as a rallying point, a marker of difference of the group, or better described as a form of 'boundary maintenance'.

Conclusion

A final word in this paper is that often religion has called in its favours to achieve its own ends. An important example in Australia is the issue of state funding for religious schools. This debate has been won to the advantage of religious schools, but it was clever

political manoevuring which managed it, particularly by the Catholic schools. Up until the 1960s there was no significant national funding of Catholic schools, but the threat that Catholic schools would close their doors, temporarily flooding the public school system, caused a fundamental realignment of what the nation would fund in terms of education. The question of course arises whether this contravenes s 106 of the Constitution, but it would be difficult for the two major parties to initiate this kind of public debate. Perhaps the power exercised here by the Catholic Church (a power that perhaps a Muslim organization could not exercise at the moment) is a clear contrast to what East German churches were able to do. It seems to me absurd to argue that the Church in East Germany caused the downfall of the Communist state as proposed by Kuhnle (2008) – because like a medieval state it became closely entwined with it. Although both countries were constitutionally without official religions, the role that the Church played in politics was quite different. Yet, pragmatic decisions were made so that religious symbols and organizational structures became useful in winning the battle of ideas over legitimacy. For both the GDR and Australia, sport has been a more successful way of binding the nation. Changing attitudes and behaviour is a long game which requires both a powerful rhetoric and practical measures; in brief, religion is useful, but it is questionable whether the nation gets its money's worth.

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