

The Catholic Nationalist: Rethinking Kohl's Notion of Germany.

By Christian Wicke

Abstract

Religion can shape the form nationalism takes: the notion of the nation itself can be filled with religious content. Kohl's Catholicism facilitated a liberal type of nationalism, assisted a romantic conceptualisation of Germany, Europe and the West, and had a strong effect on the way he interpreted, falsified and relativised Germany's history. His "liberal nationalist" principles were derived from Catholic doctrines. The attacks of socialism and communism were based on Catholic Social Teaching. The state as a transcendental community rooted in Christian values. Patriotism and national self-determination were unconditionally Christian duties. The constitution was deeply Christian and his own party the most adequate national representative of its spirit. Kohl saw the secularism that accelerated after the sixty-eight movement and the decline of Christian Democratic power in 1969 as a threat to national heritage. Socialist atheism would be anti-national, anti-European and anti-Western. His religious denomination served as both a factor of integration and demarcation in his nationalism. Kohl's nationalism was therefore not merely a proto-religious substitute for religion but articulated as religious *per se*.

Introduction

Religion can thoroughly shape the form nationalism takes: the notion of the nation itself can be filled with religious content. Politics, cultures or histories that are constructed to give meaning to particular concepts of the nation can be articulated in religious rhetoric. This analysis of the nationalism of the former German Chancellor Helmut Kohl will therefore move beyond the idea of modern nationalism as a proto-religious substitute for religion (see Hayes 1926, 1960; Smith 2003) by looking at a nationalism that has been articulated as religious *per se*. It reveals that his Catholicism facilitated a liberal type of nationalism, assisted a romantic conceptualisation of Germany, Europe and the West, and had a strong effect on the way he interpreted Germany's national history.

Kohl's upbringing in the Palatinate region, his Catholic parents, his political mentor Father Finck as a teenager after the Second World War and his early membership in the Christian Democratic Union (CDU) signal an omnipresence of Catholicism in Kohl's life. Kohl's background facilitated a view on history that assumed positive continuities in the German past and encouraged him to falsify and relativise national

history. His romantic notion of Germany stood in the tradition of political Catholicism that was suppressed in Bismarck's Reich, controversial in the Weimar Republic and the Nazi era, and eventually revived and harmonised under West Germany's first post-war Chancellor Konrad Adenauer as a reaction to the failures of the past. The new official nationalism of the Federal Republic (est. 1949) that succeeded under Adenauer's newly founded CDU offered an alternative to the "failed" Prusso-Lutheran notion of the nation. It was based on a western conception of Germany, which should be integrated into the European and Transatlantic frameworks in order to safeguard the Christian occident. Kohl saw himself obliged to maintain this conception throughout his career.

His "liberal nationalist" principles¹ were derived from Catholic doctrines that comprised ideas of subsidiarity, individualism, solidarity and welfare. Further, his attacks of socialism and communism were based on Catholic Social Teaching. The non-totalitarian state had to be a transcendental community rooted in Christian values. Kohl thus projected patriotism and national self-determination as unconditionally Christian duties. He interpreted the West German constitution as deeply Christian, so that only his own party would be the most adequate national representative of its spirit. Kohl saw the advance of secularism that accelerated after the sixty-eight movement and the decline of Christian Democratic power in 1969 as a threat to national heritage. The cultural and ethical foundation of the *Volk*, the republic and Europe was in his eyes essentially rooted in Christianity. Consequently, socialist atheism would be anti-national, anti-European and anti-Western. Informed by a genuine European identity, it was an occidental concept of nationhood with strong poly-centric components that motivated Kohl during his Chancellorship (1982-1998) to play a leading role in the European integration process and the way he shaped the German (re)unification. His religious denomination served as both a factor of integration and demarcation in his nationalism.

Kohl's Catholic Nationalism

¹For the ideology of liberal nationalism see some of its greatest advocates, such as Neil MacCormick (1982), Yael Tamir (1993) and David Miller (1996).

Kohl believed he had learned the lessons from the past. He was convinced that a functioning state had to be based on Christian principles and could thus not afford any complete secularisation (Kohl March 1975: 102). The national community, its culture, history and values rested, in Kohl's view, extensively on its Christian heritage and the churches played an instrumental role in maintaining this tradition (Kohl March 1975: 103, 15-06-1988: 294). Kohl, moreover, saw Christianity as an indispensable force against secular radicalism that he saw reviving in the 1970s, when he perceived an extreme threat to the national and republican tradition (Kohl March 1975: 107, 13-06-1976: 170). He saw the ecclesiastical institutions as anti-Communist allies, as promoting human rights and appeasing class struggles (Kohl March 1975: 108).

In his PhD (1958), Kohl described the relationship between religion and politics after "the loss of the unity of the occident" as problematic: in modern times, it would be difficult to distinguish between specifically Christian policies and quasi-Christian motives (Kohl 1958: 77). The Third Reich had, in Kohl's view, however, revealed the contrast between Christian and non-Christian politics, as religion had been suppressed and persecuted. He took this alone as evidence for the conclusion that "one can justly talk about a Christian defence front in the Third Reich" (Kohl 1958: 77). Kohl's religiosity thus had a strong impact on his interpretation of national history: in his memoirs he described the Nazi-era as "apostasy from God" (Kohl: 2005: 340).² Kohl still admitted in his thesis that there was a feeling of guilt because Catholic politicians supported Hitler's Enabling Act (Kohl 1958: 80). During his later political career, he would, however, fail to accept this fact. According to Kohl, the "first German democracy [during the Weimar Republic] was destroyed by extremists from left and right" (Kohl 22 February 1979; Kohl 13 October 1982). He blamed atheist

² As he wrote in his memoirs:

'Yet, first it had poisoned the spirit. The rulers were menials of lawlessness. With their arrogance and gluttony they blinded the people and ruined the whole continent. Origin of this work of destruction was an increasing fall in values and morality. In the end, the totalitarian *Unrechtsstaat* presupposed an apostasy from God.

The hypocritical reference of the rulers of the Nazi-regime to "divine destiny" only served to cover up the own arbitrariness. It was and remains in reality the worst perversion of religious belief: a derision of the living God, as the great religions acknowledge and witness him' (Kohl 2005: 340).

communists and fascists equally for the German catastrophe (Kohl 10 April 1976: 156). Kohl could therefore relativise the German past on the basis of its present Eastern counterpart (Kohl 10 April 1976: 156). His Catholic background in that sense affected his version of national history as well as his interpretation of political ideologies and the way he exploited the Cold War.

Kohl presented the politics of his party as a “divine duty to supervise that the worldly areas of life do not make themselves independent.” Natural law, in the Christian sense, would be the standard to solve disputative questions (*Rhein-Zeitung* 11 January 1968). He called upon his party members “to fight for maintaining the person as he was intended by God...” (Kohl 28 August 1964: 11). Christianity he saw as intrinsically anti-ideological (Kohl: 05 November 1974: 587). Ideology, in turn, would be always evil (10 April 1976: 157). The CDU was in his view therefore not an ideological party but a “*Weltanschauungs-Partei*” entrenched in the worldview of the Church (Kohl 28 September 1964: 11). Yet, ideologies, namely liberalism, socialism and National Socialism served him as demarcations to locate the Christian Democracy on the ideological spectrum (Kohl 28 August 1964: 11).

Kohl claimed that the foundation of the FRG as a success story mostly written by his own party, which connected “social, Christian and liberal thought” (Kohl 13 October 1982). The main rivalling party served as an atheist anti-type: “The CDU... very much in contrast to Social-Democracy, never wanted a substitute for religion” (Kohl 29 August 1964). As opposed to the SPD, his party would stand for a “notion of democracy that assumes the human, how he really is, not as a dogmatic philosophy of a “new human,” how he could be or should be” (Kohl 23 May 1974: 94). Only the CDU would thus represent the real will of the German citizens, their “Christian and liberal heritage” (Kohl 12 June 1973: 55). And when he saw Adenauer’s moral legacy crumbling in society in the 1960s, he proclaimed the CDU as a messiah of the Federal Republic to restore the Christian values, liberal principles and national imagination that were necessary for salvation (*Rhein-Zeitung* 11 January 1968; CDU 19 September 1985).

For all that Adenauer was Kohl’s greatest national hero, the Federal Republican constitution was his supreme national symbol. For Kohl, the German Basic Law itself

was based on the Christian *imago dei* (Kohl 13 June 1976, Kohl 12 February 1984: 230). The legal system of the FRG would rely on Christianity and Enlightenment, yet the latter rooted in the former, which ultimately implied the sublimation of liberalism (Kohl 28 May 1987: 109, 23 May 1974: 70). The constitutional state had superseded individual reason, because human cognition was at all times imperfect (Kohl 08 December 1973: 56-7, 1973: 93). In Kohl's view, the values upon which the state was built were not subject to empirical or discursive practice but to Christian natural law (Kohl 13 June 1976: 171). And because his own party would be the best representative of this Christian tradition, he portrayed it as Germany's most constitutionally patriotic faction (Kohl 1973: 70/71).

Kohl did neither concretely differentiate between Catholic belief and Christianity as such, nor did he clearly distinguish Judaism. The liberal tradition, which comprised "the basic values of freedom, solidarity and justice, to the inalienable dignity of the human being, to Human Rights," would ultimately rest on "Christian faith" (Kohl 12 February 1964: 230, Kohl 03 October 1982). He referred to Ernest E. Griffith, according to whom the Judeo-Christian religions would serve as the best foundation to maintain democratic institutions and principles, which included: "love for freedom," "participation in social life," "moral cleanliness of public institutions," "voluntary recognition of duty to serve the community, on the part of economic groups," "the assumption that political leadership and administration are public positions of trust," "constructive limitations of passions in the interest of society" and "amicable cooperation of peoples" (Kohl 14 June 1972).

Yet, to him there was "a noteworthy difference in the preconditions" between Catholicism and liberalism: "Catholic Social Teaching is determined by a notion of the person...as a member of a supra-personal, more comprising community," whereas "classical liberalism assumes autonomy and independence of the individual and does not emphasise the social character explicitly" (Kohl March 1975: 113). He therefore wanted to bring religious awareness into liberalism. Kohl declared: "for the CDU the answer to the question about basic values cannot be given positively through the reference to mere factuality of society" as this "would leave the dignity of the person up for negotiation" (Kohl 13 June 1976: 171). He advocated welfare and solidarity as Christian principles, while liberal nationalists believed the social questions in liberal

societies could only be guaranteed by nationalism (see MacCormick 1982, Tamir 1993, Miller 1996).

Kohl elevated the state itself was into a sacred sphere, a transcendental community: “our state is more than a collective of production for material wealth...It is a community of free citizens, a community of the ones alive, the dead ones and the ones coming after us...this is our political and historical contract” (Kohl 12 June 1973: 55). This transcendental patriotic duty could, in Kohl’s view, not be fulfilled by any socialists, whose conception of history would be purely materialistic: “citizens will only be combat-ready...if they are not only convinced by their reason, but also by their heart, by their emotion and if they are convinced by their feeling, this is my Republic” (Kohl 28 April 1979: 15-16). Not a socialist state, but the Christian commandment of the grace of charity and solidarity would most effectively endow co-nationals with mutual social obligation (Kohl 13 June 1976: 172).

Kohl felt that the religious and the national imagining were both on the decline with the sixty-eight movement, and the coming to power of the Social Democratic government in 1969. All this he saw as a movement towards secularisation in the 1970s, against which he sought to react. Although Kohl joyfully noted a “revival of local customs and traditions” after during his Chancellorship in the 1980s (Kohl 18 March 1987: 27), he realised that the challenges of the modern secular world had persisted (Kohl 18 March 1987: 27). His romantic nationalist politics of *Heimat* and *Kulturnation* were not sufficient enough to prevent people from fearing a loss of security, to solve the “tension between continuity and progress, between traditional and modern values” that came about in the course of secularisation (Kohl 18-03-1987: 7). He perceived the Churches and religious communities as central in solving this problem (Kohl 18 March 1987: 9). Religion was necessary to avoid dangerous feeling of angst that emerged out of “faithless cultural scepticism” (Kohl 12 February 1984: 231). Instead, optimism was needed: “Help us, that not pessimism, but the belief in the future of our country – deriving from our trust in God – determines our actions. That is lived Patriotism in 1984!” (Kohl 12 February 1984: 246).

Hope was needed when unification appeared increasingly unrealisable. Kohl was convinced that “especially the German wants unity” (Kohl 1975: 129). When the

Pope visited Germany in 1980, Kohl affirmed: “As a Pole, he knows what it means when the *Heimat* is violently cut up. He however also knows that an unflinching consciousness of national unity proves stronger than any political power” (Kohl 10 November 1980). Like John Paul II (2005), Kohl saw the universal principle national self-determination as something that went beyond its international legality. It was directly linked to the *natural* willingness and obligation for unity of all peoples: “That is a piece of normality in the life of peoples” (Kohl 28 April 1979: 14-15).

Although Kohl desired to maintain regional, national, ethnic and religious demarcations, his Catholic nationalism had somewhat poly-centric tendencies that ensured a relative degree of tolerance, which was again a principle demanded by liberal nationalists: “For the Christian in any case, patriotism means the attitude not only towards the own fatherland, but always also means the respect of the love of fatherland of the neighbour and thus the rejection of any form of national arrogance” (Kohl 26 September 1992: 427). Kohl’s genuine European identity suggested at least some elements of authenticity within this rhetoric. As with Adenauer, the underlying source of Kohl’s Europeanness was a Catholic background. Similar to Germany, Europe, the European Community (EC) were for Kohl primarily cultural and “spiritual-moral” notions based on a long Christian tradition (Kohl 1973: 62, *General-Anzeiger* 19-09-1977, Kohl: 31 October 1991: 373). Catholic symbols in his home region, such as the Speyer Cathedral, were to him simultaneously German and European *lieux de memoire* (Kohl 2004: 25). “The Roman-German Kaisers,” who once resided in the Palatinate “did not rule over a nation-state, but over an early house of Europe, which reached from Sicily to the North Sea. They contained the consciousness of the occidental world in themselves, this ancient and Christian *Kulturkreis*” (Kohl 2004: 26). Kohl consciously used the principle of subsidiarity taken from Catholic Social Teaching to explain European identity. Catholic, Christian, Western, European, national and local identities were all mutually constitutive in Kohl’s mindset (Kohl 27 October 1992: 442, 444). While each European nation had its own cultural core, they would share the common religious and therefore cultural heritage that had to be revived in public consciousness by the Church and politics (Kohl 23 June 1991: 360, 26 September 1992: 418).

If Adenauer was Germany's prophet of the revival of Christian Europeanism in the post-war epoch, Kohl was his messenger towards the end of the century (*FAZ* 17-9-1989). The fall of communism in the East and the German reunification had, in Kohl's view, proven that Christian heritage was stronger than any political constraints (Kohl 2007: 579). Kohl grasped this moment as a great chance for a re-Christianisation (21 June 1991: 368-369). As much as the atheist ideology had banned East Germans from their "real" national heritage, it had hindered Europeans in the East from their real Europeaness. Communism was anti-Christian, thus non-Western, hence un-European, and therefore non-German (Kohl 02 April 1985, Kohl 23 June 1991: 361). At the same time, Kohl romanticised the diversity of European culture and Christian variety across the continent and demanded to "draw an ecumenical bow from the monasteries and chapels of Ireland to the churches and cathedrals of Kiev and Moscow" (Kohl 21 June 1991: 369). In Kohl's nationalism, religion served as both a factor of integration as well as political demarcation.

Conclusion

Religion constitutes an underlying factor in the analysis of Kohl's nationalism, which was not *Ersatzreligion* but legitimised on Christian grounds. Catholicism shifted toward the centre of power in the Federal Republic under Adenauer. Catholics then were no longer second-class citizens and leaders such as Adenauer and Kohl sought to impart an official notion of Germany as integrated into Europe and the West on the basis of a common pre-national Christian heritage and to promote a transcendental interpretation of constitutional democracy and the "social market economy" as based on Catholic Social Teaching. With the division of Germany and the rise of Christian Democracy, Catholicism succeeded the alleged Protestant trajectory of the failed Reich and presented itself as a counter force against the Communist threat within the context of the Cold War. Communism was portrayed as equally evil and atheist as the Nazi apostasy from God. Kohl used his Catholic background to falsify and relativise national history by displaying Catholics as victims of the accidental terror under Hitler and within an otherwise glorious German tradition that reached back to the Christendom's pre-national legacy and the romantic memory of the Holy Roman Empire.

This biographical approach to nationalism thus offers more general conclusions, which seem to be worth further exploration. It reveals that religion cannot be ignored as a parameter in structuralist, idealist, and elitist accounts in Nationalism Studies: First, religion may be a reason to exclude groups from the official national culture and thus cause socio-political advantages/disadvantages. In times of crisis the role allocation between religious groups in national culture can change. Second, religion can have a strong effect on political ideology, national myth-making and the interpretation of national history. Notions of the same nations and states can be dependent on the religious groups they accommodate and can vary amongst them. Third, the religion of political actors may influence their foreign policy performance and official interpretations of the meaning of liberal rights and institutions in allegedly secular states.

References

Hayes, C. (1926). "Nationalism as Religion." In *Essays on Nationalism*. New York, Macmillan.

---. (1960). *Nationalism: A Religion*. New York: Macmillan.

John Paul II (2005). *Memory and Identity: Personal Reflections*. London, Weidenfeld & Nicolson.

Kohl, H. (1956). *Die politische Entwicklung in der Pfalz und da Wiedererstehen der Parteien nach 1945*. PhD dissertation in History at Ruprecht-Karls-University of Heidelberg. Unpublished. Hanover: Bibliothek des Niedersächsischen Landtags.

---. (29 August 1964). Rheinland-Pfalz im neuen Europa. 12th Assembly of the CDU Rhineland-Palatinate in Trier (28-30 August 1964). Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung/Kohl/Reden.

---. (14 June 1972). Chancen und Ziele Christlicher Politik. Draft manuscript for a discussion at the Catholic Office in Bonn. Archive Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung/Kohl/Speeches .

----. (1973). *Zwischen Ideologie und Pragmatismus*. Stuttgart, Bonn Aktuell.

---. (12 June 1973). "Aufbruch in die Zukunft." Speech at the 21st Federal Assembly of the CDU in Bonn. In Hintze, Peter & Gerd Langguth. Eds. (1993). *Helmut Kohl. Der Kurs der CDU*. 37-55. Stuttgart, DTV.

---. (8 December 1973). "Verfassung und Nation als Auftrag der Unionspolitik." Speech at the Catholic Academy in Munich. In Hintze, P. & G. Langguth. Eds. (1993). *Helmut Kohl. Der Kurs der CDU*. 56-67. Stuttgart, DTV.

---. (23 May 1974). “Das Grundgesetz – Verfassung der Freiheit.” Speech at the *Paulskirche* in Frankfurt. In Hintze, P. & G. Langguth. Eds. (1993). *Helmut Kohl. Der Kurs der CDU*. 68-78. Stuttgart, DTV.

---. (March 1975). “Unabhängig aber partnerschaftlich kooperieren.” Interview with the *Herder Korrespondenz*. In Hintze, P. & G. Langguth. Eds. (1993). *Helmut Kohl. Der Kurs der CDU*. 99-117. Stuttgart, DTV.

---. (1975). “Die Intellektuellen und die CDU.” Article originally appeared in *Sonde*, 8(1). Reprinted in Hintze, P. & G. Langguth. Eds. (1993). *Helmut Kohl. Der Kurs der CDU*. 118-133. Stuttgart, DTV.

---. (10 April 1976). “Wir kämpfen für Freiheit und Menschenrechte.” Speech at a rally of the *Junge Union* in Gelsenkirchen. In Hintze, Peter & Gerd Langguth. Eds. (1993). *Helmut Kohl. Der Kurs der CDU*. 154-163. Stuttgart, DTV.

---. (13 June 1976). “Freiheit, Solidarität, Gerechtigkeit, Grundlage und Auftrag unserer Politik.” Speech at the Catholic Academy in Hamburg. In Hintze, Peter & Gerd Langguth. Eds. (1993). *Helmut Kohl. Der Kurs der CDU*. 164-174. Stuttgart, DTV.

---. (22 February 1979). Kohl in the broadcast of *Zweites Deutsches Fernsehen*, “Bürger Fragen - Politiker Antworten” with Reinhard Appel in Den Haag. Archive: Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung/Kohl/Interview.

---. (13 October 1982). First Policy Statement as Federal Chancellor. “Koalition der Mitte: Für eine Politik der Erneuerung.” In *Reden 1982-1984* (1984) Bonn: Presse- und Informationsamt der Bundesregierung. 9-48.

---. (12 February 1984). “Christliche Verantwortung für eine menschliche Zukunft.” Speech at the 26th Federal Assembly of the Protestant Working Group of the CDU/CSU in Wuppertal. In Hintze, Peter & Gerd Langguth. Eds. (1993). *Helmut Kohl. Der Kurs der CDU*. 228-246. Stuttgart, DTV.

---. “Kontinuität und Fortschritt.” Speech at Deutscher Bankentag. *BPA Bulletin* (2 April 1985): 313-317.

---. (18 March 1987). Preserving Creation, Mastering the Tasks of the Future. Government Policy 1987-1990. Policy Statement by the Government of the Federal Republic of Germany. Bonn, Press and Information Office (in English).

---. (28 May 1987). “Die ethischen Grundlagen der demokratischen Ordnung.” Speech at the Assembly of Lawyers in Hamburg. In *Reden zu Fragen der Zukunft*. 107-120. Bonn, Presse- und Informationsdienst.

---. (23 June 1991). “Christen in Verantwortung fuer Europa.” Speech at the 57th *Katholikentag* of the diocese Speyer in Johanniskreuz. In Hintze, P. & G. Langguth. Eds. *Helmut Kohl. Der Kurs der CDU*. 355-370. Stuttgart, DTV.

---. (31 October 1991). “Die Idee Europa – Die Zukunft des Kontinents.” Speech at a congress on Europe of the CDU in Frankfurt/Oder. In Hintze, P. & G. Langguth. Eds. *Helmut Kohl. Der Kurs der CDU*. 371-379. Stuttgart, DTV.

---. (27 October 1992). “Wir gewinnen mit Europa.” Speech at the 3rd Assembly of the CDU in Dusseldorf. In Hintze, P. & G. Langguth. Eds. *Helmut Kohl. Der Kurs der CDU*. 430-448. Stuttgart, DTV.

---. *Erinnerungen. 1930-82*. Volume 2. München, Droemer.

---. (2005). *Erinnerungen. 1982-90*. Volume 2. München, Droemer.

MacCormick, N. (1982). “Nation and Nationalism.” In *Legal Right and Social Democracy*. Oxford, Clarendon Press.

Smith, A. (2003). *Chosen Peoples*. Oxford University Press.

Tamir, Y. (1993). *Liberal Nationalism*. Princeton University Press.