EEA RESOURCES

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NATIONALISM, POPULISM, POLITICS AND IDENTITY

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Introduction: what is the issue?

At a time when many in Europe are engaging in identity politics[1] it is very important for Christians to have a proper understanding of their own identity, and an awareness of how they should think, pray and engage with political matters. This is particularly the case when the temptation to react to the challenges of liberalism and Islam by behaving as yet another group engaging in identity politics is all too evident.

Populism is a neutral term. Its dictionary definition is "support for the concerns of ordinary people[2]." Similarly, nationalism assumes a variety of forms. There are examples in European history when a nationalist movement has sought to liberate a people from oppression, but also times when a nationalist ideology has brought division and conflict. We need therefore to know how to discern whether a populist or nationalist movement can be supported by us as Christians, and when we need to be prepared to challenge an unjust and potentially dangerous nationalist agenda.

The key concepts of populism are 'the people,' 'the elite,' 'the will of the people,' and 'enemies of the people.' Populism can be linked to the radical right or the radical left. When it is linked to the radical right, it generally assumes a nativist ideology (the idea that states should be inhabited exclusively by members of the native group and that non-native elements are threatening). Issues are raised that have been kept off the agenda by mainstream parties, typically immigration, globalisation and European integration. When it is

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[1] The appearance of exclusive political groups based on nationality, religion, race, social background etc., replacing traditional broad-based party politics.

[2] Oxford English Dictionary

linked to the radical left, it shares the key concepts of populism, but generally assumes a socialist ideology opposing liberal economics and austerity policies. As this paper is concerned with toxic nationalism, it will focus exclusively on populism linked to the radical right.

Populist movements tend to attract those left behind both economically and culturally by a liberal agenda and liberalism's rejection of traditional values. The main danger is that populist movements divide society into a good 'us' the real people, and a bad, or even evil 'other.' In defining who is the 'us' and who is the 'other' in many European nations, religious identities play an important role. A common populist call for a return to the religious heritage of a nation is more often to do with a sense of belonging than belief, a restoration to a native religious identity with traditions and symbols but without any spiritual content.

Nationalism has no clear definition. Historically ethnic struggles for cultural and political self-determination, particularly against colonial domination have been considered sympathetically. But ethnic nationalism is open to idolatry if supreme loyalty is required by the state, the people, or the race, and it has all too frequently led to xenophobia and conflict. Definitions of populism and nationalism and the characteristics of populist and nationalist movements are considered in Appendix 1.

Christian assessments of modern nationalist movements

In the context of considerations of Scottish Identity, Storrar (1990, p.131) maintains that there are three assumptions to the biblical model of the relationship between church and nation. First, what he calls the pluralist assumption, that the church, nations and Kingdom of God operate as three distinct but related communities in a set of relationships determined by the biblical story of salvation. These relationships cannot be confused without harm to each of them. Secondly, an incarnational assumption that it is only through Jesus Christ that the holy nation of the Church finds its identity. That identity cannot be reduced to the nationhood of the communities among which it lives, otherwise the Church would be merely a national and not a Christian institution. Thirdly, the missionary assumption, that church and nation will always be two separate communities with a missional relationship, and not one community with a common identity, thereby excluding any sense of a need for mission to the nation. In Storrar's view, if these three assumptions are missing, there is a crisis in the relationship between a particular church and nation.

Storrar argues that a Christian approach to culture that is faithful to Christ's own example will adapt to changing cultural contexts (p.163). This means that at some times in the history of a nation, Christians may be able to affirm many aspects of the culture in which they live. At others, Christians may be called to separate from aspects of culture because of their primary and overriding loyalty to Christ. In most situations, Christians must seek to transform culture in the light of the gospel. To determine the appropriate response, it is necessary to discern what is happening in the nation, and apply to it the demands of faithfulness to Christ. As Reimer says (2015, p.77) the Church of Christ will stand against a sinful and corrupted culture, but accept and affirm aspects of culture that are in alignment with God's Word. Further comments on the biblical approach to nations and identity are set out in Appendix 2.

The failure to maintain a distinction between our loyalty to Christ and the culture within which we live out our calling as a holy people, has led to situations where Christianity has served as an agent rather than a critic of nationalism. This was evident in the Lutheran Church in Germany during the 1930s when German Christians, religious nationalists, aligned the Christian faith and Church to Nazi ideology, including its anti-Semitic elements. It was against this nationalist [captivity of the Church] that Bonhoeffer and Barth signed the Barmen Declaration in May 1934, confessing the Church's supreme loyalty to Jesus Christ. Unfortunately a false link between church and state is also a feature of many nationalist ideologies in contemporary Europe, potentially affecting every geographical area and major denomination. As Goudzwaard warns, (1981, pp. 39-48), any nation which claims a Christian heritage can fall into the trap of a nationalist ideology

through a selective reading of the Bible. Where there is a sense of threat, which may come from a secular humanist or Islamist ideology, there is a temptation to link up with an extreme ideology and call for strong leadership in the hope of restoring national pride and identity. But where the main concern of this ideology is to preserve national interests, and those national interests dictate what is good and just, a nationalist ideology is at work, and the nation has become an idol. It is, therefore, important to set appropriate boundaries to nationalism.

In the context of Canada, and the movement for an independent Quebec, Christians have attempted to consider where those boundaries should be drawn. Their starting point was the need to have a respect for the community to which we belong and which provides us with the context in which we develop as human beings. Cultural identity is both good and necessary, giving people a sense of belonging, but it is important to remember that it has for Christian's limited autonomy. If nationalism becomes an absolute and autonomous loyalty it becomes an idol, destructive rather than protective of humanity.

The Quebec Roman Catholic bishops therefore put forward the following conditions: for them, a nationalist movement is ethically acceptable only if it advocates a more just society, respects minorities, intends to cooperate with its neighbours, and refuses to regard the nation as the highest good (Baum, 2001,p.108). Others added that a nationalist movement should open the door to cultural and human renewal. If it has developed as a reaction to an oppressive or alienating regime, it should help people to discover their identity and freedom, and support a culture within which people can discover their vocation (Grand'Maison cited by Baum, 1970, pp.107, 183-4). In this way, it avoids the danger that a nationalist movement, possibly born out of an experience of oppression, fails to pursue justice and reconciliation, and a cycle of oppression and violence continues.

More recently, in France La Commission d'Éthique Protestante Évangélique wrote an open letter to Christians voting or tempted to vote for the Front National. The letter suggests that they were motivated by anger with mainstream parties' increasingly liberal agenda, by concern about the impact on French society of an increase in the number of refugees, and by fear of Islam. The Commission emphasised the incompatibility with the gospel of a movement that responds to challenges with hatred (Lettre ouverte à nos frères et soeurs évangélique qui votent Front National, 11/12/15).

In the Netherlands, Stegeman and Verheij responded to the attempts by certain politicians to hijack Christian culture, by reaffirming the primary loyalty of Christians to follow Christ and work for His eternal Kingdom. Christian culture is not to be mobilised as a political force or reduced to a political programme. Furthermore, the Christian gospel is an invitation to all and is not compatible with rejection of peoples or groups, or a lack of compassion. It is to be a blessing to all peoples (Appendix 3 a translation by Jeff Fountain).

Questions to consider
when considering nationalist and populist movements

In the context of nationalist movements in Europe, some helpful questions to ask ourselves are:

1. As our starting point, do we have a proper understanding of our identity in Christ; that this is our primary loyalty, and that it is on that basis that we approach our culture and our nation?

2. Are we certain that the movement or party does not call for absolute loyalty? Is the party's ideology compatible with our primary loyalty to Christ?

3. If a political movement has arisen in response to a sense of injustice or oppression, does it accurately identify the issues, and does it propose a solution that is achievable and that would contribute to the wellbeing of the whole community? Or does it stir up a sense of victimhood, grievance, and blame against other groups in society?

4. Will it contribute to human flourishing, a respect for culture and a sense of identity and belonging for all?

5. Does it respect democracy, the rights of representation and access to justice for all[3]?

6. Does it respect the rights and needs of minorities, and enable them to participate in the society?

7. Will it respect the rights of asylum seekers and attempt to integrate immigrants?

8. Does it advocate sustainable economic development, and protection for the vulnerable and poor?

9. Does it intend to build good relationships with neighbouring countries, and respect for other cultures?

Conclusion

Christians have an overriding loyalty to Christ. But we live out our calling in the context of a nation and culture. Provided we recognise that it has a limited autonomy, the nation can provide for us a positive sense of belonging and community. However, at any time we need to be discerning as to the aspects of our nation and culture that can be affirmed by us, and those that must be challenged in the light of the character of God as revealed in the biblical narrative. It is vital at a time of rising nationalism in Europe that the claims and ideology of political movements and parties be examined carefully and in faithfulness to Christ. We should not be misled or manipulated by references to 'Christian values' or 'Christian heritage.' If these 'Christian' values and programmes are not consistent with the character of our Lord and His Word, they must be challenged.

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[3] The rule of law, applying equally to all, is an important aspect of democracy. It is protected by an independent judiciary to which all citizens should have access.

Appendix 1

What is nationalism?

One of the difficulties is the lack of any agreement on a clear definition of nationalism. Secular commentators have put forward a variety of distinctions between nationalism and patriotism, or types of nationalism, to distinguish between what is acceptable and what is not. There is also much disagreement about the historical roots of nationalism. Some see it as dating from the French Revolution or the development of German Romanticism, while others trace it back to the Reformation or even earlier in the medieval period.

Professor Seton-Watson concluded that a nation is any community of people that perceives itself to be a nation (1977). Leaders of independence movements frequently rely on a distinction between ethnic nationalism and civic nationalism, made popular by Ignatieff. Civic nationalism, which Ignatieff considers to be acceptable, holds that a nation should be composed of all those regardless of ethnicity who subscribe to the nation's political creed, irrespective of race, colour or religion (1993, pp.1-4,189). According to this view what holds a nation together is not its common roots, but the rule of law.

Ethnic nationalism, according to Ignatieff, finds that national belonging is the overriding form of belonging, based on the people's pre-existing ethnic characteristics; their language, religion, customs and tradition. The peoples of Europe living under imperial subjection in the 19th Century looked to this for inspiration and it is currently gaining ground in many European countries. However, Ignatieff warns that the more strongly there is a sense of belonging to one's own group, however, the more hostile, the more violent, the feelings towards outsiders, the "other" (1993, pp.6,189).

However, this neat distinction does not accord with reality. It is a fact that even nations based on common citizenship do remember the ethnic tradition that has shaped them in the past (Baum, 2001, pp.120-121). Furthermore, ethnic nationalist struggles against colonial domination have been considered sympathetically in Africa and Asia. The United Nations Covenant on Civil and Political Rights 1966 recognises the right of nations and people to cultural and political self-determination.

Nationalism was responsible both for multiple claims to sovereignty which caused conflict and war in the ethno-federal setting of the former Yugoslavia, but also liberated states and united people in a common cause in the revolutions of 1989 in the Baltic Republics and Central and Eastern Europe. These were not just rebellions against illegitimate regimes, but also nationalist revolutions against Soviet domination (Bunce, 2005, p.412)

On the other hand, it is evident that this type of ethnic nationalism is open to idolatry, requiring loyalty to the state, the people and the race, the motherland, the fatherland, King and country (Storrar, p.111; Spencer, 2016, pp.36-37). Even in those states where the initial struggle was viewed positively, nations affirming their identity can be tempted by self-absorption, narrowness of spirit and xenophobia (Baum, 2001, p.90). The position is complicated in multicultural states by the fact that ethnicity may be fluid and many people now have more than one ethnic identity (Joireman, 2003, pp.31-32). Christians must consider carefully what aspects of nationalism they are able to affirm. Secular definitions of nationalism do not give us a clear distinction, but the biblical narrative has much to say on the subject.

What is populism?

The Oxford English dictionary definition of populism is neutral: populism is "support for the concerns of ordinary people." The difficulty of definition is that most leaders do not self-identify as populist; it is a negative label given to them by academics and media. Politically populism has been linked to the radical right or left. It is a "thin" ideology which means that it is almost always linked to one or more other ideologies, nativism (the idea that states should be inhabited exclusively by members of the native group and

that non-native elements are fundamentally threatening to the homogeneous nation state) on the right, and socialism on the left. (Mudde, C. 17/2/2016). Its key concepts are notions of 'the people', the 'elite' and the 'will of the people.' Supporters argue that populism constitutes the essence of democratic politics (Mudde and Kaltwasse, 2013 pp. 500-506), and that it is liberalism, and the liberal elite, that is the problem. Populist ideology frequently brings to the fore issues that many people care about, but which have been kept off the agenda by cross party consensus, for example, immigration, austerity, globalisation, and European integration. It frequently attracts those that have been left behind not just economically, but also culturally by liberal democracy's rejection of traditional values (Inglehart and Norris, August, 2016).

Populism's main danger, according to opponents, is that it is a moralist ideology that rejects any division of interests or opinions within "the people." It rejects the legitimacy of opponents and weakens the rights of minorities. This uncompromising stand leads to a polarised political culture, dividing the people into a good "us" and a bad, or even, evil, "them" (Marzouki and McDonnell, 2016, p.2). Mudde calls it 'an illiberal democratic response to undemocratic liberalism.' (Mudde, C. 17/2/2015). In European populist radical right parties there is a close connection with nationalism and authoritarianism (Mudde, 2007, The xenophobic nature of much of current European populism comes from a concept of the nation that relies on an ethnic and chauvinistic definition of the people, and rejects the multicultural nature of many modern European societies (Mudde and Kaltwasser, 2013, p.502

In defining who is the 'us' and who the 'other,' religious identities often play an important role. The populists' use of religion is more about belonging than belief; frequently they are focused on a restoration to a native religious identity with traditions and symbols, without any spiritual content. This ideology calls for a battle against the elites who disregard the importance of religious heritage, and against 'others' in society, allegedly seeking to impose their religious values and laws on the native population. These 'others' are usually immigrants, particularly Muslims. Both groups are 'enemies of the people' (Marzouki and McDonnell, 2016, p.2). Most populist leaders and parties pay lip service to Christianity in order to reject Islam (Roy, O, 2016, p.186). For Christian believers, Roy argues, Christian identity without a Christian faith does not make sense, and there are serious differences in Europe between church leaders and populists on values such as attitude to ethnic minorities and foreigners, immigration, and aid to the developing world. Populists may be pro-Israel, while not supporting the rights of European Jews. In Europe, some populists are fairly liberal on sexual issues. They tend to promote a Christian identity for Europe, while further secularising the public space (Roy, O., 2016, p.196-9). Roy argues that the challenge now is for the Churches to reaffirm their spiritual message as a universal message, without allowing it to add "further fuel to the populist fire."

Appendix 2

A Biblical view of nations

In the Old Testament, the nations of the earth are viewed as part of God's providential ordering of human societies. They emerge after the fall and are mentioned for the first time in Genesis 10 and 11 (Storrar, 1990, p.112). Although nations are not mentioned in the Creation story, the diversity of nations within the unity of humanity is described as part of God's creative purpose, and of the structuring of social relationships for which humans were made (Deut. 32.8; Acts 17.26; Wright, C., 2004, p.214). Yahweh exercises legitimate governance over all the nations and peoples of the world, and the gods they worship. They must come to accept His rule, which is characterised, by equity, righteousness and truth; any imagined autonomy of political power is rejected (Psalm 2; Kidner, 1973, p.51; Psalm 96.5-10; Broyles, 1999, pp.375-7; Brueggemann, 1999, p.492 ;). This is articulated more fully in Genesis 9.8-11.30 in a passage preceding the election of Israel as Yahweh's preferred and privileged partner (Brueggeman, pp.492-4). Kidner notes (1967, p.104) that not every nation known to the Old Testament is enrolled in Gen. 10, but enough are present to make the point that humanity, for all its diversity, is one under the one Creator. The Noahic covenant applies to all the nations (Genesis 1.28, reiterated in Gen. 9.1,7). It was intended that all nations bound together, should live under Yahweh's life giving covenant. The future envisaged for them was one in which there would be an end of hostility and barriers, the building up of common worship, all submitting to a God who is larger than their own state ideology, under a rule of shared shalom (Brueggemann, 1999, pp. 493,521). Inclusion is seen as God's ultimate aim (Is. 2:3-4; Motyer, 1999, pp. 51-52; Is. 56.7; Motyer, p.351).

However, in Gen. 11.1-9, the nations are seen in a negative light. The result of the pride and arrogance (which, Kidner says, could be the motto of modern nationalism) exhibited in the building of the tower of Babel, with its stairway to heaven, is expressed in the discipline of the Lord, resulting in division and mutual incomprehension (Kidner, 1967, pp.109-110). The blessed state of the family of humanity, characterised by unity and coherence, has been transformed into a relationship of vexation, alienation and insecurity (Brueggeman, 1999, p.494; Storrar, 1990, p.113). Storrar, citing Barth (1961, Section 54.3), notes that it is important to hold together these two different views of the nations: the positive aspect of diversity of cultures in response to the divine command in Gen. 9.1, and the negative aspect of fragmentation and division as a result of judgment, remembering that both the command and judgment were given to the whole of humanity. The nations are the communities that arise in the course of human history, now affected by sin, but also upheld by both the blessing and judgment of God's sovereign rule over human life on earth. It is through the diversity of nations, languages and countries that humanity now fulfils its cultural mandate. But it is through the alienating differences that God restrains sin (Storrar, p. 114), and prevents the limitless potential for evil of a unified and fallen human race (Wright, C., 2004, p. 216).

In God's story, the focus is on building a community to serve God's purposes. The call to Israel is not based on cultural, ethnic, territorial and military grounds, unlike the gentile nations, but on the spiritual ground of God's election covenant and law. Israel was to be a holy nation, and through its faithfulness to God's Word, all nations were to come to know God and His Torah, the command to love God and neighbour (Brueggemann, 1999, pp.494-6; Storrar, 1990, pp.114-116). However, Israel struggled with this national identity, and repeatedly wanted to be a nation like the others, with its identity based on the images of kingship and pagan worship. In the fullness of time, God would send to Israel His chosen servant who would hear and fulfil God's word not only for Israel but for all the nations of the earth (John 1.1,2,18; Tasker, 1960, pp. 41-2, 44-9; Luke 24.45-47; Morris, 1974, p.343; Storrar, p.118).

The final reversal of the Lord's discipline of the nations in Gen. 11, is promised in Zephaniah 3.9. (Kidner, 1967, p.110) when from among all the nations a people would be assembled who call on the name of the Lord for salvation (Palmer Robertson, 1990, pp. 326-328). So, in Pentecost, a new chapter of the story is

opened, in the articulating of one gospel in many tongues (Acts 2; Kidner, 1967, p.110) and the inclusion of both Jew and Gentile, commissioned to be God's new community. Through the Word of the crucified Jesus, all the barriers of Babel were to be broken down, as the Word makes all nations into one people of God (Storrar, 1990, p.122). Christian identity meant sharing with Christ in kingship, being a holy nation, called for the purpose of proclaiming God's character (1 Pet. 2.1-10; Stibbs and Walls, 1959, p.104).

For those in Christ, the law which maintains ethnic boundary lines and social and gender distinctions has no relevance to their new identity, one rooted in and defined by Christ (Gals. 3.28; 1 Cor. 12.13; Col. 3.11; Jervis, 1999, p.107). Paul says that old distinctions cease to be relevant to their standing before God or one another. But this is not to say that every aspect of human identity becomes irrelevant for all purposes. Paul is still aware of himself as a Jewish Christian (Romans 11.1-6; Cranfield, 1985, pp. 266-270), but it is not the basis of his status in the Christian family. Every situation in which the church is divided along ethnic or cultural lines is therefore condemned and the passion for the unity of the church, welcoming to the alien and the stranger is explained, (Wright, 2002, pp.42-3).

The final mention of the nations is in Rev. 7.9, in which people of every tribe and language, people and nation will bring their wealth and their praises into the city of God, and in Rev. 21 and 22, where there is a threefold reference to the nations. First, they will walk by the light of Christ; secondly, the glory and honour of the nations will be brought into the New Jerusalem, symbol of God's new creation; thirdly, the tree of life within the city will have leaves for the healing of the nations. The witness of the church is intended to bring about the conversion of the nations. The mixing of references to covenant people and all nations in Revelation 21 brings together the Old Testament promises for the destiny of God's own people and the universal hope, in the Old Testament, that all the nations will become God's people. The history of the covenant people – both of Israel, and of the church which is redeemed from all the nations, will find its eschatological fulfilment in the full inclusion of all the nations (Wright, 2011, pp.198-199; Bauckman, 1993, p. 138-139), contributing the richness of multi-cultural life and diversity (Wright, p. 57; Wright, C. 2004, p.215; Storrar, p. 125). God's people are called to a dual nationality in which they live out their eternal Christian identity within the provisional community and identity of their nationhood, seeking to transform it according to the Word of God, and thereby inaugurating the Kingdom of God (Storrar, 1990, p.124).

Appendix 3

Flirting with Christian culture March 13, 2017 Weekly Word, by Jeff Fountain

Concerned with how some politicians have been using the Christian tradition as a stick to chase migrants away from Europe during the Dutch elections, two theologians recently drafted a manifesto now signed by many other theologians, church leaders, publishers, broadcasters and prominent believers.

Janneke Stegeman, 'theologian of the fatherland', and Alain Verheij, self-styled 'theologian of twitterland', noted the flirtatious behaviour of politicians towards Christian culture. While appreciating the renewed interest in politics in 'our beautiful tradition', they wanted to clarify some points to these politicians before they could see how much common ground they shared.

Freely translated, their manifesto (which inspired parts of last week's *weekly word*) reads:

1. Bosom pals we will never be (fortunately).
A church is not a political party, a political party is not a church. That's why we have the separation of church and state. When those two sit on each other's laps, you get a political or religious dictatorship, where neither God nor the people, but only those in positions of power, are well served.
Whether the election results swing left or right, the church will always steer its own course. And she will not be afraid to be critical of the government where the gospel would require. In the Bible, the best prophets lived far away from the palace for everyone's sake.

2. God's kingdom is not from here.
Christians are not to follow politicians like sheep. Their kingdom is not from here; their king is not of this earth. You may call it 'otherworldly', head-in-the-clouds, super-spiritual or even dangerous to the state (because Jesus had no message to Caesar).
We see it a little differently.
We will always use our hands and words to create a better version of the land on which we stand.
We will always work towards this promised kingdom on earth in the country where we live.
We will always seek connection with our neighbours.
And yet the fact remains that it is impossible to mobilise Christian culture as a political force.
Our kingdom is an outrageous utopia – too radical for the compromise of your coalitions, too embracing for your borders, too demanding for responsible policy makers.

3. 'Christian' is an invitation, not a rejection.
Anyone may belong to the Christian culture: Jew, Gentile, woman, man, slave, king.
So said the apostle Paul, one of our founders.
This Christian Jew with a Roman passport wrote that in Greek.
You don't become a Christian by race or birth or because of your history; but rather by the gracious adoption of a loving heavenly father.
This invitational character is deeply rooted in the Christian culture.
Everywhere the term 'Christian' is used, it needs to sound a welcome.
Excluding whole groups while calling yourself a Christian is not an option within our tradition.
Even if that person is regarded as a competitor or as a threat.
'Love your enemy' is a rule of thumb that we have wonderfully (sometimes painfully) learned from our Lord himself.

4. Christian culture is compassion.
Jesus explains who may be called 'Christian' through the story of the sheep and the goats.
The sheep (Christians) are at Jesus' right hand because they feed the hungry, give drink to the thirsty, give a home to the foreigner, give clothes to the naked, and visit the sick and those in prison.

This, more than all creeds, all the church buildings or church history, this is the foundation of all Christian culture: compassion.

Love God above all things and treat one another as you want to be treated – this is the heart of the Law and the Prophets, and so the heart of the Christian tradition.

5. Christian morality is virtually impossible to translate into a political programme.

Those wanting to apply the Sermon on the Mount or other words of Jesus to a political programme will sooner or later start tearing their hair out.

Revenge is subordinated to turning the other cheek!

Forgiveness needs to be repeated *ad infinitum*!

To those demanding something from you, you should not refuse but rather give double!

No politician can convert this into policy!

Realistically, Christian morality is an open invitation for violent opportunists to exploit a defenseless culture.

Century after century, followers of Jesus have said, 'You can't be serious!'

But he was indeed serious enough to put it into practice, to hand himself over to be mocked, spat upon, tortured and crucified. Political flirts should also reckon with the example of the 'first' Christian, Jesus Christ.

6. Finally, we as Christians refuse to be used for this empty campaign rhetoric.

We refuse to be the symbolic stick by which others are being chased away.

The heart of Christianity has compassion beyond borders, is far above local political affairs, and should be 'a blessing to all peoples.'

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