

Plenary Session

MONDAY, JULY 1, 2019 (HOTEL SCANDIC STAR LUND - AUDITORIUM)

Introduction to the Plenary Session:

“Nationalisms and their Effects on Jewish-Christian Relations”

By Dr Pavol Bargár

Dear ladies and gentlemen, dear friends,

The theme of this plenary session is nationalism. In particular, we are going to explore for the next two hours the effects of nationalisms on Jewish-Christian Relations. And indeed, it is very adequate to use the plural form of the word, nationalisms, here as the phenomenon of nationalism finds many and varied expressions and forms around the world, depending on a context. Speaking from a European perspective, there was much fear in certain circles – and, one should add, anticipation in others – that political parties which regard nation as one of the ultimate values would make a significant gain in the recent EU parliamentary elections. Although this did not happen to be the case (thanks to God, as far as I am concerned), nationalism continues to be one of hottest issues today.

But what does this word, nationalism(s), refer to anyway? A Wikipedia definition tells us that “nationalism is an ideology and movement characterized by the promotion of the interests of a particular nation, especially with the aim of gaining and maintaining the nation’s sovereignty (self-governance) over its homeland.” (see Anthony Smith, *Nationalism: Theory, Ideology, History* [Cambridge: Polity, 2010], 9, 25-30). Nationalism is often combined with other ideologies, for example, conservatism or socialism. In practice, it can be seen as negative or positive, depending on context and one’s individual outlook. While it has been a significant driving force in various independence movements, nationalism combined with racial hatred was a key factor in many wars, persecutions, and genocides, most notably the Shoah.

Given the diversified nature of this phenomenon, one is led to ask what unifying elements there are that allow to speak of nationalism as a single category. One possible answer is provided by the late Jewish Polish-British sociologist philosopher Zygmunt Bauman in his last book, *Retrotopia* (Cambridge: Polity, 2017). Here, Bauman argues that in the contemporary world characterized by growing uncertainty, insecurity, and violence, an increasing number of people turn toward an idealized, or even completely imagined, version of the past, rather than toward a construction of a better future, to find security and purpose for their lives. These retrotopic reorientations are by and large typical for their tribal attitudes, with the nationalistic attitude being one of them. Nation, and the sense of belonging to a particular nation, becomes the ultimate value and source of identity. And even though there is essentially nothing wrong with being proud of one’s nation, language, and culture, problems arise when one begins to promote one’s nation at the expense of other nations and groups. In other words, when the “blood and soil” ideology starts gaining the upper hand.

As a Protestant theologian, I often wonder what resources we have in our religious traditions to counter these latter ideologies and sentiments. Speaking from my own Christian tradition, I believe Jesus' words in the Gospels about family represent one example of such resource. Arguably quite harsh – I mean, who would not bury their parents (Lk 9:59-60), who would ask provocative questions about who their mother and brothers are (Matt 12:48), who would hate their family members (Lk 14:26) – these utterances can be taken to challenge the primacy of blood bonds within a clan, a tribe, a nation. Jesus can be interpreted as saying that neither biological givenness nor social constructs are of ultimate importance. All human beings are to be seen first and foremost as members of humankind, created in God's image, and thus in relationship to God and each other.

Admittedly, this is nothing but a single interpretation of a part of the Christian tradition. There certainly are other resources, both from Jewish, Christian, and other traditions. And I am very happy that we can explore some of these resources as well as various issues and topics related to the rubric of nationalism(s) together with the esteemed specialists whom we have on our panel today and who are bringing a variety of perspectives to our discussion, both religiously and internationally. Let me introduce them to you in the order they will speak to us today.

Ms. Hana Bendcowsky lives in Israel where she serves as Director of the Jerusalem Center for Jewish Christian Relations at the Rossing Center for Education and Dialogue. Hana coordinates and teaches in the Center's various educational programs, as well as producing educational materials, consulting and doing advocacy work. On top of that, she is a professional tour educator in Jerusalem leading study tours in the Christian Quarter.

Prof. Mary C. Boys of the USA is Skinner & McAlpin Professor of Practical Theology as well as Vice-President of Academic Affairs and Dean at the Union Theological Seminary in New York City. A long-time participant in various projects on Jewish-Christian (especially Jewish-Catholic) relations, Mary is a member of the Committee on Religion, Ethics, and the Holocaust at the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington, D.C.

Prof. Jesper Svartvik comes from Sweden. He was president of the Swedish Committee Against Antisemitism (2005-2009), first holder of the Krister Stendahl Chair of Theology of Religions (2009-2018), and currently serves as a diocesan theologian in the Church of Sweden diocese of Karlstad. Jesper is also a member of the planning committee for this conference.