

Nationalism in the balance

Thought for the Day

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When I came back from holiday last week, I expected to find Scotland still in the grip of the silly season, but I could not have been more wrong. Of course there were the usual skirmishes about what height this or that flag should fly, but even they were symbolic of a bigger issue.

Yesterday our new First Minister launched his “conversation with the nation” about Scottish independence – by an ironical coincidence, on the same day that Pakistan, the country of origin of one of our largest minorities, celebrates its 60th birthday.

What happened then, with partition from India, should be a reminder of the dual face of nationalism: of course there are all the positive aspects of wanting to assert our own identity, but against those are the very ugly aspects of xenophobia, and ethnic and religious hatred. The continuing violence in Kashmir remains a bloody reminder of the pain of partition, just as much as the unresolved conflict in the Middle East: the same colonial power relinquishing its mandate; the same internecine violence in their wake; the same hatred and bloodshed; the same legacy of accusation and counter-accusation.

We forget all this if we preen ourselves on living in a more civilised time and place. True, the nationalisms that produced the new European states from which our most recent immigrants come seem to have been altogether more peaceful – a succession of “velvet revolutions”. But it’s not so long since the same Europe produced the Nazis and the xenophobic terror of Bosnia – the cloak of European civilisation remains thin and fragile.

– And we mustn’t forget that every nationalism creates new minorities, which can be seen as a present reminder of the former oppressor, and so be an even greater challenge to our humanity.

The portion of the Torah read this week in synagogues throughout the world contains two fundamental rules: first, probably the earliest endorsement of majority decisions; but also the injunction, “Justice – only justice shall you pursue”. The trick for us all – and for nation-builders in particular – is to find the right balance.