CHRISTIANITY AND NATIONALISM
IN THE FIRST CENTURIES OF THE HISTORY
OF THE CHURCH*

In a famous aphorism Huizinga warned us against a mistaken approach in historical research, namely that of serving up morsels from the stew of traditions without due discrimination. The questions which the researcher wants to put to the past need to be sharply defined.

This is certainly good counsel to be taken to heart when we intend to give an account of the relationship between "Christianity and nationalism" in early Church history. Whereas the concept of "Christianity" in our study may be reasonably well defined, this is assuredly not the case with "nationalism". We will, therefore, take as our starting-point, the working hypothesis outlined in the first of this series of lectures; for, while this might eventually need revision, it will meanwhile provide the researcher concerned with tracking down the facts with a very useful divining rod.

I will, if I may, repeat from that lecture two sentences which form the kernel of the definition. First of all the following definition of the concept of "nation": "a group of people, organised as a self-governing community or at least desiring to be such a community, who feel themselves to be united by the shared experience of a common past and generally also by a measure of homogeneity of language, culture and ancestry and who desire to maintain that unity". And secondly, this definition: "nationalism is the aspiration to maintain one's own nation and to promote its well-being because of the conviction that it represents certain values and has a particular purpose to fulfil".

While it is true, as Smitskamp himself points out, that this concept first became clearly observable only towards the end of the 18th century, and while it is admitted that it is extremely risky at all times and certainly in this instance to rummage around in ancient history with modern problems in mind—studies of social history of antiquity in particular furnish a number of frightful examples—, nevertheless we ought not thereby to be prevented from posing the question: did early Christianity at some point in its development encounter any kind of nationalism, and, if so, what stance was taken towards it?

The question itself is clear and straightforward. The only missing point is a more accurate delineation of "the first centuries". In order to gain a reasonably coherent picture, it seemed sensible to me to limit this investigation to the period which closed with the famous Edict of Milan
(AD 313). There is a measure of unity about this period. After that time great changes occur; Christianity becomes the religion of the emperors; increasingly the Roman empire becomes prey to centrifugal forces; the frontiers of the Empire are no longer capable ofwithstanding the onslaught of the surrounding nations. Rapid disintegration is particularly evident in the West and with it the emergence of all manner of "barbaric nations". It would indeed be fascinating and important to include research into this period from the 4th to the 6th century in our study. One has only to think of the extraordinary way, in which Constantine's emperorship is linked with Messianic ideas in Eusebius, of the nationalistic Roman backlash expressed in the Third Relatio of Symmachus and in the battle over the altar of Victory, of Augustine and his De Civitate Dei, the political bible of later centuries, of the impressive figure of Cassiodorus at the court of Gothic Kings, and of the question whether there is a connection between the currents of nationalism and the emergence of the great sectarian churches of the East. However in view of the time allotted to us and for the sake of clarity we will have to leave all this untouched.

It is interesting to discover that, as far as I know, no substantial study of this specific issue has so far been published. E. L. Woodward's Christianity and Nationalism in the Later Roman Empire (London 1916) deals precisely with that period which we have decided to exclude. Several scattered references may be found in the well-known and well-documented book by C. J. Cadoux but they provide no coherent picture. In this respect it is important to stress once again that we are concerned with the relationship with "nationalism", a theme which is to be clearly distinguished from the relationship between "Church and State" which has of course received ample treatment in connection with the persecution of Christians. We ought also to distinguish it from the relationship between "Christianity and Culture", which moved between the concept of a praeparatio evangelica and the violent rejection aired in Testullian's famous adagium: "What has Athens in common with Jerusalem?" Of course our enquiry is bound to touch on these two issues tangentially but no more than that.

Two further observations in conclusion of these prolegomena. The first is this. Just at the time when this contribution was first delivered as a lecture (March 29th, 1951) an article was published on the same theme written by that expert in the field of Christian antiquity, Erik Peterson. This striking coincidence should not be passed over in silence. Peterson's point of departure is a somewhat different problem, namely the question posed to the early Christians by the co-existence of a wide variety of nations. For this reason the publication of his article has not called for a