

Notes from the U3A Philosophy Group Thursday 20th March 2014

Subject: - Should a nation be defined by language and territory, by ruling party or by faith?

A link to an article with this title by Roger Scruton was circulated prior to the meeting.

These notes start with a précis of the article.

This article looked at the Middle East today in the light of what happened to the remains of the Austro-Hungarian Empire at the end of WW1. Nation states were created whose boundaries reflected language, religion, culture and ethnicity. By contrast the Ottoman Empire was carved up without relation to pre-existing loyalties.

Turkey is given as one of the few cases where this worked. Atatürk turned the heart of the empire into a modern state on the European model. Elsewhere many people identified themselves in religious rather than national terms. The result of imposing national boundaries on these people resulted in the kind of chaos seen in Iraq and Syria.

Europeans define themselves in national terms. Such an idea is anathema to Muslims. The word Islam means submission.

Atatürk established a new civil code, based on European precedents and a constitution severing connections with Islamic law. Citizens were to identify themselves first as a Turk and only then as a Muslim. Erdogan has recently taken a step back towards old Islamic values. He is not happy with a constitution that puts patriotism above piety. In Turkey opposition is now becoming dangerous.

Egypt's influential leader Sayyid Qutb denounced the idea of a secular state and was executed by President Nasser, who came to power in a military coup. Since then the Muslim Brotherhood and the Army have played against each other.

Scruton finishes by saying that Islamic jurisprudence originally permitted adaptation to the changing needs of society, but that this ceased in the 8th Century. The introduction of Sharia Law today risks imposing a system unable to adapt to the changing circumstances of human life. Secular law adapts, religious law endures. The only question is "who are we?" What way of defining ourselves reconciles democratic elections with real opposition and individual rights?

Roger Scruton is an English philosopher who specialises in aesthetics.

Thoughts about boundaries

Many boundaries were artificial. Some being straight lines drawn on a map by people that had not been to the area. India and Pakistan were treated in the same way as the Middle East.

Many nations were founded artificially

Crimea is a current example of these problems, with divided allegiances

Germany didn't attack Switzerland. Was this because of the geography or because they wanted a safe haven?

Thoughts about laws and government

How do we know which laws are God's and which man's?

Man made laws because we needed a moral standard

People are governed by the powerful

When governed by religious laws there is no possibility of discussion

You can't impose democracy

Under the Soviet system there was a commanding officer and a political officer

We will end up as small city states, individual entities. Only in that way can people work efficiently

Just when you think it's getting better, another dictator emerges

All dictators, who have been cruel to their people, eventually fall

Thoughts about customs

Different things offend people from different backgrounds

The young in some traditions are turning back to old ways, such as head scarves

Thoughts about religion

Many beliefs concur that you should treat others as you wish to be treated
All religions are fragmented. The key is tolerance and negotiation
Why do people accept religious laws to govern their lives?
Some do not know that there is an alternative, with no access to mass media.
Religion is a good way of controlling people
Many people whose lives are down trodden and miserable turn to religion
There is talk of a religious gene
Religion gives a sense of security and identity
Without religion the world would be in chaos
Much of the chaos in the world seems to be caused by religion
Buddhism is a peaceful religion but its priest have killed Muslims
The movement of people has diluted religions
The Archbishop of Canterbury has been attacking the state in the same way as Ayatollahs
The Queen, who is the head of the Church of England, must give assent to any Act of Parliament.
Bishops sit in the House of Lords
Religious laws are a case of conscience
Some religious laws were to do with hygiene such as ritual slaughter and separating meat and dairy
I take out of religion what suits me and benefits my community

Thoughts about language

We cannot be defined by language. The English language is used by many nations and originated from Sanskrit.
The Swiss nation uses three languages. After years of fighting there is now co-operation with a frequent use of referendums

Thoughts about identity

Who we say we are depends on who is asking
Many people no longer hold allegiances
We are losing freedom because of terrorism
I don't feel a part of my nation of birth. I have evolved into part of the British nation

General thoughts

We haven't learnt anything from the past. I try to live as a good and honourable person
Conflicts developed as people began to own livestock and disputes about land and resources caused divisions
We are all self-interested. We need enlightened self-interest.
Some people are not yet ready to accept more advanced ideas
It takes time for people to integrate
The world is evolving but people move at a different pace. We should learn to coexist on a smaller scale
Everything is cyclical

Conclusion

As usual and as anticipated by our leader, Christopher Langdon, there were no answers and we did not put the world to rights. We enjoyed the discussion and particularly the Philosopher's Cake. (The recipe will be made available by Christopher at a future meeting)