

Theological librarians: the custodians of civilisation

Austin Cooper

I begin this talk with a picture of an old lady. The lady in question died in March 1989 in a nursing home in Switzerland at the age of 96. Her death came rather suddenly, her last illness being comparatively short: just a few weeks before her death she was photographed in Rome after the last of her several private audiences with the pope. When she died she was buried with some pomp in Vienna, the capital of Austria. At her Requiem Mass, the liturgy used no less than thirteen different languages. She was later interred in the crypt of the Capuchin Friars church a few blocks away, under a plain black marble slab like dozens of others in the crypt. The whole elaborate funeral received a great deal of TV coverage throughout Europe, and leading newspapers throughout the world commented on her passing. *The Times* went so far as to note the event as marking the 'Passing of the Austro-Hungarian Empire'.

The lady in question was Zita, the wife of Charles, the last emperor of Austria and King of Hungary who reigned for the two years from November 1916 to November 1918. Her father was the Grand Duke of Parma, the last ruler of that independent Italian state who lost his throne in 1860 when the forces moving towards a united Italy overran the greater part of northern Italy. During the first world war, two of her brothers were serving as officers in the French army and were to play, with Charles and Zita, a valiant but abortive effort to end the carnage that was destroying so much of Europe, and of course, which was to destroy the Austro-Hungarian empire.

What was the Austro-Hungarian Empire?

I. In 1910, the population of the three parts of the Habsburg Empire was the following:

Austria	28,572,000
Hungary	20,886,000
Bosnia-Herzegovina	1,932,000
Total of the Habsburg Empire	51,390,000

II. Population of the West 'Austria'

Germans	9,950,000
Slav speaking peoples:	Czechs 6,436,000
	Poles 4,968,000
	Ukrainians 3,519,000
Southern Slavs:	Slovenes 1,253,000
	Serbo-Croats 783,000
Latin speaking peoples:	Italians 768,000
	Rumanians 275,000

III. Nationalities in the East 'Hungary'

Magyars	9,945,000
Germans	2,037,000
Rumanians	2,949,000
Slav speaking peoples:	Slovaks 1,968,000
	Croats 1,833,000
	Serbs 1,106,000
	Ukrainians 473,000

What held it all together? We can never dismiss the strength of what is; of the historic fact, of being in possession. On a fateful day towards the end of the first world war the prime minister and foreign secretary had their usual audience with the emperor, Charles, at the Schönbrunn palace outside Vienna. On the way down the two stood on the landing and discussed where they would lunch when they returned to the city. Things were in a terrible state but things had been bad before, life continues, horrors pass. Little did they realise that within hours the empire would no longer exist and the world they knew would never be the same. History is always written with the burden of hindsight: we know how the story unfolds. So much has been written about Central Europe under that impression that what has happened, had to happen: that the dismemberment of the old empire was somehow inevitable. History is also written by the victors; there does not seem to be much point in listening for muffled voices or looking at the silent lives. But perhaps they have some values to impart, nonetheless.

Another unifying factor was its imperial family. It is hard for us to realise how strong this was. When I was a student in USA in the early 1960s I was fortunate enough to have some lectures by Hans Kohn: he was in his day, the foremost historian of nationalism. He was an Austrian Jew who escaped Austria just before Hitler annexed the republic. Entering the lecture room one morning he announced with some pride: "Ladies and gentlemen: today is the birthday of my old emperor." The Hapsburg family had been there for more than nine hundred years. The best remembered was Franz Joseph 1848-1916, the longest serving head of state in Europe for some considerable time. He was also a hard working, if somewhat unimaginative man: but he embodied the best traditions of the family. In a recent interview, Dr Otto Hapsburg, the eldest son of Charles and Zita and a member of the European Parliament and President of the Pan-European Union said

Race and nationality never played any role in the thinking of our family. Even religion did not. My father was a very modest and mild person. It was difficult to rouse him to a state of anger but I remember a scene at our dinner table – it must have been in 1918 – that made a deep impression on me. Somebody at table made an anti-Jewish remark. My father flew into a rage... (*Crisis*, April 1990, p. 27)

Another unifying factor was the army, and to a lesser extent the navy. The army had a disproportionate number of Germans and Hungarians in the officer ranks, yet not always. The defence forces never had commanders and ranks of the same nationality: Polish officers might command a regiment of Croatian soldiers and so on: but there were 80 words of command, in German, that everyone had to know. And it all worked! Indeed it worked very well - despite falling behind the other great powers in its expenditure on the forces. Historians now recognise that the army remained an efficient fighting force: indeed it won its last battle even after the Empire had officially fallen apart! (see Alan Sked, *The Decline and Fall of the Hapsburg Empire 1815-1918*, London: Longmans, 1996)

The empire also had its unity in economics. Historians are now more aware of its growing economic strength: the western sector was heavily industrialised; the east was primarily agricultural. And as well as a splendid system of railroads, it has its main street: the Danube river.

But there was also a cultural unity. In the 1860s the imperial government undertook a vigorous programme of rebuilding Vienna, when the French were doing wonders with Paris - in the wonderful baroque period with its associated music of Haydn and Mozart and others.

But surely the great achievement has been the existence of a supra national state in an age of increasing nationalist hatreds. Just imagine that in the old imperial days some 12% of Vienna's population were Jews, almost as many were Czechs. No wonder that the sight of it filled a nationalist fanatic like Hitler with horror.

I was repelled by the conglomeration of races which the capital showed me, repelled by this whole mixture of Czechs, Poles, Hungarians, Ruthenians, Serbs and Croats, and everywhere, the eternal mushroom of humanity – Jews and more Jews. To me the giant city seemed the embodiment of racial desecration. (*Mein Kampf* (1974 ed) p. 114)

This sort of comment seems to me to make the study of Austrian Hungary a worthwhile occupation; and for the Christian especially so. It will always be the case that we humans are confined in our vision, limited in our interests and stultified in our appreciation of people and things different from ourselves. One would have thought that in an age which was called 'The Enlightenment' we would have learnt greater toleration. That age prided itself on just such an attitude, yet ironically enough, it was speedily followed by a hardening of differences in what more recent people call Nationalism.

This Nationalism was no mere attachment to home and hearth; to one's family, folk and the familiar. It carried with it a bitterness, an hostility and a detestation of all who were different. It had its worst and logical climax in the horrors of the Nazi persecution of Jews and others in the Holocaust.

It simmered long in Europe and flourishes still in post Colonial Asia and Africa. We see evidence of its strength almost daily on our TV sets at news time. The disease is of European forging where it periodically rears its ugly head afresh. Yet it need not have been so. There have been some wonderful examples when people have refused to make hostility and prejudice their chief attitudes. Catholics in Germany long withstood some of its earlier excesses in the Kulturkampf, which sought to bludgeon Catholics into the nationalistic vortex. The Iron Chancellor, Prince Von Bismarck, sought to subdue the possible disaffection of Catholics on the border lands of the new Prussian dominated Germany: Catholic Poles in the East looking to an independent Poland, Catholics in Bavaria looking south to Austria as a natural partner and those in the Rhineland possibly more sympathetic to France. But German Catholics managed to remain proudly German and staunchly Catholic.

Sadly it was otherwise in that greatest of European political legacies: the Austro-Hungarian empire that I've been speaking about this evening. Here no less than 13 separate and often conflicting nationalities were held together by the bonds of dynastic loyalty, imperial pride, economic advantage and that indescribable bond of historic fact. That is, the sheer power of what is in possession. It had simply survived and prospered for centuries. And what has managed to do so is not always a thing to be destroyed.

Austria-Hungary was a Catholic entity in that the vast majority of its subjects were in communion with the Holy See, but it was also potentially catholic in having sizable minorities of Orthodox, Unitates and Protestants. In overcoming the hostilities between nationalities and churches Austria Hungary offered a unique opportunity for simply being Catholic in the modern world. Some of its leading citizens managed to see the vision: that foremost Catholic gentleman of the 19th century, Franz Joseph, Karl Leuger, the great Christian Socialist mayor of Vienna, and Joseph Strossmeyer, (1815-1905) Bishop of Djakovo in Croatia who was both a Southern Slav patriot, an imperial loyalist and a Catholic in mind and heart. Sadly these were exceptions. For the most part Church people either accepted a privileged position in society and adopted a polite and detached inertia, or else they sided with the nationalist forces of disintegration. Often clergy who should have preached a gospel of peace became propagators of a divisive nationalism. The figures are interesting. The final imperial census of 1910 revealed a patch-work of religious allegiance as well as linguistic and nationalist origins:

Denominational Statistics:**Austrian Provinces.**

Latin Rite	20,661,000
Greek Rite	3,134,000
Armenian Rite	2,000
Total Catholic:	23,797,000

Jews	1,225,000
Greeks (Eastern)	607,000
Evangelicals	491,000
Old-Catholics	13,000
Of no confession	6,000
Mohammedans	1,000
Of other confessions	8,000

Hungarian Provinces

Latin Rite	10,229,190
Greek Rite	1,907,936
Total Catholic	12,207,126

Evangelicals	3,823,061
Greeks (Orthodox)	2,882,695
Jews	896,466
Unitarians	70,260
Of other confessions	15,837

Bosnia and Herzegovina

Greeks (Eastern)	673,000
Mohammedans	549,000
Catholics	339,000
Jews	8,000
Of other confessions	4,000

The old monarchy on the Danube cannot simply be relegated to the romantic world of the undying charm of Haydn and Mozart and the flamboyance of baroque architecture. Austria Hungary presented a unique opportunity and this opportunity was lost. In the end it proved the major casualty of World War I. And the internecine conflicts of a shattered Central Europe haunt us still. The heavy price of division and discord is still being exacted. The present pope, in 1993 lamented 'the racist pretensions and (evils) of nationalism' (*Tablet* 4/12/1993) in the guise of civil war and ethnic cleansing. The implementation of a truly Catholic vision would have made it otherwise.

There are examples too numerous to mention of Catholics being divided by nationalist prejudices. To give but one contemporary example. No sooner had the strong arm of communist domination been lifted from the Baltic states, than the Catholics of Lithuania refused to allow the Polish Catholic minority celebrate a Polish language Mass in the cathedral of the capital, Vilnius. A senior Church spokesman is reported as saying that it would not be possible for 'the Polish enemy' to have Mass 'in our national shrine'. (*Tablet* 20/4/1991)

The old story learnt in the process needs remembering: Humpty Dumpty cannot be put back together again. But that does not mean we should fail to be delighted by his genial countenance, or lament his being cruelly shattered. It is worth remembering Austria Hungary, both for what it managed to achieve, and also for what it failed to do. History should teach and encourage and warn. But somehow the best can be preserved in a more homely fashion. When Dr Otto Von Hapsburg was elected to the European parliament. The Premier of Bavaria met him in the foyer and welcomed him by saying 'Thank God we have the Empire back with us again'. In the words of the *Times Literary Supplement*, (16 February 1996) the same gentleman 'has adapted the Hapsburgs' role as hereditary politicians to modern circumstances with remarkable intelligence, sense and humanity.' That is something each of us can do as we seek ways of keeping alive and making real the essential Christian attitude of love for all and knowing neither Jew nor Greek. And who better to do that than the custodians of civilization – librarians in theological colleges and the like.

Fr Austin Cooper
Principal, Catholic Theological College
Melbourne