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Are Catholics a nation? The problem of defining nationalism

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Abstract
For all their interest as social phenomena, nations and nationalism have proven to be difficult terms to define, which has resulted in a lack of consensus among scholars working on these subjects. In this paper, it is my intention to expose the deep chasm that engulfs our present knowledge about what nations are. My method for achieving this goal comprises a critical engagement with the most popular definitions of nations and nationalism based upon a single hypothetical premise: that the Holy See of the Catholic Church, with its seat in Vatican City, is a nation-state which represents a purported Catholic nation. The results of this study suggest that current approaches to the definition of nations and nationalism – be they based on alleged objective criteria, voluntary association, political organization, communal imagination, or organizational patterns – are generally incapable of dismissing the claim of Catholics to nationhood. Despite this fact, certain elements sketched within some of these definitions might hold the key to developing more precise and usable definitions of these two concepts in the future.

KEYWORDS
definition, historiography, nationalism, national identity, Vatican

INTRODUCTION

In the introduction to his best-selling book *Histories of Nations*, the historian Peter Furtado referred to the opening ceremony of the Beijing Summer Olympics of 2008 as 'the world's

largest-ever history lesson'. 'The opportunity', he continued, 'for a nation to present such a high-profile, massaged image of its history and heritage to the world is a rare and powerful one'; the exceptional broadcasting to outsiders of the common process by which 'nations […] seek ways of manipulating that self-image internally for their own citizens' (Furtado, 2012: 10).

These two statements, separated by just a few lines, are certainly problematic. In the first, Furtado's reference to history and heritage seems to imply the historical journey of a community of people, most likely composed of thousands or millions of members. The second, in contrast, refers to nations as trying to manipulate their citizens. One might well wonder who effects this manipulation. Politicians? The bureaucratic apparatus? The system of public education? Whatever the answer, it seems difficult to accept that the first instance of 'nation' – as a community – would somehow only include politicians, teachers, and administrators. In Furtado's text, the term shifts from the people to the state; from the community at large to quantitatively small elites. As a result, when he later reveals that the objective of his edited volume is 'to get to grips with the national and cultural differences that both enliven and endanger our world' (Furtado, 2012: 14), the first adjective is simply confusing. Is he referring to differences that exist between state elites or between large communities of people? The word 'nation', thus endowed with completely opposite and incoherent meanings, is rendered effectively meaningless.

Of course, there is no denying that trying to define what a nation is remains a difficult task, at least when conceptual precision is the goal. However, the previous example is emblematic in one aspect: that to most people outside academia, the concept brings forth a sufficient set of associations and usages so as to render it unintelligible. In a quick survey of the meaning of the term 'nation', and without much difficulty, members of the general public would probably be capable of providing a list of well-known nations embodied in their own sovereign states, and might even point to movements that strive for 'liberating' their nations from the yoke of outsiders. Some might go as far as to mention the United Nations, right-wing nationalism, or national culture or security as crucial elements to understanding the concept.[1] The mystery of the 'nation' – if we were to accept such certainties – would appear to us to be already solved.

Yet, as the paper will try to demonstrate, there is nothing obvious, no natural simplicity to the idea of the nation. So apparent is this, in fact, that materials intended for newcomers to nationalism studies (such as the famous Oxford reader by John Hutchinson and Anthony Smith) cannot help but admit that: 'perhaps the central difficulty in the study of nations and nationalism has been the problem of finding adequate and agreed definitions of the key concepts, nation and nationalism' (Hutchinson & Smith, 1994: 3–4). If we consider that 'a discipline of thought is essential to the formation of a discipline of language and a discipline of language is essential to the maintenance of a discipline of thought' (Abbott, 2002: ii), then there is a point to be made about nationalism studies not even being a discipline at all.

We should not rush to blame this absence of consensus on a lack of interest on the part of scholars or underdevelopment of the field. The last fifty years have witnessed the ebb and flow of Western scholarly attention in nationalism studies, often brought about by world-shaking events like the fragmentation of the USSR, the Balkan conflict, or the Brexit campaign. In many of these instances, practical concerns have become entangled with an impulse to theorize and explain the phenomenon on a broader basis. Yet, somehow, the issue of definition has persisted. There is no denying, of course, that some of these works have attained the status of 'classics' and have helped to direct attention towards aspects previously disregarded by sociologists, political scientists, and historians. But, given the often conflicting definitions provided by their authors, a thorny relationship with conceptual clarity has remained a central and regrettable feature of the study of nations and nationalism as a whole.

Definitions are important. First, a shared definition saves time, space, and resources, all of which must otherwise be devoted to explaining precisely what each writer means by a given term. If nothing else, the prospect of doing away with such an effort should suffice to justify the search for a consensus on definitions of nations and nationalism. In addition, there also exist

deeper concerns that call for such an endeavour. Because 'all concepts are partly theory-laden' (Walsh & Vaughan, 1993: 200), but also because – no doubt to the dismay of scholars who would like to pursue their fieldwork without devoting any energy to theory –there is simply no gaining knowledge about a phenomenon without first identifying it as such. Moreover, insofar as we lack any objective definition of nations and nationalism against which to measure them, new developments in communal, social, and political identifications continually escape our attention. This fact condemns nationalism studies to an on-going attempt to pinpoint the vague origins and chronological limits of two terms which we seem barely capable of understanding.

I could try to contribute my own definition of these two concepts and add it to the exceedingly long list of references to cite in any serious study about nationalism, but I will refrain from doing so. This is because it is my intention in this paper to expose the deep chasm that confronts our present knowledge about what nations are. In order to achieve this goal, I will conduct a theoretical experiment upon a simple premise: that the Holy See of the Catholic Church, with its seat in Vatican City, is a nation-state, and one which represents a purported Catholic nation. This proposition will be tested against some of the most frequently cited definitions of nations and nationalism, which range in their chronology from the eighteenth to the early twenty-first century. Such an analysis will try to evaluate the extent to which these theoretical descriptions provide sufficient grounds to sustain the claim to nationhood of the Catholic community.

Of course, I am very well aware that Catholics do not comprise a national community by any stretch of the imagination. There is hardly any need to explain the veracity of this claim, so readily understandable in the light of the Church's own character and historical development. But despite this caveat, the experiment itself remains valid. By taking the position of outsiders and simply applying our theoretical framework about nationalism to the study of this group, it might be possible to shed some light on the shortcomings of the definitions thus analysed. Given that many of them are a constant presence in the field of nationalism as a whole – often framing not only theoretical but also practical research – this is not simply a whimsical exercise. On the contrary, I hope that by demonstrating how our definitions of these concepts often rely on previous knowledge which obscures their full array of imprecisions and ambiguities, the paper may help scholars appreciate the need to revise some of our approaches to the study of nations and nationalism as a whole.

THE NATION: NATURAL COMMUNITY OR VOLUNTARY ASSOCIATION?

The oldest definition that most studies of nationalism tend to cite was provided by the French historian and philologist Ernest Renan, who in a lecture given at Sorbonne University in 1882 declared that the nation was an 'everyday plebiscite' (Renan, [1882] 2018: 261–2). Here, 'nation' seemed to acquire a wholly voluntarist meaning; a community composed solely of those who felt themselves to be its members. The famous quote, though, was preceded by a preliminary provision that qualified and slightly altered its meaning. In Renan's words:

> A nation is a soul, a spiritual principle. Two things that, in truth, are but one constitute this soul, this spiritual principle. One is in the past, the other in the present. One is the possession in common of a rich legacy of memories; the other is present consent, the desire to live together, the will to perpetuate the value of the heritage that one has received in an undivided form. (Renan [1882] 2018: 261).

The value of Renan's contribution must be understood from his denial of there being any 'natural' status to nations and his attempt to place these phenomena entirely within the realm of human action and imagination. It is hard to overestimate the extent to which this opinion,

when it first appeared, was exceptional. Nationalist activists and ideologues, many of them trained academics (Berger, 2007: 32–3), tended in the late-nineteenth century to emphasize the unproblematic nature of their communities. The English nation, for instance, was widely believed to have already existed back in Roman times, when its Anglo-Saxon forefathers 'were living in the northern part of Germany' (Creighton, 1881: 14; Green, 1874). Other nation-builders around the world, even less modestly, claimed that their own nations possessed an 'authentic history of over 4,000 years' (Sun, 1927: 9). Standing against such intellectual currents and claiming that nations were dependent instead upon the constant agreement by their members, Renan was exceptional for his stark denunciation of these essentialist and widely-espoused interpretations.

Yet for all its relative novelty, his definition lacked conceptual precision. After all, the community of Catholic believers, united by a millennia-old history dating back to the time of Christ himself and shaped by endless accounts of martyrdoms, theological discussions, institutional reorganizations, schisms, moral revolutions, saintly lives, and miraculous conversions, is hardly wanting in the rich legacy of memories mentioned by Renan. The requirement of present consent makes the notion even less satisfying, since abandoning the community altogether (despite the associated risks, especially in the pre-modern world) was always an option available to most Catholics – at least in theory. In addition, the will to live together and live according to the value of a heritage passed down through the generations has been historically vindicated by Catholics in their fight against heterodoxy and heresy and in their desire to transmit intact the message of the apostles. In fact, in some historical periods like the Middle Ages, the image of a single Christian *ecumene* was instrumental in connecting geographically and linguistically dissimilar populations in a shared universal world of culture and moral ideas. The fulfilment of these two provisions, according to Renan's framework, would assuredly endow this community with 'the essential preconditions for being a people' (Renan, [1882] 2018: 261). As a result, the political organization that claims to represent this community, the Holy See of the Catholic Church, could legitimately take its place among the family of nation-states.

Renan might have tried to address the heterogeneous nature of national communities by defining nations as the product of the voluntarist union of their members, but others took the opposite approach. Johann Gottfried Herder, writing in the politically discrete German states of the eighteenth century, explained that there existed 'one *genius* that expresses itself […] no less in the writings than in the customs and actions of a nation' (Herder, 2004: 119). The success of Herder's view is manifest in the fact that Joseph Stalin, more than a century later, still saw nations as 'historically constituted, stable communit[ies] of people, formed on the basis of a common language, territory, economic life, and psychological make-up manifested in a common culture' (Stalin, 1954: 16). Such a detailed description, if compared with the one provided by Renan, appears to be entirely founded upon a series of objective criteria which leave little room for an 'everyday plebiscite'. In Stalin's argument – just as in Herder's – nations constitute evident realities, social communities discernible from each other according to a set of measurable criteria. 'It is only when all these characteristics are present', Stalin sternly declared, 'that we have a nation' (ibid.: 17).

The Catholic Church would merit a paradigmatic position among the nations so exhaustively described by the Soviet leader. It is no small thing that it can boast an almost unparalleled historical longevity, which according to some of its chief members even pre-dates the birth of Christ himself (Vatican II, 2014a: 283). This long history is evidence both of the Church's endurance and the rootedness of Catholic customs in the life of its members. The Catholic Church has managed to sustain, despite the ebbs and flows, a powerful claim to the right to direct the lives of many Europeans. Simultaneously, it has expanded its influence as a crucial social agent into Latin America and Africa. Some dioceses – such as Ravenna and Marseilles – declare that they have remained in the orbit of Catholic influence from the time of the apostles; these territories, located mainly in Western Europe, constitute the heartland of Catholic

Christendom and are endowed with crucial symbolism in the imaginary of their members. Yet nowhere is this historical *continuum* made more manifest than in the case of Rome itself, where the See of Peter constitutes a vivid reminder of the power and cultural legacy of the shared heritage of Catholics everywhere.

This common culture, embodied in Catholic rituals, symbols, places, and texts, could hardly have been capable of sustaining itself, let alone thrived, without a shared language of its own. Language, of course, has often been allotted a particular significance in studies of nationalism as a crucial marker for defining true national status (Anderson, 2006; Fox & Miller-Idriss, 2008; Hobsbawm, 1992; Leersen, 2006). Catholics found in Latin the medium for their message, and institutionalized its use as one of their main distinguishing features, doubling down on its use after the Council of Trent (1545–1563) (Eire, 2016: 397). Although the identification of Latin with Catholics has become more problematic in recent centuries, there is no denying that archaic Latin forms still constitute the second language of Catholic elites and high-ranking authorities, especially in their official and ritual functions (Connaughton, 2003).

Thankfully for Catholics, Latin has not entirely been lost to the general public either. In the heartlands of Catholic Christendom in Western Europe, as well as in Latin America and parts of Africa, local varieties of evolved Latin remain hegemonic. The more or less independent development of these local variations over two millennia has undeniably left its mark on the linguistic structure of the Catholic world, rendering some of its members incapable of understanding each other. But this phenomenon is not wholly dissimilar from situations in places like China, for example, where many varieties of Sino-Tibetan languages co-exist, bridged to each other by the official use of Mandarin (Smith, 2015: 172–3) – a fact that has not prevented the identification of the country as a nation-state. These specifics notwithstanding, there is no denying that for much of their shared history many Catholics have been connected to each other by linguistic ties whose impact and legacy still persists today, both in symbolic terms and in everyday usage.

This kind of too-direct connection between objective criteria and national belonging is one that recent scholarship has increasingly distrusted. But this suspicion is not entirely new. After all, Max Weber, writing at the beginning of the twentieth century, already stated that: 'If the concept of the nation can in any way be defined unambiguously, it certainly cannot be stated in terms of empirical qualities common to those who count as members of the nation' (Weber, 1946: 172). Weber rejected the paradigm that saw nations as necessarily comprised of populations sharing a common language or descent. Instead, he argued that a sense of 'mission' lay at the root of any idea of nationhood (ibid.: 176). Yet it is hard to see how early Catholics, united by their belief in Jesus Christ and the urge to preach the Gospel, could have not been endowed with such a trait.

THE NATION: A MEANS TO EXERT POWER?

Ultimately, Weber would arrive at a definition of 'nation' as 'a community of sentiment which would adequately manifest itself in a state of its own; hence, a nation is a community which normally tends to produce a state of its own' (Weber, 1946: 176).

The relationship between nations and state power is unquestionably another of the great theoretical currents in the field. John Breuilly, author of a wonderful and exhaustive book that analyses the development and impact of nationalism worldwide, perfectly summarized the fundamental truth behind this relationship when he stated that 'nationalism is, above and beyond all else, about politics and that politics is about power' (Breuilly, 1993: 1). Just like Weber, Breuilly believed that nations were communities whose main characteristic was a unique relationship to the state. As he defined it, nationalism 'is used to refer to political movements seeking or exercising state power and justifying such actions with nationalist arguments' (ibid.: 2) –

including, for example, the existence of a nation whose interests and sovereignty should take priority over any other alternative claim.

Interestingly enough, the Holy See of the Catholic Church enjoys this kind of sovereign status over the territory of Vatican City, a small enclave within the city of Rome. Because of this, and acknowledging the turbulent history of this micro-state as a remnant of the Papal States, the ability of the Catholic community to produce and sustain their own representative state institutions over long periods of time seems to be irrefutable. However, Breuilly's second requirement – that nationalist movements must justify their actions according to nationalist arguments – seems hardly applicable to the Church, which is more likely to refer to its constituents as 'the People of God or 'the Body of the Lord and the Temple of the Holy Spirit' (Vatican II, 2014c: 80) rather than as a 'nation'. From this standpoint, the use of nationalist rhetoric would be the critical element that would exclude the Holy See from qualifying as a nation-state.

Other authors have similarly underscored the intimate connection between nation and state. Anthony Giddens, for instance, has explained that nations can only exist 'when a state has unified administrative reach over the territory over which its sovereignty is claimed' (Giddens, 1985: 119). Once again, this definition does not exclude the control that the Holy See exercises over Vatican City itself, but it leaves beyond the pale the rest of the territories mainly inhabited by Catholics, over which the primacy of the Holy See was once proclaimed. But this interpretation, which undoubtedly provides many benefits for the study of well-established nation-states, also highlights a problem with Giddens' approach. By failing to consider the arguments made by political actors about territories and communities outside their borders, Giddens' description fails to include states whose recognized political borders simply do not align with the totality of territories and populations they claim to represent. Therefore, the Holy See could be considered to be an irredentist state (Ambrosio, 2001), just like Germany in the 1930s or the People's Republic of China today.

Although contemporary research has been more reluctant to explain nations and nationalism solely in relation to the state, it has not necessarily abandoned a state-centred approach to their definition. So, for instance, Jonathan Hearn describes nationalism as 'the making of combined claims, on behalf of a population, to identity, to jurisdiction, and to territory' (Hearn, 2006: 11). Hearn's conceptualization is far more nuanced than that of Giddens, and his mention of 'jurisdiction' – rather than 'administrative reach' – is broad enough so as to include irredentist nation-states and nationalist movements lacking a state apparatus.

Nevertheless, if we interrogate Hearn's definition further, we find it is still unable to tease out the existence of a Catholic nation. Claims to identity, for example, 'can be quite variable' (Hearn, 2006) and can include particular religious beliefs or shared historical experiences, both of which have been shown to be applicable to the Catholic case. The concept of jurisdiction, on the other hand, 'asserts the entitlement to power and the authority to make and enforce laws, although this may be claimed only to a degree' (ibid.). Here, the main interrogative would be to determine the extent of the authority to which Hearn is making reference. Taken at its broadest, this might support the claim to jurisdiction of the Holy See over the entire community of Catholics, given that its directives are widely expected to be followed and enforced through its officials all around the world. Taken at its most narrow, on the other hand, it would only recognize the full sovereignty and administrative control that the Church exercises over Vatican City itself.

This problem of indeterminacy similarly applies to the third type of claim, over a particular territory. At its broadest – since Hearn recognizes that this 'normally concerns lands that at least some of the national group occupies, but can also concern lands from which the group has been wholly displaced' (ibid.) – the definition could vindicate any claim over territories largely inhabited by Catholics. Taken at its most narrow, the Catholic nation would only possess a legitimate claim to the Vatican enclave. In both instances, though, the national status of this community would not be categorically refuted.

THE NATION: AN IMAGINED COMMUNITY?

In the search for a definition of what nations truly are, many scholars were forced to admit there did not seem to exist any objective element that could perfectly accommodate the multitude of realities claimed by nationalist movements around the world. Even painstaking attempts to single out some 'proto-national' characteristics, such as that conducted by the British historian Eric Hobsbawm, ultimately concluded that no single element, all by itself, was 'enough to form nationalities' (Hobsbawm, 1992: 77).

In light of these unpromising results, some authors opted instead for denying that nations have any authenticity at all. The sociologist Ernest Gellner, for instance, assembled an influential definition of nationalism as 'primarily a political principle, which holds that the political and the national unit should be congruent' (Gellner, 1983: 1). And yet, when interrogated about the meaning of this latter concept, Gellner appears to have had a difficult time explaining what these 'national units' were. For one, he describes nations as communities of peoples which share 'the same culture, where culture in turn means a system of ideas and signs and associations and ways of behaving and communicating' (ibid.: 7), a view that seems to position these groups as discernible social realities – as claimed by the likes of Herder or Stalin. However, in addition, Gellner also argued that two people were members of a single nation 'if and only if they recognize each other as belonging to the same nation', thus coming closer to Renan's concept of the 'everyday plebiscite'. Of course, neither of these approaches has yet proven capable of formally excluding the community of Catholics, especially because Gellner does not explain the specific modes in which this mutual recognition must be effected in order to produce a nation. Nonetheless, noting them remains instructive for showing the inconsistencies that underlie Gellner's definition.

In his seminal *Nations and Nationalism* (1983), Gellner sketched an explanation about the origins of nationalism as grounded in the transformation from agrarian to industrial societies. The book's convincing argument and wide success guaranteed that this perspective would made inroads into the work of other scholars. The aforementioned Hobsbawm, for instance, wholly embraced Gellner's idea of nations as 'sufficiently large bod[ies] of people whose members regard themselves as members of a nation' (Hobsbawm, 1992: 8). Others, such as Walker Connor, likewise declared that 'the nation is a self-defined rather than an other-defined grouping' and that 'the broadly held conviction concerning the group's singular origin need not and seldom will accord with factual data' (Connor, 1978: 380). In any case, what matters to us is that all these definitions take for granted that there was hardly anything truly 'real' about nations, and that nationalist movements should therefore not be understood as 'the awakening of nations to self-consciousness', but rather as something invented 'where they do not exist' (Gellner, 1964: 168).

These approaches, for all their virtues and relevance, can hardly sustain the stress of being confronted with the possibility of a Catholic nation. After all, Catholics, by means of their shared rites, traditions, annual celebrations, and systems of belief and ethics inhabit a world that makes them constantly conscious of the existence of other Catholics. Policing the borders of this community against unorthodox views and the influence of other groups has historically been the crucial role played by the Church. As a result, members of this community are usually able to recognize each other as fellow Catholics, no matter what their territorial or ethnic origin. In this regard, they follow patterns common to other national communities, but with one caveat: Catholics rarely, if ever, talk about themselves as a 'nation'. Here – as in the case of Breuilly, above – the crucial argument which could deny Catholics their claim to nationhood would be one of vocabulary. But what would ensue, then, if Catholics began to employ this term to refer to their shared community? According to these definitions, they would certainly constitute a rightful nation.

Of course, not every scholar agreed with these radical 'modernist' authors in rejecting the reality of national communities completely. This was the case, for example, with Anthony Smith, a former student of Gellner's who challenged his mentor by demonstrating the evident continuities that existed between many national groups and previously existing collectives. Smith saw nations as being every bit as invented as did Gellner, but he did not necessarily believe that these inventions could appear out of thin air. On the contrary, for Smith, nations were:

> named and self-defining human communit[ies] whose members cultivate shared memories, symbols, myths, traditions and values, inhabit and are attached to historic territories or 'homelands', create and disseminate a distinctive public culture, and observe shared customs and standardized laws. (Smith, 2009: 29)

Nations were invented, yes, but they were constructed out of the fabric of previous communities. Unfortunately, for all its importance in the debate with the 'modernists', Smith's definition proves equally incapable of challenging – at a fundamental level – the claim of Catholics to nationhood, given their evident cultural legacy, their attachment to the See of Peter, and their shared customs and set of ordinances. If anything, taken at its most narrow, it would exclude other national communities which have not yet attained a sufficient degree of statehood and therefore lack a set of 'standardized laws'.

On the whole, Smith's approach was not so different from that of Benedict Anderson, whose definition of the concept 'nation' is by far the most quoted in the entire field. Anderson, just like Smith and Gellner, agreed that national communities were the result of a process of invention. Further, he rejected the idea that any community without any previous attachment of some kind could constitute itself into a nation. These two assumptions pushed him to argue that nations were 'imagined political communit[ies]' and, more specifically, 'imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign' (Anderson, 2006: 6). These two criteria – limitation and sovereignty – were the crucial keystones in his approach to the national phenomenon.

It has already been shown how the criterion of sovereignty does not categorically exclude Catholics as a possible nation, even if some discussion can arise regarding the territorial extent of this authority, which may apply to Vatican City or to other larger territories mainly inhabited by Catholics. Conceptual limitation, on the other hand, is an altogether different beast. In Anderson's words, '[t]he nation is imagined as limited because even the largest of them […] has finite, if elastic, boundaries […]. No nation imagines itself coterminous to mankind' (Anderson 2006: 7). As regards this point, the position of the Catholic community is much more blurry and imprecise. For one, ecclesiastical authorities have expressed time and again that it is their ultimate goal 'to call *the whole* of mankind into the household of the Church' (Vatican II, 2014b: 3; emphasis added) and 'to bear salvation to *all* men' (Vatican II, 2014d: 48; emphasis added). This ideal state of affairs, to the extent to which it concerns the imagination of the national community, would seem to diametrically oppose the possibility of a Catholic nation in Anderson's terms.

However, ecclesiastical authorities have likewise tempered this *potential* community by recognizing the legitimacy and rights of alternative groups and institutions in an implicit rejection of their universal claims. So, for instance, the Church has admitted that there exist many 'true and holy' elements in religions such as Hinduism, Buddhism, Judaism, or Islam (Vatican II, 2014a: 282) and has even acknowledged, with regards to its many branches and separate Christian variations, that 'human powers and capacities cannot achieve this holy objective – the reconciling of all Christians in the unity of the one and only Church of Christ' (Vatican II, 2014e: 188–9). It would be hard not to view these two instances as examples of a substitution of the ideal universal community by a new image in which collaboration and co-existence with other groups is not only a matter of everyday reality, but also a fact directly addressed in

official and ecumenical documentation. This could make the identification of the Catholic nation as a 'limited' imagined community work, even if only tenuously.

THE NATION: AN ORGANIZING PRINCIPLE?

Whereas most attempts at defining nations and nationalism have tried to focus on the content that these ideas possess in particular cases, there exists another tendency that has attempted to explicate their fundamental uniqueness in relation to their ideological context or social environment. In these interpretations, the way in which members of a national community self-define has been considered less crucial than the social space in which these ideas acquire meaning. An example of this approach is provided by the sociologist Siniša Malešević in his book *Grounded Nationalism*:

> I see nationalism as an historically shaped and constantly changing phenomenon defined by its organizational capacity, its aptitude to articulate popularly enticing ideological narratives and its ability to link wider ideological projects with the emotional and moral universes of face-to-face interactional networks. (Malešević, 2019: 8).

Malešević's description seems uninterested in the content of the identity of particular national groups, a topic which had haunted the likes of Weber, Stalin, Gellner, and Smith. Rather, his approach emphasizes the social environment created by nationalism which serves as a bridge between the local and the global.

This stress on the underlying principles of the 'world of nations' has also shaped the attempts at definition of other widely cited authors, such as Liah Greenfeld or Elie Kedourie. To Greenfeld, there exists no self-evident relationship between ethnicity and identity (Greenfeld, 1992: 13). The various 'ethnic' characteristics of a given population 'form a certain category of raw material which can be organized and rendered meaningful in various ways, thus becoming elements of any number of identities' (ibid.: 13–14). What defines national identities, then, is their nature as products of a very particular type of organizational principle: one which 'derives from the fact that nationalism locates the source of individual identity within a "people", which is seen as the bearer of sovereignty, the central object of loyalty, and the basis of collective solidarity' (ibid.: 3–4). Kedourie has similarly depicted nationalism as a doctrine that 'holds that humanity is naturally divided into nations, that nations are known by certain characteristics which can be ascertained, and that the only legitimate type of government is national self-government' (Kedourie, 1961: 9).

By emphasizing the extent to which nationalism 'was always an international ideology' (Billig, 1995: 53), this approach brings a holistic perspective that connects self-definition and recognition by others as complementary aspects of national identification. In addition, it has proven to be flexible enough to include nationalist phenomena – such as irredentist nation-states or national liberation movements – which other definitions have had trouble incorporating.

And yet, for all these benefits, it is hard to see how these ideas can fundamentally disprove the claim to nationhood of Catholics. For one, the holding of a shared Catholic identity has historically been successful in connecting populations embedded in greatly differentiated local environments through a more or less coherent ideology and moral universe. This relationship between the local and the universal, which is nowhere better manifested than in the paradoxical yet central position that Catholic piety allots to regional cults and venerated saints and virgins (Eire, 2016: 390), is indeed a fundamental aspect of this community. In this regard, Malešević's definition would not present an insurmountable obstacle to their claim to nationhood.

Similarly, Kedourie's and Greenfeld's definitions emphasize national sovereignty, solidarity, and conceptual limitation, all of which have been shown, to a certain extent, to be components of the image that Catholics have of their own group.

Nonetheless, Kedourie's and Greenfeld's definitions of nationalism as an organizational framework evidence some of the shortcomings of this type of approach. Central to the conception of these two authors is the idea that nationalism is a doctrine which defends the existence of 'nations' or 'peoples' endowed with a series of inherent characteristics. For a nation to exist, it follows, members must imagine their community as one of these groups, and defend these prerogatives as inalienable features of their nations. The problem, as Jon Fox has argued, is that 'people are imprecise' (Fox, 2019: 302).

Historically, the term 'nation' has been employed to denote various types of community which contemporary scholarship would hardly recognize as such. For instance, the *Historia General de España* by the Jesuit Juan de Mariana, the best history of the various Iberian kingdoms available for more than two centuries, employed 'nation' to refer to as diverse groups as Italians, Greeks, Lusitanians, Romans, and Alexandrians. In this usage, which was common at the time, the term was taken to mean one's place of origin, without any further political connotations (Mariana, 1780). The opposite phenomenon also occurred: it was common in late-nineteenth and early-twentieth century intellectual circles to refer to what we would now consider national groups in terms of 'race'. British projects of colonization, for example, were often regarded as expansions of an alleged 'English race' (Dilke, 1890; Froude, 1886: 12; Seeley, 1883: 42–3).

Given this conceptual imprecision, Fox argues, it is hard to see how this type of definition can do anything other than claim that 'anything can be a nation, provided someone's calling it a nation' (Fox, 2019: 302). And even in this regard, as the case of the 'English race' evidences, not all nations were labelled as such at all times. The fact that Catholics might talk about themselves as a Church should not, in such an interpretation, immediately exclude them from this global imaginary of nations. But, if self-identification is not mandatory, and given that the contents of this idea, as Greenfeld and Malešević have both argued, have been shaped historically and adapted to changing circumstances (Greenfeld, 1992; Malešević, 2019: 8), how can we distinguish nations from other kinds of communal identification? The only answer would be to provide an unchanging set of criteria and assumptions that could help define this framework, regardless of the name that each community allotted to itself. Kedourie's and Greenfeld's tentative attempts at producing this elusive prize, for all their value and ambition, remain too broad and diffuse in their details to be considered successful.

CONCLUSIONS

This paper has compared some commonly cited definitions of nations and nationalism and has challenged them with the premise that the Holy See of the Catholic Church, with its seat in Vatican City, is a nation-state which represents a purported Catholic nation. The primary objective of this analysis was to prove the extent to which these definitions are incapable of denying – on the grounds established by their authors – the claim to nationhood of such a community. In this regard, the paper has generated a number of conclusions.

First, it has shown that attempts to define nations according to objective criteria such as language, religion or a sense of shared history are entirely inadequate for marking Catholics as a non-nation. Even though claims giving Latin the same status as a national language might be overstretched, adopting a narrow definition of nations based on any of these 'proto-national' elements seems to leave too many 'nationalist' phenomena outside of its scope (Hobsbawm, 1992). However, the opposite interpretation, which sees nations as 'everyday

plebiscites' (Renan, [1882] 2018: 261–2) that members can choose to either endorse or reject is perhaps even less useful.

Second, this analysis of definitions which emphasize the relationship between nation and state has been unfruitful for other, quite different reasons. In some cases, these interpretations tend to take for granted a too direct relationship between state power and national belonging (Giddens, 1985: 119). These are equivocal in the current analysis, not only because they cannot dismiss the claim to nationhood of the Catholic Vatican City itself, but also because they exclude evidently national phenomena such as irredentism. The desire to solve this apparent problem has led other authors such as John Breuilly and Jonathan Hearn to stress not the actual administrative power exerted over a territory, but rather, the claims made to it. Paraphrasing their approach, a nation-state would be that type of state which defends its claims to power according to nationalist arguments (Breuilly, 1993: 3). Here, the problem again lies in defining what is actually meant by a 'nationalist argument'. The main difficulty is that once we admit that the manifestation of these claims 'can be quite variable' (Hearn, 2006), it becomes hard not to fall back on definitions based on essentialist features such as language or religion, all of which are ill-equipped for framing nationhood.

The same problem plagues the explanations of authors like Ernest Gellner or Walker Connor. By highlighting that national imagination has nothing to do with objective criteria, these approaches fall into the trap of defining a concept in terms of itself: because any group could be a nation, only groups which are nations can be nations. Attempts at escaping this circular definition – such as the ethno-symbolist approach of Anthony Smith (2009) – have, despite their evident value, done little more than temper this radical position by referring, once again, to a long list of 'proto-national' elements which include 'shared memories, symbols, myths, traditions and values […] historic territories […] public culture, […] shared customs and standardized laws' (Smith, 2009: 29). Once again, these features are incapable of denying the claim of the Catholic community, which could even be considered one of the most successful national entities in the world on this basis, if we consider its geographical extension and chronological longevity.

Finally, the paper has also shown that definitions of nationalism as an organizing principle of social life rather than as a political ideology present their own set of problems. These definitions, which have endowed this nationalist discourse with certain basic, inescapable elements, tend to be too vague to exclude a purported Catholic nation. In fact, the main issue with this type of approach is that they usually enshrine the notion that for a nation to exist, members must imagine their community as being such a group. This fact, as Fox (2019) has demonstrated, is complicated further because populations have attached different connotations to the idea of the nation at different times (Leersen, 2006), and have employed various terms to refer to their own communities and those of others.

Nonetheless, this does not mean that we have to resign ourselves to uncertainty. Although I have played the role of 'devil's advocate' here, trying to stretch these definitions to the limit, not all of them have proven equally easy to twist and repurpose. Of course, claims about the mandatory nature of a homogeneous language, ethnicity, racial character or statehood are sufficiently unidimensional to be dismissible – not only in the case of Catholics, but also in regard to many of today's nation-states (Comisso, 2006: 159; Smith, 2009: 33). Others, however, have proven more resilient. Benedict Anderson's depiction of nations as inherently *limited* communities (Anderson, 2006: 7; original emphasis) seems fundamentally at odds with the goals of a universal salvific religion. Likewise, it is difficult to square Liah Greenfeld's emphasis on the centrality of the 'people' as the source of sovereignty (Greenfeld, 1992: 3–4) with the idea of the authority of the Holy See as inheritor of the position of St Peter – although not impossible, given the existence of the Conciliarist movement (Oakley, 2008). Authors like Breuilly or Hearn have similarly proven that there must exist some kind of crucial relationship between declarations of nationhood and the logical argument that structures these claims.

For this reason, although critical of the shortcomings of many of these definitions, the analysis here also offers hope for the attainment of a shared definition in the future. Rogers Brubaker has explained that scholars should stand away from 'groupism' – that is, the tendency 'to take discrete, bounded groups as basic constituents of social life' (Brubaker, 2004: 8) – and focus instead on 'the ways in which – and conditions under which – this practice of reification, this powerful crystallization of group feeling, can work' (ibid.: 10). In other words, the 'raw materials' that Greenfeld imagined as the basic constituents of national communities must be 'cooked' in a very particular way before resulting in a nation.

Sadly, our current theoretical approaches tend to be exceedingly vague and too broad to actually exclude some non-national imagined communities like Catholics from this process. What is necessary, then, is for the list of assumptions and practices which underlie this 'world of nations' – its 'circuit of culture' (Hall, 2013: 3) – to become more analytically precise and more easily ascertainable in practice. Although it exceeds the aim of this paper to analyse them here, there have already been some attempts in this direction – not only by Hall, discussed below, but also in my own work, where I argue that nationalism can be described as 'a way of making sense of the world, an ontological framework shaped by a limited series of principles and assumptions about reality', and that 'it is exclusively in the conditions enabled by this worldview that nations can be imagined, nationalist political projects be devised, and national identities appear' (Aguirresarobe, 2022: 194).

In his book on cultural representations and signifying practices, Stuart Hall (2013) traced how such assumptions were bred of unique historical, cultural, and social circumstances that ultimately merged into a form that could be copied and extended worldwide. By successfully adapting and applying this novel framework – a process undertaken by historians, politicians, intellectuals, and other interested people – it finally became possible for some communities to be 're-interpreted' as nations, even though others – such as Catholics – could not. And because this process was unique to each community but remained at the same time symptomatic of a common trend, this approach seems to point the way towards a possible reconciliation between the universal claims of the 'world of nations' and its plethora of local specificities.

Even though much work still remains to be done in this regard, it is my firm conviction that only via this process of isolating and precisely describing the ideological and psychological principles that feed the imagination of national communities – and which allow otherwise somewhat unremarkable ethnic, linguistic, religious or cultural elements to suddenly become the basis of a 'national' identity – can a solution to the problem of defining nations and nationalism be found.

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ENDNOTE

[1] As an example, see the extensive use of terms like 'nation' and 'national' in the surveys about national identity conducted by the International Social Survey Programme (2013). Available at: https://www.gesis.org/en/issp/issp-modules-by-topic/national-identity/2013.

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