This paper's subtitle was chosen in order to indicate an assumption or two. Its intention is to indicate that the subject is viewed as complex and diffuse.

Nation is the name of a collectivity, and that in itself is cause enough to pause. The United Church has not accumulated a high degree of skill in theological reflection about collectivities.

Of all modern collectivities NATION is among the most illusive. What is Nationality? The related language is imprecise. Its meaning varies with the user and within the user. Deep conscious and unconscious commitments are involved. The matter is therefore quite beyond systematic analysis.

Not only is the material powerfully charged but most of its elements are given. They include geographic and economic environment, an accumulation of historic decisions made down the years, language and cultural influences which defy accurate tracing. Nationhood is not something our conscious decision-making can have much impact upon. Little of what impact we do have is the direct result of conscious decision-making.

These are the reasons for expecting theological reflection on Nation to be fragmentary.

Another assumption of this paper that needs confessing is that Theological reflection is a search for a living WORD. The approach of the paper assumes that Christian utterance is a living word addressing relationships, attitudes behaviour, states of being. None of these latter are in themselves appropriately called Christian. The object of theological reflection is to come up with a comment, not a principle or a system. That's the second reason for the sub-title.

One assumption that is not operative is that Nation is a matter beneath theological reflection, as though it was not a matter of God's proper concern. Institutions, structures and collectivities can be said to have been included in the fall. But it is a misunderstanding of scripture to read there that they are to be seen as the fall. That institutions were made for man and not man for institutions is a compelling insight, but the inference that institutions are evil as such does not follow.

This paper therefore offers to explore a few random notions by way of theological reflection on God and Nation.
FOCUS

Having indicated some assumptions it is time to select a focus. What is this entity Nation whose theology is being sought?

Although the word can refer to a wide variety of entities, the focus I have in mind is: A People, institutionalized into a structure which holds some kind of political sovereignty.

Such naming of the referant is a long way from comprehending its nature and it is important to have some notion of its nature if we are to pursue a theology for it. I am sure that our hesitancy to reflect theologically on the matter has as much to do with our incomprehension of the dynamics of nationhood as it is to its estrangement from God.

Comprehending Nation

How does NATION get comprehended? It is the stuff of song and poetry. The nation England has been described as "1066 and All That". A nation is a people who accept a common history, sometimes helped along by self-conscious image makers (as with the people of Israel). The people share a culture, not necessarily a common language. It is shaped by such factors as geographical environment, economic organization and a chain of historic accidents and decisions. It gets its identity from its myths and rituals. It is sustained as a collective by myths that work. Many of its components are not even visible to its members until seen in comparison with those of another people. It commands powerful loyalties and oppositions although its members are not always conscious of its dynamics.

Nation is so difficult of comprehension that one is inclined to abandon any attempt to do theology with reference to it. However, its dynamics are operative and have enormous social and moral impact whether they are attended to or not. Therefore, theological reflection is called for.

God and the Givenness of Nationality

Upon being invited to contribute a paper to this project I found myself wondering how I could be anything but a Canadian. At the same time I had to admit that Canada was not of my making, nor had I any idea what I was ready to do, or capable of doing, should my nation be threatened with disintegration. The quality of inherited givenness makes one's nation a strange matter to reflect theologically about. However, allowing that most of its material is given, something has impact upon the development of Nationhood. The greater
chance that the impact will be redemptive will come from people who accept responsibility for what they have received, rather than make out they are not involved. A critical awareness of national dynamics and theological reflection are called for.

We - They and God

As I thought of what I would miss if Canada disintegrated I had to admit that not everyone in the country would hold the same things precious. Not everyone shared the myths that worked for me. Indeed, some of these myths were seen by some as precisely the material that alienated them and, by others, as the very material that had been used to manipulate, exploit and oppress them. The problem with working national myths is that they exclude outsiders while providing insiders with an identity. Working myths put us into a WE/THEY situation. What's the word to this condition?

I propose that the total abandonment of people mythology is not the solution. To offer this as the Christian word is, I think, to misapply the Galation text "There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female, for you are one is Christ Jesus" (3: 28). The doctrine of the Incarnation, which is somewhat central to the Christian understanding of God, posts warning against expecting salvation to be located in some kind of spiritualized ideal.

I also think that the proposal to opt for some world-wide-human ideology is one of these idealized solutions. The trouble with a world-wide-human ideology is that, even if it succeeded in creating a historic entity, it too would be subject to the fall. It would be another form of WE/HEY only its imperialism would be masked by innocence and thereby its impact of greater violence. Such a universal and innocent entity would be even more vicious if it purported to be the institution whereby people became the sons and daughters of God.

The more likely cure for the aggression of an exclusive peoplehood, is a mutual recognition of peoplehoods. Something like this is closer to the Christian doctrine of Reconciliation by God than is an idealized internationalism which faces no checks to its hidden aggression.

It seems to me that we need a word which lets us recognize and have our peoplehood, which exposes that condition to penetrating judgment and grace, which allows others to have their peoplehood, and enables us together to be reconciled by God. I don't think I am called to abandon all my myths, but
rather permit others to share them or reject them as they choose, to permit them to contribute their own, and to be open to the word of God addressing that confrontation.

Later Arrivals

Immigrants, with roots other than my own do not share all of what I see as my Canadian Identity. But some change has come upon them even as they sojourn in a land of promise as in a foreign land. They are no longer what they were. But like the patriarchs as understood by the author of Hebrews, they are a people who make it clear they are seeking a homeland, for "If they had been thinking of that land from which they had gone out, they would have had opportunity to return" (Heb. 11: 15). This appears to me to be a myth we can all share.

Oppressed-Oppressor

Citizens who feel themselves to be a conquered people do not feel the same as I do about Canadian identity. As I think of the myths and symbols that create my Canadian identity such as the railway, the trek west of the earlier eastern settlers, and the penetration from the Atlantic up the rivers and into the Great Lakes, I must admit that; for some, these myths and symbols that do not apply, or that represent oppression. Ours is a land that was taken from others who were there before us. A central fact of our history was the conquest of one people by another. A basic pattern of our economic development has been the exploitation of a hinterland by a concentration of power applied from a distance.

What's called for, it seems to me, in an increased awareness of the oppressed-oppressor pattern of our history and mythology -- the French fact, the Native peoples, the Maritimes, the West. We need to have, as part of our common mythology, the story as the oppressed tell it. Something redemptive will have happened to Canadian nationhood when we call the Haida myths ours, and when we hear the story of the "Reel Rebellion" also as a story of the defence for the west from foreign invasion.

Sovereignty

We have been considering the cultural and mythological elements that go with peoplehood. These are not the only components to Nationhood although they are a necessary part of it, and we cannot deal significantly with Nation if we ignore them. But theological reflection is also called for concerning the other component in our focus. Nation is seen here as a people institutionalized into a structure which holds some kind of political sovereignty. Indeed, the need for theological reflection in this matter is
even more compelling, for here we enter what is more obviously a moral realm. The way in which sovereignty rests in a political structure, or whether it should rest there at all or not, is a moral question. Structures which hold power over people can do evil things. Political institutions can be fearsome instruments in the hands of power structures to accomplish evil ends. Wars are generated by nation states jealous of their sovereignty or by peoples seeking to become nation states. Sovereignty is capable of oppression.

I think that our age has become so overwhelmed by the injustices perpetrated by institutions that we have come close to deciding they are evil as such. We have fallen into an anti-institutional stance and find theological affirmation for that stance in the historic tradition. People are central in the eyes of God. Collectivities are evil. Nation states are the cause of wars. Therefore God is against Nationhood.

I take such theological reflection to be neither adequate to the situation nor true to the historic tradition. Indeed the tradition does affirm that God alone is King, but it also affirms that He promises something special to David's line. The state is seen as Beast, but the civil authorities are also seen as being appointed by God. I think these Biblical ambiguities are essential.

One of the reasons for this opinion is that, although individual human rights are properly seen as being ordained of God, they are delivered on this earth by power structures. The fact that I am born, might entitle me to certain rights, but it is as we organize together that I am afforded them. There's the rub -- Nation states do perpetrate evil but as yet they are the key instruments in the provision and maintenance of justice. There is no way justice can be done without care being given institutions of political power.

National Unity vs Regionalism

The present threat to Canadian Nationhood appears to be coming from regionalism. This appeals to many as the cure for the oppression that the present structure perpetrates. Is there a Word to this situation?

I think it would be preposterous to propose that God wills national unity and that guidance therefore be sought for strategies to accomplish this.
However, the fact remains that some centre of political sovereignty will be required to accomplish any cure of the injustice in the situation. God's will is that justice be done. Is a nation-wide sovereignty a more likely forum for justice to get done or would a bunch of regional sovereignties be a more appropriate instrument? That question won't be answerable in an historic vacuum nor will it be well answered by a failure to consider the fate of any regional sovereignties in the shadow of a much more powerful sovereignty to the south of us.

The question then becomes -- What is the most likely instrument for curing the injustice? -- and guidance needs to be sought for strategies to get that question dealt with instead of evaded or predecided.

Some open acknowledgement and appreciation of the injustices are needed as well as some open exploration of the remedies. It is upon this undertaking that we need theological reflection. What new insights might we hear out of a renewed dialogue with the historic tradition?

1. It sounds like sin-bearing is required. Insights into the distinction between sin-bearing and guilt-tripping would be helpful.

2. It sounds like a new hearing of the doctrine of Just-and-Sinner-at-the-Same-Time would be helpful. There are profound theological reasons for saying that exploration for remedies must be open. A clearer understanding of the eschatological stance of the New Testament warns us against identifying one particular solution as the state of grace and another as the state of sin.

3. The historic doctrines of God in History and of the Incarnation warn us against expecting to find salvation in an idealized dream state. We are called to discover the saving activity of God in History. We are invited to expect salvation in the flesh.

The Complex Question of The Cure of Structures

The question of God and Nation is an aspect of the enquiry into the relationship of the Reign of God and structures. Decisions and actions in this matter are an aspect of societal ministry. It seems to me that the United Church of Canada is only on the threshold of the kind of theological reflection this will require of us. Christians have been preoccupied in the past with Church and State matters. Positions were developed and held which characterized certain Christian sub-cultures for generations. I don't find them presently helpful.
This paper is an attempt to find some new connections between a tradition, rich in insight on the matter, and an issue of major consequence. It may have belaboured the obvious, it certainly leaves most of the work to be done. But to come up with anything pertinent, the reflection will need to accompany a responsible engaging in the issue.