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THE RELIGIOUS FACTOR IN THE SCOTTISH INDEPENDENCE REFERENDUM

Abstract

The 2014 referendum in Scotland, which brought victory for unionists, was characterised by a high level of involvement of religious organisations. Most Christian Churches chose to be neutral on the referendum dilemma; this was inspired by prevailing viewpoints among the clergy, who objected Scottish independence. Analysing the stance of the Church of Scotland, Roman Catholic Church, Episcopal Church of Scotland, and Free Church of Scotland, I argue in this paper that the chosen path of neutrality played more in favour of unionists. The Churches' influence on the referendum's outcome was far beyond statistical error: had Churches publicly supported independence, it would have been likely that Edinburgh would now be negotiating the terms of "divorce" with London.

Keywords: Churches; Scotland; religion; independence; referendum.

Introduction

The September 2014 referendum in Scotland, where its people were offered to choose between independence and the continuation of the union with the rest of the UK, was, undoubtedly, a landmark event in the life of Scotland and even wider Europe. Indeed, for the first time in the history of the European Union, the issue of secession of a territory from an EU member state was put for the public voting, with the agreement of all major political forces. The negotiations, held among elite circles, led to the signing by the UK and Scottish Governments of Edinburgh Agreement on 15 October 2012. This agreement, praised as "an example of dialogue and conciliation" (Guibernau et al., 2013, p. 3), allowed the Parliament of Scotland to legislate for a single question referendum. The motion to offer to electorate several choices (i.e. to include, as a third option, greater devolution without independence) was decisively rejected by London during negotiations (Casanas Adam 2014). On 18 September 2014, Scots were asked a simple and clear question: "Should Scotland be

an independent country? Yes/No”, allowing them to define their future. A balanced victory of unionists emerged as the referendum’s outcome: they defeated pro-independence camp with 55.3 to 44.7 score, getting majority in most Scottish council areas, apart from Dundee, Glasgow, North Lanarkshire and West Dunbartonshire.

As evident from the increasing number of academic publications, social scientists highlighted their growing interest in the Scottish referendum. The analysis was largely grouped around the involvement of political parties, non-governmental organisations and legal, historical and ideological factors, the presence and influence of which was at times in the heart of debates and was shaping choices and preferences (Tierney 2013, Torrance 2013, Torrance 2014, Hassan 2014, Mullen 2014). In this array of opinions, the religious variables were also visible, although not as bright as one could expect: their presence was seen in the pre-referendum papers (Bonney 2013, Bradley 2014), while post-referendum publications did not produce any substantial study, specifically outlining the role of Churches. Although Eric Stoddart in his article “Public Practical Theology in Scotland: with particular reference to the independence referendum” devoted short sections to the Church of Scotland, Roman Catholic Church and Episcopal Church contributions, these sections were limited to mainly listing some events, organised by Churches and mentioning several papers produced (Stoddart 2014). Such a neglect of the analysis of Churches’ involvement in the Scottish referendum is hardly justifiable, although it is reflective of the general trend of overlooking religious actors, in line with secularisation assumptions. However, even if the secularisation hypothesis for Scotland is true, one needs to bear in mind that the majority of Scots — 53.8 percent -- regard themselves Christian, according to the last (2011) census. Even supposing that for many of them this is more cultural self-identification than the reflection of their regular religious practices, we still need to realise that the voluntary desire to declare such self-identification implies some links with Christian Churches. In addition to this phenomenon, the presence of Churches in the life of Scotland was visible not only in the distant past or at the important events (such as the Act of Union and Disruption), but also consequentially from 1707 to 1999, when:

The Church’s [Church of Scotland] General Assembly was the nearest thing that Scotland had to a parliament, gathering representatives from every parish to consider the wellbeing of the nation and to engage in democratic debate on a number of important public issues of the day. The debates

on the Assembly's Church and Nation Committee's annual report were regularly attended by leading Scottish politicians who sat intently in the gallery (Bradley 2014, p. 169).

True, this central role of the Kirk¹ faded away after the establishment of the Parliament in 1999, but it definitely did not fall to the zero level. Reduced, but still palpable significance of the Kirk as well as the growing importance of the Roman Catholic Church, do not allow to consign religious organisations to limbo. Indeed, in spite of the Church of Scotland's membership decline, there were 32.4 percent of respondents in 2011 census who described themselves as affiliated with this Church, while 15.9 declared their belonging to the Roman Catholic Church. These figures are substantial enough to expect that the involvement of Churches in the Scottish political/societal life, including independence referendum, should be acknowledged appropriately. My main argument is that their influence and participation, partly concealed by the chosen pattern of behaviour (neutrality), was crucial for the campaign and influenced its outcome, even to the substantial degree.

This paper is structured as follows. First, I discuss the theoretical foundations for the Churches' stances on sovereignty and integration. Second, I analyse the involvement in the referendum campaign of main Scottish Churches: Church of Scotland, Roman Catholic Church, Episcopal Church of Scotland and Free Church of Scotland, and several smaller denominations.

Churches and Independence: The Theoretical Approach

First, we need to identify if Churches are in principle willing to take, on their official level, a perspective on the issues of sovereignty and independence. Here, I make a clear distinction between the position of the Church, expressed on the level of appropriate governing body (Synod, General Assembly, Bishops' Council, etc), and the opinions of individual Church members, either lay or ordained. Individuals, especially not belonging to the college of clergy, are free to articulate their views, but these are regarded as their personal opinions, not necessarily reflecting the view of their Church. These private opinions are undoubtedly present and in some cases they proliferate, especially at the times of important political and societal changes, but, as noted earlier, it would be incorrect

to attribute an opinion of, say, “Catholic lawyer” or “Anglican writer” to the official perspective of their denominations.

On the other hand, the decisions on the higher (official) Church level, related to the contested issues of sovereignty, independence and integration are rare. Normally, these decisions are taken during “once a generation opportunity” developments, when both the political establishment and the population en masse wishes to hear the voice of Churches. For instance, Churches expressed their official attitudes towards European integration, as a rule in favour of the uniting Europe (Mudrov 2015). Although entering the European Union required certain reduction of national sovereignty, there was hardly any case of opposing EU membership from mainstream Churches in the candidate countries. Even in the UK, historically one of the most Eurosceptic states, the Church of England favoured integration. Indeed, in 1972, at the first debate of the General Synod of the Church of England on Europe, a special report, “Britain in Europe: Social Responsibility of the Church” was produced, with positive statements on the UK’s forthcoming membership in the European Economic Community:

British membership of a Community which (based as it is on a common understanding of human rights and liberties) counts among its aims the reconciliation of European enmities, the responsible stewardship of European resources and the enrichment of Europe’s contribution to the rest of mankind, is to be welcomed as an opportunity for Christians to work for the achievement of these ends (Church of England 1972).

The Churches’ support was also evident in the major EU enlargements of 2004 (ten new countries) and 2007 (two new countries), when Catholics, Orthodox and Protestants approved their countries’ membership in the Union. The discordant voices coming from certain religious communities and hierarchs were also present, but the official stance, on the level of the governing Church bodies, was clearly in favour of integration. In some cases, there even occurred direct interventions in the debate from high-profile religious leaders. A prominent testimony to that was Pope John Paul II’s request to Poles, before the June 2003 referendum in Poland on the EU membership, to vote in favour of the Union. This intervention from the head of the Catholic Church was met with dissatisfaction by those influential Catholic figures who opposed Polish transfer of sovereignty from the Presidential palace in Warsaw to the European quarters in

Brussels (Mudrov 2015), but the outcome of referendum in Poland was overwhelmingly pro-European.

The pro-EU stance of the Pope was quite in line with the theoretical assumptions that Catholics tend to be more in favour of integration, while Protestants are normally in favour of nation-states. Brent Nelsen and James Guth point out that, for Catholics, “[t]he nation-state has never been the ultimate authority” and “[t]he Church has always preferred a level of governance above the nation-state that united Christians under the Pope’s moral guidance” (Nelsen et al. 2001, p. 201). “The traditional Catholic perception”, according to Ivy Hamerly, is that the “state sovereignty caused strife”, while, in contrast to that, “Protestants see state sovereignty as preserving peaceful diversity in Europe” (Hamerly 2012, p. 217). Overall, Hamerly’s statements are in line with the prevailing assumptions: Protestants “tend to place a higher value on national sovereignty”, but Catholics are more in favour of integration and unification (Hamerly 2012, p. 216).

In the analysis of this religious divide (Protestant/Catholic), the presence of Orthodox Churches was not given similar consideration, although one could expect Orthodox to be more in favour of the unification trend. As a testimony to that, in the Basis of the Social Concept of the Russian Orthodox Church—the world’s largest Orthodox Church—one can discover greater appraisal of integration rather than nation-states (The Russian Orthodox Church N.d.). Practically, the Orthodox Churches of Cyprus, Romania and Bulgaria generally supported their countries’ membership in the EU, in spite of some opposition, which continue to exist and even increase in some cases (Archbishop Chrysostomos 2011). No Orthodox Church required on the level of its Synod or Council the withdrawal from the EU, and no similar requirement has ever been articulated by other Christian denominations in Europe, with the exception of some Free Churches, such as the Free Presbyterian Church in Northern Ireland.

Overall, it is evident that Churches do express their views on the issues of sovereignty and integration, even if they are reluctant public speakers in this area – at least more reluctant than on the issues of family and protection of life. However, the mainstream perspective on the Catholic-Protestant divide seems now outdated. My argument here will be that, while recognising the historical value of the Protestant versus Catholic attitudes towards sovereignty, one needs to point to a changing pattern: the conceptual shift, in most Christian denominations, in favour of supranational unions. As a testimony to that, most Christian denominations

in the UK spoke in favour of the remaining in the European Union, before the June 2016 referendum on the EU membership.

Churches and the Scottish Referendum: Involvement and Debates

One of the key questions, which is of relevance to the main focus of this paper, is whether the Scottish Government expressed its interest in the religious participation in the independence debates. From what is known, this interest was minimal, and Churches were not specifically invited to contribute to this campaign. Nor were they given any special consideration -- a sharp contrast with the discussion on the future of Scotland in the 17th and 18th centuries, which eventually led to the new status (Union), sought out now to be overturned by the Scottish National Party (SNP). Indeed, three centuries ago arguments for closer union "were often couched in Protestant terms"; unity and divisions were found in faith issues, and "the attempts to impose on Scotland what were perceived as English forms of worship, and English norms of church government (bishops)" provoked the revolution against Charles I (Mason 2013, p.142).

On the surface, this lack of Government's interest might be interpreted as the deliberate downgrading of the Churches' role by those agenda-setters who elaborated the main principles and instruments for the public voting. The principal arguments in favour of independence, articulated by the Scottish Government, did not include reference to religion, even indirectly. The main focus lied elsewhere, in the domain of economic benefits and the desired opportunity not to be governed by "the hands of others":

If we vote No, Scotland stands still. A once in a generation opportunity to follow a different path, and choose a new and better direction for our nation, is lost. Decisions about Scotland would remain in the hands of others <...> With independence we can make Scotland the fairer and more successful country we all know it should be. We can make Scotland's vast wealth and resources work much better for everyone in our country, creating a society that reflects our hopes and ambition. Being independent means we will have a government that we choose – a government that always puts the people of Scotland first (The Scottish Government 2013).

Within the 670 pages of the “Scotland’s future” White Paper, published by the Scottish Government in November 2013, Churches were listed just as civil society organisations, along with “Business philanthropists, co-operatives and mutuals, trade unions, charities and many other organisations and individuals” (The Scottish Government 2013a, pp. 368-369). Religion was scarcely mentioned in the main body of the document, manifested only in the statement that “An independent Scottish Government will promote, and support amongst the Commonwealth States with the Queen as Head of State, a similar measure to remove religious discrimination from the succession rules”² (The Scottish Government 2013a, p.354). An additional remark appeared in the “Questions and Answers” section, where it was declared, in the answer to question 590, that “We propose no change to the legal status of any religion or of Scotland’s churches” (The Scottish Government 2013a, p.564). The request of “Scotland’s diverse faith traditions” to see proper recognition of the “contribution of faith to Scotland’s society” was not granted such an acknowledgement.

However, this ignorance was not necessarily the reflection of the downgrading of religion, although “the lack of detail on the Kirk’s role”, as a former moderator of the Church of Scotland claimed, was indeed noticeable. True, it would have been fairer if the historical role of the Kirk was mentioned, but one has to point, in this case, to another important fact: Scottish Christianity did not start from the Reformation. Bearing in mind multifaith and not exclusively Protestant presence in the history of Scotland, this “lack of detail” could be interpreted as a reflection of more objective and positive stance of the Scottish Government towards different Churches, as well as understanding of the shifting religious preferences. The Kirk is now losing its membership, with the increasing significance, at the same time, of the Roman Catholic and Free Churches, who broaden their base at the expense of the Kirk’s fleeing members and due to the immigrants, coming mainly from the former Communist bloc. David Brown writes about the Catholic Church as “rivalling the established Church of Scotland in terms of active members” (Brown 2014, p.88). Therefore, any provision for a special Kirk’s role in an independent Scotland would look like a bias against other Churches, which, the existing trend prevails, may well assume in the future the role of national Churches, especially in practical/numerical terms. It is not accidental in this context that there were attempts by the SNP and Scottish Government “to gain support among Roman Catholics” (Bonney 2013, p. 483), and the Catholic Church,

according to Norman Bonney, was granted “a disproportionately high involvement” in leading *Time for Reflection*³ in the Scottish Parliament (Bonney 2013, p. 480).

Overall, the immediate pre-referendum history of Scotland does not reveal a clear stance towards Churches. There were cases when the Churches’ opinion was disregarded, and religion-based arguments were ridiculed and marginalised. The most vivid example was the rejection of the Churches’ concern in the process of legalising same-sex marriages. This left Christian Churches, who organised and led “Scotland for marriage” campaign, with a feeling of deep sorrow towards the Government, which pressed hard for this piece of legislation, in spite of the substantial public opposition. John Ross was very critical of the decisions, made after the introduction of the Scottish Parliament:

In the decade following its founding the Scottish Parliament has enacted, or is planning to enact, legislation further divorcing Scotland from its Christian heritage. The judiciary has been secularised, the Christian understanding of marriage repudiated, the integrity of the family endangered, and Christianity’s historical place in the education of Scotland’s children further diminished (Ross 2014, p. 7).

On the other hand, one needs to note that this prevailing secularising trend was not something unique for Scotland: it was visible in the rest of Great Britain and in much of continental Europe. For a balanced assessment of developments, we should also take into account that the SNP Government was willing to respect the rights of those who disagreed with the introduction of same-sex marriages, especially on the grounds of religion and beliefs. The same Government provided some further support for the faith schools in Scotland and, in fact, as a Catholic priest explained, the SNP administration was more open to religion than the previous ones:

After 2007 elections, when SNP took power, Scottish education civil servants, who always kept the Church out (“no, no, we administer all things, you don’t”), were sent out to ask us what our concerns are and what we are interested in, and what they could do for us. This never happened in 100 years and this means openness to religion (Interview with Catholic priest, 2015).

Certainly, the conditions for Churches created by the SNP Government were not the best possible, but these were more favourable than what had been practiced by previous administrations. Somewhat paradoxically (this will be explained later), it was one of the factors which influenced the Churches' decision to abstain from giving an official piece of advice to people on how to vote. In fact, the analysis of the involvement of the main Christian denominations reveals a degree of formality on their part: quite an unusual behaviour in the circumstances, when Scotland was making an extremely important choice, "once in a generation opportunity". This involvement will be discussed below.

Church of Scotland

The decision on neutrality of the Church of Scotland was undoubtful: "the General Assembly has decided to remain impartial with regard to the outcome of the referendum" (Church of Scotland 2014, p.9), and the counter-motion for this -- "Commend aspiration to full nationhood for Scotland" was not put to the General Assembly, while the proposal on neutrality was accepted by 418 to 15 votes. However, this neutrality did not fully correspond with some previous actions of national Church, which "played a critical role in the movement which led to the establishment of the Scottish Parliament" (Church of Scotland N.d.). After the referendum, Church was welcoming further devolution in its submission to the Smith Committee. Also, the Kirk did not hesitate to take a public stance on such a political issue, as the EU membership, advocating Europhile perspective. Revd Dr Angus Morrison, Kirk's Moderator in 2015-2016, commenting on the opening of the blog on the EU membership referendum, stated that "the General Assembly had a long standing view that Britain was better off as part of the European Union", although he admitted that "ministers would not be telling people how to vote from the pulpit" (Life and Work Magazine 2015).

From a theoretical perspective, it had been pertinent to expect that the Church of Scotland would take a clear position and, as a national Church, would promote independence. This did not happen: although the Kirk became a very active participant in the referendum campaign, its slogans were carefully formulated, to keep neutrality. The then Moderator John Chalmers was convinced that Church ministers and members had "much to contribute to the substance of the discussion", but without taking

sides (Life and Work Magazine 2014). The Church's halls were offered for debates for politicians and public figures from various ideological spectrum; the Kirk also "held 32 community consultation events across the nation, reaching more than 900 participants" (Church of Scotland N.d.a). These participants chose values for the future Scotland; the most popular ten values included Equality, Fairness, Justice, Education, Respect, Honesty, Community, Opportunity, Compassion, and Tolerance (Church of Scotland N.d.a). These values, broad and acceptable to most layers of society, did not represent anything specific, provocative or challenging (for instance, there were no family values or sacredness of life), but Sally Foster-Fulton, convener in 2012-2016 of the Church and Society Council, was convinced that:

These values represent the best of human intentions. We can say: these are the things we share; values which are intrinsically Christian. We need to say: we are Christians and we are servants... The only side we were in this debate is a side of the poor (Interview with Foster-Fulton 2015).

One could legitimately ask why the Church, who chose to be "incredibly active" (Interview with Foster-Fulton 2015) at the campaign, kept such a strong attachment to the principles of neutrality and impartiality. The two main explanations, offered by the Church's representatives, were different, but both were hardly fully convincing. Foster-Fulton claimed that "we are a broad church and it was not for the Church to tell people what to think, but it was time for you to think because you had to decide on big thing" (Interview with Foster-Fulton 2015). The Clerk of Dundee Presbytery, Revd James Wilson, suggested that "there was no relevant issue for faith. Poverty is relevant, education is relevant, but independence is irrelevant" (Interview with Wilson 2015). However, the difficulty with these explanations is that, in a similar situation, facing a variety of opinions on EU membership, Church of Scotland refused to be neutral. In May 2016, the General Assembly overwhelmingly voted in favour of the case of the UK remaining in the EU. The suggestion not to put this controversial Leave/Remain dilemma for the Assembly's voting (to maintain the Church's neutrality) was rejected (Church of Scotland 2016). Also, the issues of poverty and education, highlighted by Wilson as "relevant to faith", were, in fact, intertwined with the Scottish independence dilemma, fuelled by socio-economic slogans from both sides.

In fact, the disagreement with somewhat superficial neutrality was visible: in August 2014, 34 serving and retired Kirk ministers published a pro-independence declaration, in a "Sunday Herald" newspaper. The signatories included some prominent figures from the Church of Scotland, such as Andrew McLellan, former moderator of the Church, and Norman Shanks, former convener of the Church and Nation Committee. The main issues the supporters of independence put on the agenda were those of nuclear weapons on the Scottish soil, inability of the Westminster Government to deliver "socially just and equitable society", and enhancing Scotland's contribution "to the wider community of nations" (STV 2014). Douglas Gay, an academic and Church of Scotland minister, while agreeing that many aims were, in principle, reachable without secession -- through further devolution, was firmly convinced in impossibility to remove nuclear weapons if Scotland remains a part of the UK (Interview with Gay 2015). The pro-independence declaration was almost immediately downplayed by Kirk's senior figures: John Chalmers re-assured the public in the Kirk's neutrality. The Moderator admitted that it was "their right" for ministers to sign the Declaration, but recalled their negligible numbers: they represented only 1.8 percent of the Church of Scotland ministers (STV 2014). Even after the referendum, in its 2014 Annual Report, the Church of Scotland highlighted that it was "at the heart of the debate about the future of Scotland" (Church of Scotland 2015, p.19), but further emphasised that it was not done for the promotion of either independence, or union. Instead, "we [the Church] asked ordinary people what they wanted for their country and we challenged the politicians to deliver what they called for" (Church of Scotland 2015, p.19). Norman Shanks, a former convener of the Church and Nation Committee, said that the Church took "a measured middle line", although he thinks "it was a pity". Shanks recounts:

In 1979 there was a first referendum in Scotland. Church took a strong line: there should be a home rule, and appropriate letter was prepared, encouraging people to vote "yes". However, it was prevented by senior figures, because Church of Scotland as a national Church should not take a partisan position. I think it is a very debatable issue. There are issues related to well-being of society, where it is appropriate to come to one side or another. On some issues it is appropriate to be specific; otherwise people in congregations say: they do not speak for me (Interview with Shanks 2015).

This dissatisfaction is reflective of the pro-independence perspective of some Church of Scotland members, although there is no evidence that they represented the majority; even the opposite seems true. Douglas Gay estimated that from 30 to 40 percent of the ministers and members of the Church of Scotland voted “yes” (Interview with Gay 2015), which is below average. According to the post-referendum survey, the number of Protestants who voted “Yes” was 39.9 percent (Fraser 2015), although this is inclusive of other Protestant denominations. The reason why the Kirk chose strong neutrality was, in fact, related to these prevailing attitudes. Indeed, the neutrality was seen as a tool for getting outcome, regarded as more acceptable for Scotland and for the Church of Scotland, which, according to David Chillingworth, was “slightly nervous about its status in an independent country” (Chillingworth 2014).

Roman Catholic Church

The Roman Catholic Church (RCC)—the second and more viable denomination, compared to the Church of Scotland, was in the same niche with the latter on the referendum dilemma: refraining from giving to Scottish people a piece of advice on how to vote. Archbishop Philip Tartaglia, president of the Bishops’ Conference of Scotland, encouraged everyone to vote “with complete freedom of choice and in accordance with their prayerful judgment of what is best for the future” (Harkins 2014). The Church decided to abstain mainly due to the lack of what was characterised as a “moral content” in the referendum, which seemed to offer a purely political choice. Also, bearing in mind the referendum dilemma, the RCC distanced itself from the Church of Scotland, as evident in the article written by Archbishop Leo Cushley:

The Catholic Church is not a national institution in Scotland in the way it was in the middle ages. Nor does it have the place—politically, religiously, numerically—of, say, the Church of Scotland. We do not have the unique, long-standing relationship with the state’s institutions that the Kirk as a national institution with a privileged constitutional status has to consider (Cushley 2014).

For the Catholic Church, the neutrality was indeed more logical and explicable step; and, in fact, its clergy was more disciplined in

observing this neutrality. Few exceptions were noticeable, though. Peter McBride, Parish Priest of St Thomas Catholic Church, Riddrie, Glasgow, openly revealed his pro-independence views, explaining this by a better possibility for “a more equitable distribution of resources and wealth” in an independent Scotland (Bergin 2014). Archbishop Leo Cushley was very careful in choosing his words in a June 2014 “Sunday Times” article, but he was adamant to dismiss what he called the “unfounded fear” of the creation of the ineradicable division by the referendum. This statement, irrespective of the degree of its diplomatic vagueness, would be playing in favour of the “Yes” campaign, since it was the opposite side -- “Better Together” -- who spoke about divisions and disturbing social reaction, as well as “anger and aggression” caused by the referendum (Interview with Keenan 2015). Regarding the most important questions for a “person of faith”, as Archbishop pointed out, such as “the freedom of belief and worship, and freedom of conscience”, there was “little to choose between the Westminster consensus and the Holyrood⁴ consensus—to say nothing of the European consensus” (Cushley 2014). However, most opinions, known to the general public, came from the Catholic laymen, and, typically, did not differ substantially from the concerns, articulated by the Church of Scotland’s people. Clyde Naval Base (Faslane) was there: Rennie McOwan, while not revealing plainly his stance on the referendum dilemma, was adamant to emphasise that “nuclear weapons are evil and immoral and British politicians are very happy about keeping them”; therefore “an independent Scotland could bring this [nuclear-free status] into fact” (McOwan 2014).

In contrast with “Yes” supporters, the arguments of Catholic unionists were at times harsh, encompassing gloomy predictions for the future of independent Scotland, mainly in politico-religious terms. Some spoke about fear of persecution: “a leading Catholic lawyer” Paul McBride claimed that sectarianism could blossom in an independent Scotland and the SNP policy could lead to “very serious consequences” for Catholics (Dunlop N.d.). Similar caution was expressed by Professor Patrick Reilly, a “leading Catholic academic” (according to “Scottish Catholic Observer”), who stated:

I know that some people feel safer being part of the UK, as they feel that England is more tolerant towards them than an independent Scotland might be. I can see why some people would take the view that Scotland would be more divided under independence (Dunlop N.d.).

However, the accusations against “priests and other officers of the Church”, who “campaign openly for one side in the referendum [for “Yes, Scotland”], sometimes directly from their pulpits” (Thompson 2014) need to be judged with caution. We may only speculate about the number of these priests and officers, and, certainly, cannot claim that they represented a sizable portion. Indeed, as a Catholic priest indicated, there was probably around 1 percent of priests who made their views known—in favour of independence. He also emphasised that he “was not conscious of any who spoke publicly” on the other side of spectrum, for the “Better Together” campaign. Even such a minor involvement of the Catholic clergy was perceived by this priest critically:

They [clergymen] were expressing their personal preferences. The bishops would have preferred they would not do that. In my personal opinion, they acted irresponsibly, because the following Sunday they had to stand before their people who voted one way or another. It’s my opinion that no one should know in my parish how I vote. I am not ordained a priest in the Church to make political choices for my parishioners. I am ordained to teach the teaching of the Church. Maybe the teaching of Church on specific issues: justice and peace, about pro-life—these are the things ... But I think it’s completely wrong to say: you should vote Labour, or SNP, or for independence, or not. I think this is a personal judgement which is not in my competence as a priest. I am not given a platform on Sunday as a citizen; I am given a platform as a priest of the Roman Catholic Church, to teach what the Church teaches, not my personal opinions (Interview with Catholic priest 2015).

According to Bishop Joseph Toal, “one or two priests” in his Diocese of Motherwell made their views known in favour of independence, but this occurrence was exceptional and was negatively perceived by parishioners. As Toal indicated, “people complained about that; people phoned me and said the priests should not be campaigning”. Toal also rejected Tom Gallagher’s assertion about the “covert support” for the “yes” campaign from the Catholic hierarchy. According to him, “we tried to be independent. We thought we should not actually interfere, it was not our place to do” (Interview with Toal 2015). Interestingly, two Catholic bishops whom I interviewed in England and Northern Ireland, also confirmed that they would prefer to stay neutral, had they lived in Scotland, although earlier one of them -- Bishop Noel Treanor from Belfast – did not hesitate to express publicly his views on the Treaty of Lisbon’s referendum in the

Republic of Ireland (Interview with Treanor 2015; Interview with Arnold 2015). Overall, the Catholic neutrality was quite well-maintained, in spite of the fact that, according to the pre-referendum estimates, Catholics were more likely to vote for independence than the members of the Church of Scotland. This was confirmed by the post-referendum survey, which found that 57.7 percent of Catholics supported separation of Scotland from the rest of UK (Fraser 2015). However, in such hierarchical structure as the Roman Catholic Church, the divisions between priests and laymen in their voting preferences are particularly important, but there is no data to assess these differences properly.

Episcopal Church of Scotland, Free Church of Scotland and Other Denominations

Both Episcopal and Free Churches, as the third and fourth largest denominations in Scotland (although much smaller, compared with the two main denominations) did not violate the general religious consensus on neutrality. David Chillingworth, primus of the Episcopal Church, published an article, where he described his identity as “Irish-British”, putting the Irishness on the first place. But he declined, in a 2015 interview, to reveal his stance on the independence dilemma and dismissed my assumption on how he voted, which I based on the peculiarities of his self-described identity:

I do not want to disclose [my perspective]. I do not think that it's right for you to take a statement of my identity and decide how I vote. It's very dangerous for Churches to be in a position that someone looks—you are from the Roman Catholic Church, or Episcopal Church, therefore you vote at the referendum in that or this way. This gives us the sectarianism, like in Ireland (Interview with Chillingworth 2015).

Most Episcopal clergy took a similar nuanced position, at least publicly. Bishop of Aberdeen and Orkney, Robert Gillies, claimed in his article that “There's a strong pull towards Scotland becoming an independent, small nation”, but he immediately stated that there is “[a]n equally strong argument that says all Scotland needs are greater devolved powers within the existing UK” (Gillies 2014). However, there were clergy who openly expressed their views, often via social media, supporting one side or

another. David Chillingworth was critical of that behaviour, even if the statements did not cross the borders of the Internet:

I think it was a mistake. They should not have done that... It's always a difficult question. Where people appear making statements in their role as clergy—it's their mistake. If you are a member of the congregation and you oppose to independence and your priest declares on social media to be in favour—it's difficult. It will affect your relations with the Church. I chose for obvious reasons not to express my personal view -- it's one of the sacrifices you make. It's profoundly dangerous for Churches to take view on what flag flies. Some clergy does not realize this; there is a plenty of sectarianism in Scotland (Interview with Chillingworth 2015)

Although the Free Church of Scotland, the fourth largest denomination, is very different from the Episcopal Church in terms of its doctrine and organisation, its official view was in the same vein: that of neutrality. As David Robertson, Free Church Moderator since 2015, pointed out, "as denomination, we do not hold political views, we hold social and moral views" (Interview with Robertson 2015). However, two perspectives were articulated at the General Assembly in May 2014: for and against independence. John Ross, discussing possible developments in case of the "Yes" vote, noted that, based on the SNP documents, "in an independent Scotland, as a matter of public policy, and for the first time since the Reformation, Christianity will be deprived of state recognition as Scotland's national religion" (Ross 2014, p.8). As Ross underlined in an e-mail correspondence, "one of main concerns was the lack of provision made by the SNP for an adequate state recognition of Presbyterianism equivalent to that which has operated in Scotland since the Reformation" (E-mail correspondence with Ross). On the other hand, Neil MacLeod emphasised that the choice was between secular Scotland and secular Britain, but the "No" vote means "the Church has no voice", while "Yes" vote presupposes positive change, "where the church articulates a clear vision of the place it should have in the nation state; what other rights would we want to see, for example whether the church should advocate for protections for freedom of religion or freedom of worship" (Free Church of Scotland 2014).

It is also worth noting that smaller denominations, such as the Free Presbyterians, the Free Church (Continuing), the Reformed Presbyterians along with some others issued their discussion papers on the referendum

(Free Presbyterian Church of Scotland 2014). These papers highlighted, as Revd John Forbes specified, “many legitimate spiritual concerns”, but largely were left unnoticed. The same happened with Forbes’ deliberations on the nature of the Treaty of Union and its violation by England. Indeed, Forbes was adamant to highlight the concerns that were outside the mainstream economic-political-social domain, since, from his perspective, it had nothing to do with the independence dilemma:

What is absolutely certain is that issues such as the economy, democracy, healthcare and North Sea oil, etc. have nothing whatever to do with the essential principles of Scottish nationhood. Don’t let these be the key issues that make up your mind. If you intend to vote Yes because you think it will bring a more wealthy and democratic Scotland, then you are voting for the wrong reasons. If you intend to vote No because you think you will be more stable and secure remaining within the United Kingdom, then you are also voting for the wrong reasons <...> The only legitimate reason to seek independence is because the Treaty has been violated and you believe independence will give a better opportunity for redress (Forbes 2014).

However, this perspective was indeed marginal and never acquired its proper place in the mainstream debate. Although Free Presbyterian Church of Scotland commended the outcome of the referendum in religious terms (Vogan 2014), major Scottish denominations refrained from using explicitly religious language. The opinion of the Church of Scotland, articulated at the first General Assembly after the referendum, held in May 2015, did not go beyond usual praise for “authentic voice [of the Church] both during the campaign and after it” and “the wide public engagement and high turnout in the 2014 Referendum” (Church of Scotland 2015a; Church of Scotland 2015b). Obviously, smaller Scottish Churches remained isolated in their attempts to bring distinct dimensions to the referendum’s discussions.

Concluding Remarks

The neutral or, in the words of David Chillingworth, “agnostic” perspective of Churches on the referendum dilemma was visible to all participants of the campaign. However, this did not look as something ordinary: as seen previously, Churches were willing to take stance on the issue of independence or integration, even in the circumstances of

divisions in society or the internal divisions among the Church members. The Scottish case was quite distinct in that regard: with a high degree of consensus, most Scottish Churches did not produce any recommendation to their flock on how to vote. Moreover, when some Church ministers or clergy took a public stance, it was normally followed by high-level statements, confirming the official neutrality of the Church.

In my view, such a perspective has the following explanation: Churches in Scotland were predominantly unionist, for number of reasons. First, Church membership is currently composed of older generation, which, as seen from the post-referendum survey, was in favour of the Union (Fraser 2015). Second, there was a degree of dissatisfaction with the absence of the adequate mentioning of Churches in the Scottish Government's White Paper "Scotland's future". This was especially contrasting in light of the arrangements in England (where the existence of the established Church is widely accepted), and of the European Union at large, with the explicit mentioning of religion and Churches in the main EU document—the Treaty of Lisbon (Mudrov 2016). Third, there was a strong historical feeling of unionism in the Church of Scotland: Ian Bradley even claimed that in the first half of the XX century, "the Kirk was a bastion of Unionism" (Bradley 2014, p. 170). Interestingly, before the 1997 devolution referendum, three Church of Scotland ministers became senior members of "Think Twice" campaign, which opposed devolution. There was no similar representation among the leading figures of "Scotland Forward", which played the opposite role, campaigning in favour of devolution and the establishment of Parliament with tax-raising powers. The Kirk was more pro-Union than the Roman Catholic Church, but this division was more visible on the laity level, while clergy was predominantly in favour of the union both in these Churches and most other denominations. Peter Mackenzie, SNP councillor in East Lothian Council, provided the following assessment:

The Churches were overwhelmingly unionist. From my own experience, Church of Scotland, Episcopal, Catholic and Baptist Churches were overwhelmingly against Scottish independence. I spent a lot of time in the advertising in Sunday Herald [in support of independence], phoning a lot of Church of Scotland ministers, asking to support us, and I got some angry replies. The clergy would be overwhelmingly unionist (Interview with Mackenzie 2015).

In spite of this predominant Unionism, it would have been difficult for Churches, bearing in mind the developments in the last decade, to take a unilateral pro-Union stance. The Scottish National Party, advocating independence, was in general more favourable to Churches than other parties; the SNP Government was more favourable than previous administrations. Therefore official anti-independence statements from Churches (had they come) would have looked as a sign of disrespect to the government, which was willing to show a high degree of support to religious organisations. This official neutrality led to some dissatisfaction from the SNP and pro-independence factions in Churches, but this was partly counter-balanced by the launch of the “Christians for Independence” group and by the public statements of some clergy, who often spoke on the “Yes, Scotland” side and were widely circulated in the media. In fact, the launch of “Christians for Independence” was mainly political initiative of the Scottish National Party, supported by some pro-independence factions of several Scottish Churches, especially in the Church of Scotland. Dave Thompson, Member of Scottish Parliament in 2007-2016 and Convener of the Group, emphasised that the group was aiming at “Christian voice to be heard” and “to let Christians know that it is OK to be in favour of independence” (Interview with Thompson 2015). It was the only group of such kind in Scotland; the opposite side—“Better Together”—did not establish anything similar. Most likely, it was a reflection of the SNP strategy to enhance its support among Christians, especially among members of national Church. The SNP felt that the Church of Scotland played more on the unionist side; it was indirectly confirmed by the appraisal of the Kirk’s activity from the “Better Together” campaign. Baroness Annabel Goldie “commended the work the Church of Scotland did pre and post Referendum, working to engage their communities and encourage them to think critically about politics and the communities in which they live” (Goldie 2015). The assumptions that Catholic hierarchy covertly supported “Yes” side also do not seem enough grounded.

One can ask, in this case, why the disobedient -- to the decisions of higher governing Church bodies – voices of clergy were mainly in favour of independence, while supporters of the union preferred to keep silent, following the path of neutrality. Foster-Fulton and Gay suggest that, first, it was due to the nature of “yes” and “no” groups, and, second, the “no” campaign was quite confident in its victory, not expecting their opponents to get more than 30-35 percent of public support. However, there could be one more reason: clergy, being “overwhelmingly unionist”, was satisfied

with the position of neutrality, realising that such stance played more in favour of unionists. Also, it did not want to jeopardise future perspective of their denominations in the unlikely (but still not excluded) event of Scotland eventually gaining independence. While we cannot provide exact assessment (in percentage) of how the stance of Churches shaped the outcome, it is evident that their influence was far beyond statistical errors. Had Churches publicly and fiercely supported independence, it would have been quite possible that Edinburgh would now be negotiating the terms of "divorce" with London, rather than just discussing new waves of devolution.

NOTES

- ¹ This is an informal name for the Presbyterian Church of Scotland, widely used in Scotland.
- ² Currently, the succession rules in the UK do not allow Roman Catholics to assume the monarch's throne.
- ³ This is a special time in the Scottish Parliament, when the representatives of different faith (or non-faith) groups give speeches on various ethical and moral issues. Normally it takes place once a week (during the Parliament's sessions) and lasts no more than 4 minutes.
- ⁴ This metonym is used to refer to the Scottish Parliament. It originates from the name of the area in Edinburgh, where the Parliament building is located.

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