

Thought for the Day – c. 0723, 5 August 2014 - BBC Radio Scotland

from Alastair McIntosh, a Quaker, author and scholar

Good Morning

Tonight's the night that Alistair Darling and Alex Salmond will meet on TV as each lays out a vision for our future nationhood.

But what is a nation? Is it merely another word for a state as the mechanisms of territorial administration?

Is a nation, as many academics would argue, just an "[imagined community](#)"; a community of interest defined by the projection of power mainly towards economic interests?

Or could it be that a nation is something more? As a theologian called [Ernest Renan](#) famously expressed it: "A nation is a soul, a spiritual principle."

It exists, he said, when "a large aggregate of people, healthy in mind and warm of heart, creates the kind of moral conscience which we call a nation."

Renan was coming from a Biblical perspective where people have souls and the collective inner spirit is personified as the "angels" of the nations.

Such a view might no longer find consensus, but I was back home on the Isle of Lewis ten days ago and went to the Lochs Agricultural Show where virtually the whole community had gathered. I found it an emotional experience; one that reaffirmed how it is that community coheres through a shared consciousness and this, raising the consideration that nations are precisely such communities writ large.

Angels, whether of the nations or otherwise, are sometimes to be wrestled with, and that can hurt. Jacob [wrestled](#) with an angel all night long and had his hip dislocated.

The referendum debate can also hurt. But the endgame for Jacob was to receive the angel's blessing, just as the endgame in community writ large is what the Bible calls "the healing of the nations", and that, rising to the potential of a higher, God-given vocation.