

# Unity and difference: John Robert Seeley and the political theology of international relations

DUNCAN S. A. BELL\*

**Abstract.** This article explores the international political thought of one of the most prominent late Victorian public intellectuals, John Robert Seeley (1834–95), the Regius Professor of Modern History at Cambridge, and author of the best-selling *The Expansion of England* (1883). Challenging conventional readings of Seeley, I argue that his vision of global politics must be located within the wider frame of his views on the sacred, and that he is seen best as articulating an intriguing political theology of international relations. In particular, I argue that instead of interpreting him as a realist, as has traditionally been the case, his position is classified most accurately as ‘cosmopolitan nationalism’. Only by situating him in the intellectual context(s) of his time is it possible to provide an adequate account of the identity of his political thought.

## Introduction

John Robert Seeley (1834–95), the Regius Professor of Modern History at Cambridge (1869–95), was one of the most prominent intellectuals in Victorian Britain; his was a voice that ranged across public discourse at the peak of the country’s global ascendancy. He played a noteworthy role in a number of significant intellectual and practical debates: he was a notorious figure in the pervasive conflicts over the nature of religious belief, especially through his best-selling study of the moral example of Christ, *Ecce Homo* (1866);<sup>1</sup> he was active in pushing for the reform of higher education, including the admission of women to the ancient universities; and he was a pioneer in the professionalisation of the academic study of history, whilst exerting, alongside his Oxford counterpart Edward Freeman, a powerful influence on establishing political science as a distinct field of

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<sup>1</sup> [J. R. Seeley], *Ecce Homo: A Survey of the Life and Work of Jesus Christ* (London: Macmillan, 1866). For the wider context see, for example, Frank M. Turner, *Between Science and Religion: The Reaction to Scientific Naturalism in Late Victorian England* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1974).

enquiry.<sup>2</sup> But he is remembered best, if at all, as a panegyrist of the empire, most notably in *The Expansion of England* (1883). In this essay I seek to dissect Seeley's international political thought, in so doing adding not only to our understanding of Seeley himself, but of the contours of late nineteenth-century political theorising more generally.

Seeley can be seen as an important, though often neglected, forerunner of the academic study of international relations. After John Stuart Mill, and perhaps Henry Maine, he has a good claim to being the individual most responsible for broadening the imaginative horizons of Victorian political thought: in contrast to what he saw – with considerable exaggeration – as the overwhelmingly parochial nature of much contemporary theorising, focused as it was (so he claimed) on the teleological unfolding of liberty and the glorification of the constitution, he elaborated a vision of the multifaceted connections between the 'international', the 'imperial', and the 'domestic', whilst stressing simultaneously that a richly-textured comprehension of the past was fundamental in grasping the lineaments of the present, as well as for mapping the future.<sup>3</sup> In his mind and in his writings these domains, both spatial and temporal, were often conjoined.

Seeley has been the focus of considerable scholarly attention.<sup>4</sup> However, the precise nature of his international thought remains poorly understood. In this essay I argue that the various existing interpretations of his ideas, developed by both IR scholars and historians, are inadequate, and that it is only possible to map the topography of his global vision by situating it within the wider framework of his conception of the sacred. Consequently, he cannot be inserted comfortably, as has often been the case, into the homogenising 'traditions' – whether realism, liberalism, or one of the multitude of other variations on this familiar theme – that are so often employed to identify and categorise historical figures. If we are to use retrospective labels at all, Seeley is viewed best as a 'cosmopolitan nationalist', a position underpinned by his understanding of religion. In the following analysis I do not attempt to paint an exhaustive picture of Seeley's thought, and many issues, including his attitude towards India, his

<sup>2</sup> J. R. Seeley, 'A Midlands University', *Fortnightly Review*, 42 (1887), pp. 703–16, and Seeley, *Introduction to Political Science: Two Series of Lectures*, ed. Henry Sidgwick (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1923 [1896]). See also, Peter Burroughs, 'John Robert Seeley and British Imperial History', *Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History*, 1 (1973), pp. 191–213; Reba N. Soffer, *Discipline and Power: The University, History, and the Making of an English Elite, 1870–1930* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1994); and John Burrow, Stefan Collini, and Donald Winch, *That Noble Science of Politics: A Study in Nineteenth-Century Intellectual History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983).

<sup>3</sup> See Seeley, *The Expansion of England: Two Courses of Lectures* (London: Macmillan, 1883), ch. 1, and his unfinished project, *The Growth of British Policy: An Historical Essay* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1895).

<sup>4</sup> The most useful studies on Seeley are: Deborah Wormell, *Sir John Seeley and the Uses of History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980); Richard Shannon, 'John Robert Seeley and the Idea of a National Church: A Study in Churchmanship, Historiography, and Politics', in Robert Robson (ed.), *Ideas and Institutions of Victorian Britain: Essays in Honour of George Kitson Clark* (London: Bell, 1967), pp. 236–67; H. S. Jones, *Victorian Political Thought* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 2000), pp. 55–9; Burrow, Collini, and Winch, *That Noble Science of Politics*, ch. 7; Reba Soffer, 'History and Religion: J. R. Seeley and the Burden of the Past', in R. W. Davis and R. J. Helmstadter (eds.), *Religion and Irreligion in Victorian Society: Essays in Honor of R. K. Webb* (London: Routledge, 1992), pp. 133–51; and, David Worsley, 'Sir John Robert Seeley and his Intellectual Legacy: Religion, Imperialism, and Nationalism in Victorian and Post-Victorian Britain', unpublished Ph.D., University of Manchester, 2001.

historical claims and historiographical system, and his writings on literature and education, are left aside.

Seeley is usually regarded as a fairly straightforward realist advocate of power politics.<sup>5</sup> Recently, two IR scholars have sketched somewhat different accounts: Karma Nabulsi has argued that he should be viewed as a ‘martialist’ aficionado of political violence, and Daniel Deudney, whilst not offering an alternative paradigmatic classification of Seeley, interprets his views on Greater Britain and imperial federation as a challenge to realist readings of late nineteenth-century political discourse.<sup>6</sup> All three interpretations, despite their differences, share a common feature: they fatally underestimate the importance of religion in the identity of Seeley’s thought. He was, above all, a political theologian of international relations. In the centrality of religion in his thought, it might be considered possible to discern a parallel between Seeley and a later generation of scholars, namely the stern avatars of an Augustinian realism, Kennan, Wight, Butterfield, and rather more ambiguously, Reinhold Niebuhr.<sup>7</sup> However, despite some superficial overlaps, Seeley’s theological stance was radically different from their darker visions – penned as they were in the face of ‘total war, totalitarianism, and the holocaust’.<sup>8</sup> It was far less pessimistic, about both the ‘city of man’ and human moral psychology, and it was less grounded in a conception of original sin. Seeley tried hard, if perhaps unconvincingly, to reconcile the apparently competing claims of science, rationality, faith and worship; his sources and intentions, as well as his prescriptions, diverged significantly from the realist political theologians.

The structure of the essay is as follows. In the next section I present and then challenge the interpretations of Deudney and Nabulsi. In the third section I outline briefly three further reasons why Seeley’s identification with realism is problematic: his notion of colonisation; his liberal internationalism; and his interweaving of domestic and international politics. In section four I sketch Seeley’s understanding of theology and religion, derived in particular from *Natural Religion* (1882) and, more indirectly but no less importantly, from *The Life and Times of Stein* (1878). In the following section I relate his political thought to these conceptions, stressing the importance of a specific moralised vision of the nation-state, but also of the unity of humankind, in his analysis. The essential compatibility between particularism and universalism, difference and unity, runs through his ethical and political writings.

<sup>5</sup> On realist interpretations, including that of W. T. R. Fox, see the discussion in Worsley, ‘Sir John Robert Seeley’, pp. 130–3. Worsley himself declares Seeley a realist (pp. 133 and 165). See also Burrow et al., *That Noble Science*, pp. 227 and 232.

<sup>6</sup> Karma Nabulsi, *Traditions of War: Occupation, Resistance, and the Law* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), ch. 4; and Deudney, ‘Greater Britain or Greater Synthesis? Seeley, Mackinder, and Wells on Britain in the Global Industrial Era’, *Review of International Studies*, 27:2 (2001), pp. 187–208.

<sup>7</sup> See here Alistair Murray, *Reconstructing Realism: Between Power Politics and Cosmopolitan Ethics* (Edinburgh: Keele University Press, 1996); Charles A. Jones, ‘Christian Realism and the Foundations of the English School’, *International Relations*, 17 (2003), pp. 371–87; and Ian Hall, ‘History, Christianity, and Diplomacy: Sir Herbert Butterfield and International Relations’, *Review of International Studies*, 28:4 (2002), pp. 719–36.

<sup>8</sup> The phrase is adapted from Ira Katznelson, *Desolation and Enlightenment: Political Knowledge after Total War, Totalitarianism, and the Holocaust* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003). Interestingly this fascinating book – which focuses on the post-World War II intellectual effort to develop a disenchanted variety of robust liberalism – fails to mention International Relations scholars, although Morgenthau in particular would find a place within its argument.

### Martialism and the materialist interpretation of history: recent interpretations

Karma Nabulsi has recently delineated a tradition of political reflection and prescription, common especially in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, that she terms 'martialism'. Martialists, she argues, propounded an ideology that 'glorified war and military conquest', and she differentiates this adulation of violence from the calculated and prudential reasoning of the realists.<sup>9</sup> This is, I believe, a category useful for demarcating a considerable, and often sidelined, body of political thought. Moreover, I agree with Nabulsi's contention that it is vital that the ideological (as opposed to the purely economic) roots of empire are taken more seriously, and that a 'martialist *Zeitgeist*' infused the thought and practice of many, though certainly not all, British soldiers, imperial administrators and civil servants. It was also expressed, though rarely in an explicit and straightforward sense, in the utterances of writers such as Thomas Carlyle, his epigone J. A. Froude, and J. A. Cramb.<sup>10</sup> It can further be seen, I would suggest, in the works of some of the more jingoistic British poets of the age, such as W. E. Henley, who claimed that 'War, the Red Angel', was the lifeblood of the nation.<sup>11</sup> But Nabulsi casts her net too widely. Seeley, she adduces, was 'an almost universally recognised' martialist, and she appears to endorse this classification of his thinking.<sup>12</sup> This is misguided on two counts. Firstly, as we have seen, most interpreters present Seeley as a realist. Secondly, it is difficult to fit Seeley within a martialist framework; he was never one of the 'High Priests of the Temple of Janus'.

Seeley has been labelled, appositely, as 'politely racist', a trait that he shared with swathes of the Victorian intelligentsia.<sup>13</sup> He was no pacifist, moreover, believing that war was sometimes necessary, and sometimes just. But he did not glorify or encourage it; nor did he romanticise violence. He despised Napoleon, a martialist hero, for his 'egotism and brutality', and he was highly critical of the 'military character', believing, for example, that it was this narrow conception of individual and collective identity that helped to destabilise the Roman empire.<sup>14</sup> He was critical also of the behaviour of the British in capturing and subduing India. (Though, in terms typical of the liberals of his time, he proceeded to qualify this criticism by arguing that since the violence had undermined the indigenous political structures of the Indians it was essential for the British to remain there, so as to avert a descent into

<sup>9</sup> Nabulsi, *Traditions of War*, p. 80. Martialists, 'glorified struggle as the highest activity of man, and romanticized wars and violence' (p. 126).

<sup>10</sup> Nabulsi, *Traditions of War*, pp. 111–19.

<sup>11</sup> Henley, 'Epilogue' [1897], in Henley, *Poems* (London: Macmillan, 1926), p. 241.

<sup>12</sup> Nabulsi, *Traditions of War*, p. 110, and pp. 115–16. It is hard to see how Charles Dilke fits into this picture of glorification (p. 113). See, for example, Dilke, *Problems of Greater Britain* (London: Macmillan, 1890). On Dilke, see David Nicholls, *The Lost Prime Minister: A Life of Sir Charles Dilke* (London: Hambledon Press, 1995), and Miles Taylor, 'Republics Versus Empires: Charles Dilke's Republicanism Reconsidered' in David Nash and Anthony Taylor (eds.), *Republicanism in Victorian Society* (Stroud: Sutton Publishing, 2003), pp. 25–34.

<sup>13</sup> Eliga Gould, 'A Virtual Nation? Greater Britain and the Imperial Legacy of the American Revolution', *American Historical Review*, 104 (1999), p. 486.

<sup>14</sup> This quote is found in Seeley 'Roman Imperialism', Part I [1869] in *Lectures and Essays* (London: Macmillan, 1870), p. 2. See also Seeley, *A Short History of Napoleon the First* (London: Seeley & Co., 1886). On the military character, see Seeley, 'Roman Imperialism', Part II [1869] in *Lectures and Essays*, p. 54.

chaos).<sup>15</sup> His thought on the ethical status of war shifted, although not radically, over the years. During the 1860s and into the 1870s he was decidedly critical of the use of political violence. In 'The United States of Europe' (1871), a quasi-Kantian essay on the prospect of peace descending finally on the violent continent, Seeley stated that like his 'Peace Society' audience he was 'convinced' that war ought to be abolished.<sup>16</sup> He thought this dream unlikely, but admirable. He then expounded a series of arguments in favour of war, including one – cast in terms of 'Providential justice' – that looks very like the martialist position, only to dismiss them.<sup>17</sup> Indeed he labelled war 'this great plague of society' and 'the greatest evil of evils'.<sup>18</sup> Whilst the latter of these claims was rather hyperbolic in relation to his wider writings, the former was a fairly accurate summary of his views. Meanwhile, he wrote in an 1870 analysis of the century that 'War and politics are antagonistic to one another, and all the energy that our fathers gave to fighting the French was taken away from the study of political improvement'.<sup>19</sup> Whilst the modern age, less war prone, might be 'more dull' in historical terms, 'in another sort of interest it completely eclipses the former age'.<sup>20</sup> That 'interest' was progress, a fragile value that he remained true to throughout his life; and violence, he contended, was largely inimical to progress, both moral and material. While Seeley's optimism faltered during the next two decades, this belief never left him. Martialists, in contradistinction, disdained the belief in progress.<sup>21</sup>

But as he came to regard the nation as the highest embodiment of human communal life, so his views on the (occasional) necessity of violence shifted, and he became more willing to defend the resort to war, although still he limited his approval to comparatively rare cases of national self-determination. Like many liberals, he supported the utilisation of political violence in the struggle for national liberation – at least, in another typically liberal move, for 'white' nations like Italy. It is little surprise, therefore, that the nearest Seeley came to romanticising war was in his discussion of the 'Anti-Napoleonic Revolution' in *The Life and Times of Stein*, a book charting the birth pangs of European nationalism. He wrote of the early nineteenth-century as 'years over which there broods a light of poetry', despite (not

<sup>15</sup> On his ambivalent attitudes towards India, see Part II of *Expansion of England*. It is interesting to note that he did not take any public stand on the Governor Eyre controversy, in which all those who might be termed 'martialists' came out in support of Eyre. See Bernard Semmel, *The Governor Eyre Controversy* (London: MacGibbon & Kee, 1962). On shifting liberal attitudes to India, see Karuna Mantena, 'The Crisis of Liberal Imperialism', paper presented at 'Victorian Visions of Global Order', University of Cambridge, July 2004. See also Duncan Bell, 'Empire and International Relations in Victorian Political Thought', *Historical Journal* (forthcoming, 2005).

<sup>16</sup> Seeley, 'The United States of Europe', *Macmillan's Magazine*, 23 (1871), p. 436. For subsequent peace society discussion of this lecture, see the *Herald of Peace* (April 1871), pp. 197–9, and the discussion in Martin Ceadel, *Semi-Detached Idealists: The British Peace Movement and International Relations, 1854–1945* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), pp. 93–4. I thank Professor Ceadel for bringing this response to my attention.

<sup>17</sup> Seeley, 'The United States of Europe', p. 437. 'It is in comparison with no justice at all that the justice of war is admirable; compared with any properly organized legal system, it is surely deplorable' (p. 438). His criticism of the 'utopia' of a world without war can also be found in 'The Impartial Study of Politics', *Contemporary Review*, 54 (1888), p. 57.

<sup>18</sup> Seeley, 'The United States of Europe', pp. 439 and 447: 'War tramples on the sense of right and wrong, and on the precepts of Christianity, as inevitably as it crushes the physical happiness of individuals' (p. 447).

<sup>19</sup> Seeley, 'The English Revolution of the Nineteenth Century', Part I, *Macmillan's Magazine*, 22 (1870), p. 242.

<sup>20</sup> Seeley, 'The English Revolution', Part I, p. 242.

<sup>21</sup> Nabulsi, *Traditions of War*, pp. 126–7.

because of), ‘unparalleled bloodshed’.<sup>22</sup> In studying that period, ‘we have before us war in its fairest aspect’: ‘They [the nationalists] have in a manner reconciled the modern world to war, for they have exhibited it as a civilising agent and a kind of teacher of morals’.<sup>23</sup> On the face of it, this could be read as a frank martialist statement. However, this would be an overly hasty conclusion. Not only is this an isolated passage in a large corpus of writings, the vast majority of which are far less sanguine about violence, but he regarded the consequences of nationalism with mixed emotions, for the result was the increasing militarisation of Europe, and ‘there must be few who can rest satisfied with such a state of affairs considered final and normal’.<sup>24</sup> Whilst he admired and defended (some) nationalist struggles, and at times seemed to believe that war could be educative for embryonic nations, he worried deeply about the consequences of violence. There was undoubtedly a tension in Seeley’s thought regarding the relationship between nationalism and violence: war, a human practice massively disruptive of progress, was, it seemed, the inevitable outcome of the spread of his principle of nationality, itself a marker of the progressive unfolding of history. He did not welcome this situation, however, indeed he deplored it, and he sought instead to tame and limit the incidence and the practices of war as much as possible. If anything, his adulatory ideas about the justice of national self-determination exposed a seam of strenuous republicanism in his thought.<sup>25</sup>

In his recent discussion of *fin de siècle* British international thought, Daniel Deudney explicates the political visions of Seeley, Halford Mackinder, and H. G. Wells in order to challenge conventional realist accounts of the strategic options available during the period. In so doing, he correctly locates Seeley in the context of the wide-ranging debate over imperial federation, the idea that the Anglo-Saxon colonies could be brought into closer union (of one sort or another) with the British ‘mother country’.<sup>26</sup> (This debate is particularly interesting from an IR perspective due to the frequency with which the notion of a globe-spanning Greater British state was proposed – by Seeley most forcefully – as a response to both globalisation and fear of domestic decline).<sup>27</sup> Whilst I would agree with much of what Deudney writes, he makes a number of noteworthy mistakes about both Seeley and the debate.<sup>28</sup> This seems to stem from two factors; firstly, he relies solely on *The Expansion of England*;

<sup>22</sup> Seeley, *The Life and Times of Stein, or Germany and Prussia in the Napoleonic Age*, Part II (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1878), pp. 41–2.

<sup>23</sup> Seeley, *Stein*, Part I, pp. 96–7.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 386–7.

<sup>25</sup> On the ‘republican’ elements of late Victorian imperial political thought, see Duncan S. A. Bell, ‘The Idea of a Patriot Queen? The Constitution, the Monarchy, and the Iconographic Order of Greater Britain, 1860–1900’, *Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History* (forthcoming, 2005).

<sup>26</sup> On imperial federation, see Michael Burgess, *The British Tradition of Federalism* (Leicester: Leicester University Press, 1995); J. E. Kendle, *Federal Britain: A History* (London: Routledge, 1997); and Duncan S. A. Bell, ‘The Debate About Federation in Empire Political Thought’, unpublished Ph.D., University of Cambridge, 2004.

<sup>27</sup> See Duncan S. A. Bell, ‘The Victorian Idea of a Global State’, paper presented at ‘Victorian Visions of Global Order’.

<sup>28</sup> It is worth noting that J. A. Froude was not the first to advance the idea of imperial federation (fn. 31): loose ideas about federation appeared throughout the century, but the first proper federalist scheme most likely originated in the 1850s; see [Rev. William Arthur?], ‘Our Australasian Possessions’, *London Quarterly Review*, 1 (1853), p. 550. Part of the problem here is that Deudney appears to be relying heavily for his references on C. A. Bodelson, *Studies in Mid-Victorian Imperialism* (London: Heinemann, 1960 [1924]); this book is now very dated, though it is still illuminating in parts.

and secondly, he conflates the often distinctive views of Seeley with those of other imperial federalists. Whilst Seeley was the most prominent federalist intellectual, his arguments were not synonymous with the views that dominated the polyphonic and ever-mutating movement. These omissions and elisions lead to a number of interpretative problems. Deudney suggests, for example, that the policy of imperial preference, which he seems to think central to federalist plans, would clash with the demands of local autonomy in the colonies.<sup>29</sup> This is misleading on two counts. Firstly, few of the federalists supported imperial preference; the vast majority were free traders.<sup>30</sup> Federation was conceived more frequently as a *Kriegsverein* than a *Zollverein*, and it was only with the Edwardian Tariff Reform movement that the ideology of free trade began to lose its firm grip on the British political imagination.<sup>31</sup> Secondly, it was primarily the colonial federalists – chiefly Australians and Canadians – who were demanding preferential treatment, and preference was therefore a policy favoured by the very same people keenest on protecting local autonomy.

Moreover, the overall argumentative structure of Deudney's essay is misconceived. He implies that during the period there were two competing and incommensurable positions: one, as propounded by Seeley and Mackinder, of a federal greater Britain; the other, as articulated by H. G. Wells, a non-formal union of Britain, the settler colonies, and America, a 'political association stronger than an inter-state alliance, but not so strong as a state . . .'<sup>32</sup> These alternatives followed, he argues, 'two radically different trajectories'.<sup>33</sup> There were certainly individuals, such as the industrialist Andrew Carnegie, who thought this the case.<sup>34</sup> This stark binary would, however, have surprised many of the federalists who were (unrealistically) intent upon securing both a federal Greater Britain and a re-union with America.<sup>35</sup> This ambitious ideal assumed various forms. For most, it would be based on a loose alliance, grounded in shared values, traditions, and, ultimately, a common race and/or nationality. For others, however, the United States was to be an integral part of the global federation, an element of Greater Britain.<sup>36</sup> There was no strict divide, no necessarily differential trajectory.

Turning from the federal debate to Seeley's own arguments, I would not quibble with most of the specific claims that Deudney makes about the *Expansion*. The major

<sup>29</sup> Deudney, 'Greater Britain or Greater Synthesis?' p. 202.

<sup>30</sup> Exceptions include, Sir Charles Tupper, 'Federating the Empire, A Colonial Plan', *The Nineteenth Century*, 30 (1891), pp. 509–20 and C. E. Howard Vincent, 'Inter-British Trade and its Influence on the Unity of the Empire', *Proceedings of the Royal Colonial Institute*, 22 (1891–2), pp. 265–88.

<sup>31</sup> Frank Trentman, 'The Strange Death of Free Trade: The Erosion of the "Liberal Consensus" in Great Britain, c.1903–1932', in Eugenio Biagini (ed.), *Citizenship and Community: Liberals, Radicals and Collective Identities in the British Isles, 1865–1931* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), pp. 219–51.

<sup>32</sup> Deudney, 'Greater Britain or Greater Synthesis?' p. 189. He writes: 'A second solution to the impending crisis of Britain's world position was for Britain to unite or integrate with the United States' (p. 203).

<sup>33</sup> Deudney, 'Greater Britain or Greater Synthesis?' p. 189.

<sup>34</sup> Carnegie, 'Imperial Federation: An American View', *The Nineteenth Century*, 30 (1891), pp. 490–508.

<sup>35</sup> Moreover, it should be stressed that the term federalism was (often) employed very loosely. This led to much confusion at the time: Richard Jebb, 'Imperial Organization', in Charles Sydney Goldman (ed.), *The Empire and the Century: A Series of Essays on Imperial Problems and Possibilities* (London: John Murray, 1905), pp. 333–6.

<sup>36</sup> See, for example, John Redpath Dougall, 'An Anglo-Saxon Alliance', *Contemporary Review*, 48 (1885), p. 706, and C. W. Oman, *England in the Nineteenth-Century* (London: Edward Arnold, 1899), p. 261.

problem, however, lies in the intellectual frame within which he locates the book. Due to Seeley's focus on shifts in transport and communications technology leading to demands for a change in 'polity ontology' (the form of polity), Deudney claims that Seeley displayed an 'unmistakable' 'materialist orientation'.<sup>37</sup> Of course, at the time 'materialist' was a term taken to mean something rather different, namely crude and largely secular capitalist accumulation, and Seeley was a vehement critic of this.<sup>38</sup> But even in Deudney's terms, Seeley was no materialist. Whilst he did indeed stress the importance of material factors in politics, he regarded religion, more than technology, as the motor driving the wheels of human history. And as we have seen, his views on war and nationality were ethically charged. Moreover, as will be argued in the following sections, it is impossible to grasp his political thought – including, and perhaps especially, his notion of Greater Britain – without locating it in his conception of a universal religion. He even viewed the scientific endeavour itself as a mode of theology.

### **Liberal nationalism and colonial desire: three brief arguments contra realism**

Thus far the picture of Seeley's thought that I have sketched could, with a bit of stretching, be accommodated within a broadly realist account. Seeley believed in the value and centrality of independent sovereign states (at least in the 'civilised' world); he was a great admirer of Ranke, and therefore it comes as no surprise that he placed the state at the centre of his historical vision.<sup>39</sup> He deplored war, but thought it ineradicable and sometimes necessary in a competitive international system lacking a central governing authority. He warned against the 'utopianism' of imagining a post-violent world, he stressed the value of detached political analysis, and he was determined to influence those in power, regarding the study of history as an indispensable 'school of statesmanship'.<sup>40</sup> But the differences between his position and conventional realism are still very considerable. Even without the religious modulation of his thought, there are (at least) three problems in viewing Seeley as a realist: the first concerns his encouragement of liberal nationalism, the second his attitudes towards the colonies, and the third his conjoining of domestic and international politics.

Seeley was, as noted, an ardent liberal nationalist. He supported the claims of numerous national self-determination movements, and he venerated nationalist leaders such as Mazzini.<sup>41</sup> This is a position that would appear to clash with the conventional realist belief in the necessity of maintaining order and the *status quo*

<sup>37</sup> Deudney, 'Greater Britain or Greater Synthesis?' p. 191.

<sup>38</sup> For example, Seeley, 'Introduction' to *Her Majesty's Colonies: A Series of Original Papers Issued under the Authority of the Royal Commission, Colonial and Indian Exhibition, 1886* (London: William Clowes and Sons, 1886), p. xiv.

<sup>39</sup> On the influence of Ranke on Seeley's historical thinking, see J. L. Herkless, 'Introduction' to Gustav Adolf Rein, *Sir John Robert Seeley*, trans. Herkless (Wolfeboro, NH Longwood Academic, 1987 [1912]), pp. i–xxiv. On the centrality of the state, see Seeley, 'History and Politics', *Macmillan's Magazine*, 40 (1879), Parts I–III, pp. 289–99, 369–78 and 449–58; *Expansion*, ch. 1; and *Political Science*, ch. 1.

<sup>40</sup> Seeley, 'The Teaching of Politics', p. 105.

<sup>41</sup> This was a fairly common liberal position; see Christopher Harvie, *The Lights of Liberalism: University Liberals and the Challenge of Democracy, 1860–86* (London: Allen Lane, 1976), ch. 5.



*ante* above claims about 'political justice'. Secondly, his ideological support for the British empire was not based, as it was for some of his contemporaries, solely or even primarily on strategic calculation: he was not content with moving pieces around a geopolitical chessboard. Whilst it is possible – though, I would suggest, incorrect – to read Seeley's support for a global British state purely in terms of maintaining military and economic predominance, this was not the way in which he, and many other liberals, defended British rule in India. Instead, he drew on both the language of the 'civilising' mission, a moral obligation to support the Indian people in the quest for progress, and argued that as the British were already entrenched in India they had a 'duty' to remain, as chaos would ensue if they departed.<sup>42</sup> The British, that is, were to act as the midwives of Indian modernity. Once again, such a heavily moralised concern with what we might now label 'nation building' does not find a prominent place in the constellation of realist thought.

Thirdly, Seeley's diagnosis of, and prescriptions for, global politics were linked intimately to his views on domestic politics.<sup>43</sup> The two, I would argue against standard interpretations, were enmeshed in his thought. Although in the 1860s and early 1870s Seeley had looked optimistically towards the future, by the 1880s his vision had darkened.<sup>44</sup> Like so many of his contemporaries he feared the potentially destabilising repercussions of democracy, in the wake of 1867 and in the face of 1884 – the two Reform Acts that propelled Britain on the road to democracy. Mass democracy challenged not only political stability but also cultural refinement and vibrancy, values he viewed as intrinsic to a healthy nation, and as a key component of citizenship.<sup>45</sup> Character, both collective and individual, required a wide education in national history and literature; the democratising impulse threatened, as John Stuart Mill had earlier warned, and as Matthew Arnold feared, to hollow out British culture.<sup>46</sup> However, in the wide expanses of Greater Britain, in a global Anglo-Saxon state, Seeley discerned a potential resolution. In this, he and the federalists concurred. Not only could the discontents of the industrial and agrarian working classes be transmuted into imperial patriots through a process of organised emigration – a process central to his notion of federation<sup>47</sup> – but a system of national education could revitalise British culture, transfiguring it from its moribund state into a dynamic force nourished by an appreciation of the glories of the nation and inculcated with the correct lessons about political morality. Seeley saw such an

<sup>42</sup> See, for example, Seeley, *Expansion*, p. 183, and Seeley, *Natural Religion*, p. 221. Deborah Wormell asserts (inaccurately) that Seeley disdained the civilising mission: Wormell, *Sir John Seeley*, p. 159.

<sup>43</sup> Although most realists today separate the domestic from the international, this has not always been the case. See Michael Williams, *The Realist Tradition and the Limits of International Relations* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005).

<sup>44</sup> Compare, for example, Seeley, 'The English Revolution', Part I, p. 251, with J. R. Seeley to Bessie Seeley, 9 April 1881, Seeley papers, University of London Library, MS903/2B/1; Seeley, 'Political Somnambulism', *Macmillan's Magazine*, 43 (1880), p. 31; and, explicating the role of home rule in this switch, Seeley, letter to Oscar Browning, 6 April 1887–8[?], Browning Papers, Modern Archive Centre, King's College, Cambridge, OB/1/1455A.

<sup>45</sup> Seeley, 'Liberal Education in Universities' [1867], p. 215 and Seeley, 'English in Schools' [1867], both in Seeley, *Lectures and Essays*, p. 238.

<sup>46</sup> John Stuart Mill, 'Democracy in America' [1835] in John M. Robson (ed.), *The Collected Works of John Stuart Mill* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1963–1991), pp. 47–91; and Arnold, *Culture and Anarchy and Other Writings*, ed. Stefan Collini (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993).

<sup>47</sup> Seeley, 'The Object to be Gained by Imperial Federation', *Imperial Federation*, 1/6 (1886), p. 206. See also his comments in Seeley, 'Introduction' to *Her Majesty's Colonies*, pp. x and xxii–iii.

education as one of the foremost concerns of the university teacher, and he set about it with relish.<sup>48</sup>

Aside from these issues, however, the interpretation of Seeley as an archetypical realist flounders in its failure to set those elements of his thought that can indeed be interpreted as 'realist' in the wider conceptual and moral framework in which he embedded them. It is here that religion was so important to Seeley, and it is to this I now turn.

### **The love of humanity: towards a new 'political religion'**

In a letter written during the 1850s to J. B. Mayor, a Professor of Classics in London, Seeley voiced his concern about the 'new orthodoxy' of Comtean positivism.<sup>49</sup> This creed, he argued, had gained its foothold not so much as a consequence of any intrinsic merits, but rather due to the lack of convincing alternatives. Hegel 'will simply not do', he declared firmly, and without substantive argument, but he could not yet provide any substitute. Two decades later he outlined a potential response in his 'natural religion', attempting to draw the best features of positivism within the orbit of a more conventional Anglican theology.<sup>50</sup> In Seeley's attempt to reformulate religion – and in particular to re-establish the foundations necessary for a strongly prescriptive ethical code – in terms absorbable by the modern, post-Darwin mind, we witness an instance of Nietzsche's characteristically insightful proclamation: 'In England, in response to every little emancipation from theology one has to reassert one's position in a fear-inspiring manner as a moral fanatic'.<sup>51</sup>

Seeley followed a trajectory typical of the son of 'extreme' evangelicals.<sup>52</sup> Bypassing the early crisis of faith so common amongst his contemporaries, he glided from a youthful immersion in evangelicalism to a less unforgiving incarnationalism, from a harsh and apocryphal vision of the cosmos to a milder one in which the life of Jesus served as a noble example for human behaviour. In particular, Seeley drew inspiration from the 'broad church' theologians, A. P. Stanley, F. W. Robertson, and

<sup>48</sup> This was one of the reasons that the prominent journalist (and imperial federalist) W. T. Stead suggested that Seeley be put in charge of a college teaching the ideal of the English global nation: Frederick Whyte, *The Life of W. T. Stead*, Part II (London: Jonathan Cape, 1925), pp. 209–10.

<sup>49</sup> Seeley to J. B. Mayor, 2 March 1857, Seeley Papers, MS903/1A/1.

<sup>50</sup> In this attempt to learn from but surpass Comte, Seeley was not alone amongst the Liberal Anglicans; see also F. D. Maurice, *Social Morality* (London: Macmillan, 1869), pp. 18–19 and Lecture XIX.

<sup>51</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *Twilight of the Idols* [1888] in Nietzsche, *Twilight of the Idols and The Anti-Christ*, ed. Michael Tanner (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 2003), p. 80. Although the degree to which Seeley 'got rid' of the traditional deity and the supernatural paraphernalia accompanying it is far from clear – in *Ecce Homo* (1866) he gestured repeatedly to a belief in the transcendent realm, in *Natural Religion* (1882) his starting point was to disavow such a belief, and in the preface to the 3rd edition (1891) he restated his non-traditional Christianity, therein describing supernaturalism as 'accidental' to the religion – this passage illustrates aptly the post-1860 currents of British moral thought in which he swam.

<sup>52</sup> Boyd Hilton, *The Age of Atonement: The Influence of Evangelicalism on Social and Economic Thought, 1795–1865* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1988), p. 334. On the 'familial' context of Victorian patterns of faith, see Frank Turner, *Contesting Cultural Authority: Essays in Victorian Intellectual Life* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), pp. 73–101.

especially, Thomas Arnold and F. D. Maurice.<sup>53</sup> The term 'broad church' had been introduced mid-century to encompass, albeit not with great accuracy, those sharing a more liberal theological sensibility in the face of the radical supernaturalism and biblical literalism that united the otherwise conflicting High (Anglo-Catholic, Tractarian-influenced) and Low (Evangelical) churches.<sup>54</sup> In the background hovered Samuel Taylor Coleridge, whose ideas on the relationship between Church and State influenced the broad church theologians, and whose notion of a 'clerisy' Seeley also replicated, though, as we shall see, in an updated form.<sup>55</sup> Seeley's latitudinarianism seems to have been reinforced by the time he spent in London, where he mixed in liberal intellectual and political circles.<sup>56</sup> This was to leave a lasting impression on him, although his religious views were never as radical as they might at first have appeared.<sup>57</sup> Indeed he can be seen as a fairly conventional follower of the broad church theologians, with their focus on the interrelationship between (the usually capitalised) Church and State, their quest to reconcile modernity and tradition, and their concomitant desire for national unity through the eradication of interdenominational and class strife. Extremely critical of the Church of England, Seeley believed that it was failing in its appointed task of educating the nation morally, of providing a sense of concord and purpose for society.<sup>58</sup> As the century unfolded, he began to shift the burden of this task away from traditional religious institutions and onto the shoulders of what he hoped would become a reconfigured historical discipline, a new clerisy. Historians were to act not simply as literary chroniclers of past battles and monarchs, or indeed of the teleological unfolding of liberty, but as apostles of national destiny.

The *Expansion of England*, when not regarded as an imperialist propaganda tract, has often been characterised as a case study of the 'scientific' historiographical method that Seeley advocated unyieldingly. This was also, partly, how Seeley viewed it.<sup>59</sup> However, both his historiographical method and his understanding of science can only be comprehended adequately if viewed in a wider theological context. Seeley was trying to develop a position that combined a belief that the unity of the nation

<sup>53</sup> By the late 1850s, in his correspondence with his family, Seeley was demonstrating his admiration for the broad church. See for example, J. R. Seeley to R. B. Seeley, 29 September 1857, Seeley Papers, MS903/2A/2 and J. R. Seeley to Mary Seeley, 3 April 1855, Seeley Papers, MS903/2B/1. See also Seeley, 'The Church as a Teacher of Morality', in W. L. Clay (ed.), *Essays in Church Policy* (London: Macmillan, 1868).

<sup>54</sup> See for example, [W. J. Conybeare], 'Church Parties', *Edinburgh Review*, 98 (1853), pp. 273–342. See also the discussion in Boyd Hilton, 'Apologia Pro Vitis Veteriorum Hominum', *Journal of Ecclesiastical History*, 50 (1999), pp. 117–30.

<sup>55</sup> See Coleridge, *On the Idea of the Constitution of the Church and State* (London: Hurst, Chance & Co., 1830). The most explicit of Seeley's (published) references to Coleridge can be found in, 'Milton's Political Opinions', *Lectures and Essays*, p. 99; see also his, 'Ethics and Religion', *Fortnightly Review*, 45 (1889), pp. 501–14.

<sup>56</sup> Wormell, *Sir John Seeley and the Uses of History*, ch. 1. His educational environment was also notably liberal: John Burrow, 'The Age of Reform' in David Reynolds (ed.), *Christ's: A Cambridge College Over Five Centuries* (London: Palgrave, 2004), pp. 111–43.

<sup>57</sup> Interestingly, they also lacked any substantial trace of the evolutionism so common at the time. On the far-reaching societal impact of the 'evolutionary moment', see Theodore K. Hoppen, *The Mid-Victorian Generation, 1846–1886* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), ch. 13. See also John Burrow, *Evolution and Society: A Study in Victorian Social Theory* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1966).

<sup>58</sup> Seeley, *Natural Religion*, pp. 43 and 135–7. See also, 'The Church as a Teacher of Morality'.

<sup>59</sup> See the comments by Henry Sidgwick, 'Editor's Preface', to Seeley, *Political Science*, p. xi.

could be grasped systematically in light of its past with the harmonic moral instruction offered by the broad church; in a sense, he sought to animate through detailed historical research the vague abstractions about community, history, state and nation so commonly articulated by the theologians. His lifelong obsession with improving the system of national education and his conception of the empire and world politics more generally, were all part of a unified moral-theological vision, a vision that formed the foundations of a 'political religion'. Propagating such a view was of the greatest importance for 'on religion', he argued, 'depends the whole fabric of civilisation, all the future of mankind'.<sup>60</sup>

Seeley was once pressed by his friend Richard Jebb as to why he had not followed through on his promise, made in the preface to *Ecce Homo*, that he would write a sequel (*Ecce Deus*) focusing on the divine aspects of Christ. Seeley replied, much to Jebb's surprise, that he had written the promised book – the *Life and Times of Stein*.<sup>61</sup> This curious remark provides us with an insight into the profound relationship that Seeley envisaged between politics, history, and religion, and this holistic vision was expressed most illuminatingly in what he considered his two most important books, *Natural Religion* and *Stein*.<sup>62</sup> The former was an attempt to explore systematically the bases of belief and the purposes of faith in a world in which the naturalistic impulse, the will to science, was central. The latter was a detailed study of the career and ideas of a man whom Seeley regarded as a founding 'father' of modern Germany. They were conceived and written during the same period, however, and should be viewed as two elements of the same intellectual compound, one the theoretical articulation of his political theology, the other a case study of some of the most important aspects of this as put into practice by one of his heroes.

Seeley was above all else concerned with the challenge to reconcile science and religion. This was a major intellectual preoccupation in the Victorian era, generating countless works and impassioned debate.<sup>63</sup> In *Natural Religion* he set out to provide an analysis of the relationship between modern forms of knowledge acquisition and the realm of religious belief, as manifested both in the individual consciousness and in society. This was an attempt to move beyond, whilst incorporating the most valuable aspects of, both eighteenth-century natural theology and nineteenth-century positivism. For Seeley there were two distinct but related forms of knowledge, the theoretical and the practical. In relation to the sacred – 'in the realm of observing God'<sup>64</sup> – the two corresponded to theology (theoretical) and religion (practical). 'By theology the nature of God is ascertained and false views of it eradicated from the understanding; by religion the truths thus obtained are turned over in the mind and assimilated by the imagination and the feelings'.<sup>65</sup> Moreover, theology was concerned

<sup>60</sup> Seeley, *Natural Religion*, p. 218. Religion was, he argued, 'the soul of all healthy political organisation' (p. 259).

<sup>61</sup> See Caroline Jebb, *The Life and Letters of Sir Richard Claverhouse Jebb* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1907), pp. 85–6.

<sup>62</sup> *Natural Religion* was first published in serial form in *Macmillan's Magazine* between 1875–8, during the period in which Seeley was researching and writing *Stein*. It was published in 1882, the year during which the lectures on which the *Expansion of England* were being delivered.

<sup>63</sup> See, for example, Turner, *Between Science and Religion*, and Turner, *Contesting Cultural Authority*, essays 1–7.

<sup>64</sup> Seeley, *Natural Religion*, p. 52.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 53.

ultimately with 'the attitude of Nature towards human beings', where nature was defined as 'the uniform laws of the Universe as known in our experience'.<sup>66</sup> These laws included social laws, such as those governing the formation and growth of nations. (This was not to be confused with pantheism, however, for the focus of veneration was not the concrete expressions of nature as manifested in diverse and differentiated physical forms but nature considered as a whole, an irreducible unity.) Theology examined such meta-ethical questions as the character of virtue, the nature of temptation, and the role and limits of human conscience. 'In one word', he inquired, 'is life worth having, and the Universe a habitable place for one in whom the sense of duty has been awakened?'<sup>67</sup> Since for Seeley the scientific analysis of nature was an exploration of the laws of the universe, science was 'in the strictest sense Theology'.<sup>68</sup> And since history was an exploration of the laws of social development, it was also, in the 'proper sense', theological.<sup>69</sup>

Religion, on the other hand, was grounded on admiration, on the impulse to and act of worship.<sup>70</sup> Whereas theology engaged reason and the expressly cognitive functions of the human mind, religion was concerned more with sensitivity, imagination, and empathy; it was as much about emotion as it was about rationality. Religion, he claimed, was threefold, and he defined it as being constituted by: 'that worship of visible things which leads to art, that worship of humanity which leads to all moral disciplines, and principally the Christian, and that worship of God which is the soul of all philosophy and science.'<sup>71</sup> The third panel of this triptych focused on the worship of the God-in-nature as clarified by the theological disciplines of history, natural science, and philosophy. It was this aspect with which *Natural Religion* (if not natural religion) was concerned primarily. The aesthetic focus of the first panel pointed towards Seeley's intense love of literature and poetry, and in particular the works (and the sensibility) of the great romantic writers.<sup>72</sup> Like Maurice, Seeley admired Byron, Wordsworth, and above all Goethe, whom he regarded as the model of modern cultivation, the human embodiment of excellence in the simultaneous pursuit of art, science, and philosophy, and hence as a 'religious' thinker of the highest rank.<sup>73</sup>

The middle panel of Seeley's triptych clarified his notion of morality: it was his understanding of religion as worship that underpinned his system of ethics. Again, when discussing Stein we can discern his own position: 'As religion without morality would be to him a monstrosity, so he cannot understand any morality without

<sup>66</sup> Ibid., pp. 66 and 68.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid., p. 66.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid., p. 56. In a sense, then, Seeley's views can be seen as part of what David Newsome has labelled the Broad Church understanding of the human intellect as a tool for 'progressive revelation'; Broad Church adherents consequently held a 'dynamic concept' of revelation. Newsome, *The Victorian World Picture* (London: John Murray, 1997), pp. 214–15.

<sup>69</sup> Seeley, *Natural Religion*, p. 257.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid., pp. 131–2. See also the discussion on p. 158.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid., pp. 131–2.

<sup>72</sup> Seeley wrote widely on literature, including essays on Milton and a book on Goethe. Seeley, *Goethe Reviewed After Sixty Years* (London: Seeley, 1894). He also published, anonymously, some (bad) poetry of his own: [Seeley], *David and Samuel; With other Poems, Original and Translated* (London: Seeley, 1869).

<sup>73</sup> Seeley, *Natural Religion*, pp. 96–111, and also his *Goethe Reviewed After Sixty Years*. See also, *The Life of Frederick Denison Maurice* (London: Macmillan, 1884), Part II, p. 59.

religion'.<sup>74</sup> Seeley was deeply critical of a system of morality derived from supernaturalism, the belief that human behaviour should be regulated by certainty in the eternal pleasures or punishments of the afterlife.<sup>75</sup> This he believed was not only theologically indefensible, but led inexorably to political inaction. 'To hope even with enthusiastic conviction for a future life is one thing; to be always brooding over it so as to despise the present life in comparison with it is another'. Moreover, he continued, by 'the side of such a vision everything historical, all the destiny of states and nations, fades away, and men become quietists if not monks'.<sup>76</sup> What followed from this point was an important political claim, namely that if political action was to be encouraged and sustained, a supernatural mode of belief was likely to obstruct it. Rather than subscribing to what he considered this aberration of eighteenth-century deism, Seeley suggested that his view of natural religion as the worship of nature (broadly defined) could sustain a system of morality based on the worship of humanity, of humans. People were to teach themselves, and be guided in their understanding by the lessons taught by the historical clerisy, to be generous and humane to one another. Earlier, he had written to his friend Henry Sidgwick that utilitarian ethics were insufficient, for reason alone was incapable of identifying the 'instinct for sympathy' that lay at the root of morality. Nor, he continued, could the 'methodological' teachings of the philosophers help to inculcate the 'one law which is to be obeyed for itself, viz., love'.<sup>77</sup> It was this insight that he was later to systematise in *Natural Religion*, and which remained the centrepiece of his moral vision. The religion 'that leads to virtue', he wrote, 'must be a religion that worships men'.<sup>78</sup>

It is worshipped under the form of a country, or of ancestors, or of heroes, or great men, or saints, or virgins, or in individual lives, under the form of a friend, or mother, or wife, or any object of admiration; who, once seizing the heart, made all humanity seem sacred, and turned all dealings with men into a religious service.<sup>79</sup>

We here witness the direct link between Seeley's views on religion, morality, history and politics. Moreover, the ordering he gives to the objects of worship is indicative, for he places the 'country' at the top of his list. This was illustrative of his priorities: the country is the sphere within which the other objects either live or lived, and as such it takes precedence over them; the state subsumes society and all those in it. This simple insight lay at the heart of Seeley's political religion.

<sup>74</sup> Seeley, *Stein*, Part III, p. 556.

<sup>75</sup> Seeley, *Natural Religion*, p. 160. He labelled this form of moral reasoning the 'legal school in morals' (p. 166).

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 254.

<sup>77</sup> Seeley, letter to Sidgwick, 2 July 1867, Sidgwick Papers, Trinity College, Cambridge, Add Ms c95/64–73.

<sup>78</sup> Seeley, *Natural Religion*, p. 166. This was, of course, a position derived partially from Comtean positivism, but brought within the sphere of Christian belief. On Seeley's debt to positivism, see Wormell, *Sir John Seeley*, ch. 1.

<sup>79</sup> Seeley, *Natural Religion*, p. 168.

### The political theology of nationalist cosmopolitanism

Seeley was, unsurprisingly, very critical of the 'modern' conception of the secular liberal state, in which religion was pressed into a hermetically sealed private sphere.<sup>80</sup> This situation represented an anomaly, for the vast panorama of human history was painted largely by the brush strokes of religious ferment; religions, their institutions and patterns of belief, had played a fundamental role in social and political development, indeed in the origins and evolution of the modern state system itself. And the locus of religion in the modern world was the nation-state. For Seeley, any human community could be labelled, almost interchangeably, 'by the name State or Church'.<sup>81</sup> This claim was derived from his broad church views of the Church as an institution constituting 'the atmosphere of thought, feeling and belief that surrounds the State; it is in fact its civilization made more or less tangible and visible'.<sup>82</sup> An ahistorical understanding of the interpenetration of politics and religion, one that failed to grasp this point, was inadequate for the contemporary age. A life without religion was mechanical and largely meaningless.

For Seeley, the most important political development of the nineteenth-century, the result of the 'Anti-Napoleonic Revolution', was the increasing awareness and power of the 'nationality doctrine.' The century had, in a quasi-Hegelian spirit, witnessed the emergent self-consciousness of the nation-state. This phenomenon was witnessed first in Spain, where the armies of Napoleon had crushed the institutions of the Spanish state but had then faced the onslaught of the Spanish nation, which after surviving the initial destruction had sought to reclaim its political destiny.<sup>83</sup> It was in this period, so central to Seeley's understanding of history, that 'a new idea took possession of the mind of Europe. That idea was not democracy or liberty . . . it was nationality.'<sup>84</sup> Modern history began, for Seeley at least, with the completion of the state by the principle of nationality.

From that time forwards, he proclaimed, the doctrine of nationality began its triumphant march. It was to become the guiding spirit of his political thought. There were two primary sources of this fascination: the ideas of the German romantics, especially as instantiated by Stein, and the theology of the Broad Church, which was itself, through the work of Coleridge, influenced by the currents of Germanic organic romanticism.<sup>85</sup> Through his interpretation of the intellectual development of Stein, Seeley drew inspiration from Fichte's 'Addresses to the

<sup>80</sup> Ibid., pp. 183–5. Note that this was an inaccurate picture of Victorian politics, which were infused with religion, and that Seeley relied on a caricature of the actual state of affairs pertaining at the time. The most radical account of the persistence of religion in Britain is Callum Brown, *The Death of Christian Britain: Understanding Secularisation, 1800–2000* (London: Routledge, 2000). See also the persuasive comments in Jeremy Morris, 'The Strange Death of Christian Britain: Another Look at the Secularization Debate', *Historical Journal*, 46 (2003), pp. 963–76.

<sup>81</sup> Seeley, *Natural Religion*, p. 185.

<sup>82</sup> Ibid., p. 200.

<sup>83</sup> Seeley wrote admiringly that when 'the state fell to pieces the nation held together and proceeded to put forth out of its own vitality a new form of state'. Seeley, *Stein*, II, p. 20.

<sup>84</sup> The 'state which is also a nation is an organism far surpassing in vigour and vitality the state which is only a state'. Seeley, *Stein*, Part II, p. 17. See also Seeley, 'Georgian and Victorian Expansion', *Fortnightly Review*, 48 (1887), p. 126.

<sup>85</sup> On the importance of organic romanticism in nineteenth-century thought, see Mark Bevir, 'The Long Nineteenth Century in Intellectual History', *Journal of Victorian Culture*, 6 (2001), pp. 313–36.

German Nation' (1807–8).<sup>86</sup> Fichte had not only stressed the role of national education; he had also promulgated an holistic ideal of national unity and conceived of the state as a moral entity. 'Here certainly is heard the tocsin of the anti-Napoleonic Revolution and of all the Nationality Wars that were to follow'.<sup>87</sup> In Fichte, Seeley discerned a foreshadowing of his distinction between the nation and the state. 'Fichte proclaims the nation not only to be different from the state, but to be something far higher and greater'.<sup>88</sup> Seeley's nationalism was ultimately a branch of his political religion, and the religiosity of his conception of nationality can be seen in his argument that, in Fichte's hands, the union of past and present in the doctrine of the nation 'secures to the actions of man an earthly immortality'.<sup>89</sup> It was the quest for the earthly immortality of the Anglo-Saxon race that ultimately shaped Seeley's vision of the future of Greater Britain.

It was essential, insisted Seeley, to understand the link between the 'spirit of nationality' and religion. Both were based, ultimately, on the act of worship. Seeley argued frequently that the state was the most important unit in history. This was partly an aspect of his quest for an 'objective' Aristotelian science of political classification; it was also partly a normative claim about the ideal mode of political life. The state in and of itself was not, however, Seeley's model political form: the *nation-state* was the highest stage of political life. This fusion of two distinct but complementary ideas was a recent development in the evolution of human societies. Seeley argued, most prominently in *The Expansion of England*, that there were three essential preconditions for state unity: the existence of a community of race, a community of religion, and a community of interest.<sup>90</sup> Of these, religion was the 'strongest and most important'.<sup>91</sup> Powerful states would combine all three, and as both a precondition and a consequence they would have to be socially and politically uniform to succeed. 'States are composed of men who are in some sense homogeneous, and not only homogeneous in blood and descent, but also in ideas or views of the universe'.<sup>92</sup> The unity of the state was paramount – although it should be noted that Seeley, like most of his contemporaries, did not fall under the spell of biologically essentialist conceptions of racial or national difference.<sup>93</sup> In this discussion, as elsewhere, Seeley slipped between his notion of the 'state' and that of the 'nation-state', often employing the former as shorthand for the very different idea embodied by the latter. Nevertheless, it is clear that he viewed the two as separate categories, and that he regarded the realisation of this fundamental distinction as 'the peculiar political lesson of the nineteenth-century'. The state, he argued, 'is merely a machinery by which a number of men protect their common interests'.<sup>94</sup> It was an

<sup>86</sup> See the extensive discussion in Seeley, *Stein*, Part II, pp. 29–42. See also Fichte, *Addresses to the German Nation*, ed. George A. Kelly (New York: Harper Torch Books, 1968 [1807–8]).

<sup>87</sup> Seeley, *Stein*, Part II, p. 34.

<sup>88</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 34.

<sup>89</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 41.

<sup>90</sup> Seeley, *Expansion*, pp. 11, 50 and 220. See also Seeley, *Political Science*, p. 68.

<sup>91</sup> Seeley, *Expansion*, p. 225.

<sup>92</sup> Seeley, *Political Science*, p. 137.

<sup>93</sup> On the reasons for the general British disinclination to follow the biological and radically organicist trends apparent in much continental thought, see Peter Mandler, 'Race' and 'Nation' in Mid-Victorian Thought' in Stefan Collini, Richard Whatmore, and Brian Young (eds.), *History, Religion, and Culture: British Intellectual History, 1750–1950* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), pp. 224–45.

<sup>94</sup> Seeley, *Stein*, Part II, p. 17.



administrative unit, a governed territory ruled over by specified institutions. It lacked the other two preconditions outlined above; only when they were present could it be classified adequately as a 'nation-state'.

In assessing the political thought of any individual, the exact tracing of 'influence' is always a difficult, sometimes even an impossible, task. So it is with Seeley, especially in relation to the relative balance between the ideas of the often very different individuals from within the broad church constellation on whom he drew. I would argue, nevertheless, that Seeley's thought was marked deeply by the ideas of Coleridge, and Coleridge's follower, F. D. Maurice. Seeley respected Coleridge greatly. In a discussion of the prophetic seers of British politics, those who he labelled the 'genius politicians', he focused on Milton, Carlyle, Ruskin, and Coleridge, arguing that the key to their powers as political thinkers was that they tended to have one simple idea that they reiterated tenaciously. For Coleridge, the 'one conviction' that ran through his writings was 'the hollowness of all hand-to-mouth statesmanship, and the necessity of grounding politics upon universal principles of philosophy and religion'.<sup>95</sup> These were both ideas with which Seeley concurred wholeheartedly. Indeed, it is useful to view Seeley's dogged intellectual exertion on behalf of Greater Britain in this light. Whilst he thought that of all the prophets Coleridge was the greatest philosopher, in formulating his conception of the state he drew more on Thomas Arnold and Maurice.<sup>96</sup> Coleridge had argued that the Church of England should be legally recognised as an intrinsic component of the constitution, as a balance to the great landed and commercial interests of the country; it was an essential but quasi-autonomous element of the political nation.<sup>97</sup> Arnold, however, went further, arguing that church and state were, in a sense 'perfectly identical',<sup>98</sup> and, in his *Postscript to Principles of Church Reform* (1833), that the 'state in its highest perfection becomes the Church'.<sup>99</sup> Maurice, meanwhile, provided an extremely forceful exposition of the ideal of a spiritual nation, in which church and state were coterminous and mutually constitutive.<sup>100</sup> Seeley's conception of nationality, and moreover his international thought, wove together the threads of Fichte's romantic nationalism and the reworking of liberal Anglican theology by Arnold and, in particular, Maurice.

<sup>95</sup> Seeley, 'Milton's Political Opinions', p. 99.

<sup>96</sup> The claim about Coleridge can be found in Seeley, 'Milton's Political Opinions', p. 98. He once wrote in a letter to his father that he was 'more of an Arnoldite than a Mauriceite': Seeley to R. B. Seeley, n.d. 185?, Seeley Papers, MS903/2A/2. The respectful distance was reciprocal, as Maurice wrote of *Ecce Homo*, which he admired greatly (Maurice to A. Macmillan, 2 January 1886, Seeley Papers, MS903/3A/1). Despite these proclamations, I would argue that whilst Seeley might have shared more theological ground with Arnold (at least in the 1850s), his political thought appears to owe considerably more to Maurice, although this might simply be because Maurice lived longer and thus wrote on questions which were also pressing to Seeley.

<sup>97</sup> Coleridge, *On the Idea of the Constitution of the Church and State*. [Richard Whatley], *Letters on the Church, By an Episcopalian* (London, 1826) posed a serious liberal challenge to this central link in 'broad church' thinking.

<sup>98</sup> Arnold, 'The Church and the State' [1839] and 'National Church Establishments' [1840] in Arthur P. Stanley (ed.), *The Miscellaneous Works of Thomas Arnold . . . Collected and Republished* (London: B. Fellowes, 1845), pp. 466–75 and 486–92.

<sup>99</sup> Arnold, *Postscript to Principles of Church Reform* (London: B. Fellowes, 1833), p. 19. This was a vision supported by many Whig MPs.

<sup>100</sup> See Maurice, *The Kingdom of Christ* (London: Darnton & Clark, 1838); and Maurice, *Social Morality*.

Whilst T. H. Green's brand of philosophical idealism never travelled successfully from Oxford to Cambridge, Seeley can be seen as the Cambridge figure whose thought most closely paralleled this powerful strain in late Victorian intellectual life.<sup>101</sup> Idealism, rather than simply importing alien Hegelian metaphysics into a new and largely hostile empiricist context, codified many of the moral and political assumptions that were central to British debate at the time, and in particular to various liberal Anglican postulates such as the importance of the ethical content and affective bonds of community and the tremendous significance of the nation.<sup>102</sup> Such thinking was, as we have seen, intrinsic to Seeley's vision of the world.

It would be a mistake to view Seeley as a crudely chauvinistic nationalist, a prudential political realist, or indeed as a bloodthirsty 'martialist'. Seeley is characterised best as a 'cosmopolitan nationalist'. In his case – and indeed in the early and mid-Victorian era more broadly<sup>103</sup> – this is not a paradoxical formulation, for his conception of international (and specifically European) politics was grounded in the idea of the ultimate, albeit only vaguely articulated, unity of humankind. The future, he wrote, 'will witness national religions flourishing inside a grand universal religion'.<sup>104</sup> We see here echoes of Maurice's ideal of a 'Universal Church' in which all of humanity was united in a non-sectarian spiritual society.<sup>105</sup> And it was the idea of love, articulated through the worship of humans, and grounded in a non-exclusive, non-parochial, attachment to national-political communities that underpinned this complex (and probably unstable) admixture; once again we witness Seeley's attempt to reconcile unity and difference.

For Seeley, there were two Churches: the universal church, which accommodated all the species, believers and non-believers alike, and the national churches as institutionalised in the form of the modern state. The latter took priority, as the highest embodiment of human communal life, but it was embedded in the wider domain of the former. However, this neat binary was upset by Seeley's constant reference to a third (less clearly theorised) sphere; between the universal and the national he interposed, and drew repeatedly on the example of, an intermediary plane, namely western Christendom. This he regarded as a form of transnational civilisation.<sup>106</sup> He argued that the states of Europe constituted a 'society', bound to a certain extent by common values and a common

<sup>101</sup> See especially T. H. Green, *Lectures on the Principles of Political Obligation and Other Writings*, eds. Paul Harris and John Morrow (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986).

<sup>102</sup> On the links between idealism and the liberal Anglicans, see Jones, *Victorian Political Thought*, ch. 3, and also the comments in James Allard, 'Idealism in Britain and the United States' in Thomas Baldwin (ed.), *The Cambridge History of Philosophy, 1870–1945* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), pp. 43–59. The best recent account of idealism, which stresses its British roots, is Sandra Den Otter, *British Idealism and Social Explanation* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1996).

<sup>103</sup> This was also true, for example, of much 'patriotic' poetry until the closing decades of the century, in writers such as Elizabeth Barrett Browning and the early Tennyson. See Tricia Lootens, 'Victorian Poetry and Patriotism', in Joseph Bristow (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Victorian Poetry* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), pp. 255–80. See also Matthew Reynolds, *The Realms of Verse, 1830–1870: English Poetry in a Time of Nation-Building* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001). This is the poetic milieu that Seeley, obsessed with literature, would have grown up immersed in.

<sup>104</sup> Seeley, *Natural Religion*, p. 207. On the universalism of the Church, see also: Seeley letter to Sidgwick, 15 May 1866, Sidgwick Papers.

<sup>105</sup> See, for example, *The Life of Frederick Denison Maurice*, Part I, p. 166.

<sup>106</sup> This was most apparent in his essay on the 'The United States of Europe'.

culture.<sup>107</sup> In the *Introduction to Political Science* he argued that the 'European brotherhood of nation-states' were between them responsible for the glories of modern civilisation.<sup>108</sup> The United States, dynamic offspring of the Old World, should also, he stressed, be included in this picture. Seeley thus adumbrated a multi-layered and hierarchically arranged conception of global order, but one underwritten by a universal religious community.

Despite his constant avowal of the glories of the nation, Seeley was not an uncritical proponent of modern nationalism. He believed that the pure ideal that he so admired had often been corrupted, and that in practice it was usually 'too narrow and provincial'.<sup>109</sup> Like many liberal nationalists of our own time, Seeley's view of the positive essence of nationalism, as well as his belief that it could be controlled and kept within the beneficial limits he prescribed, displayed much naivety. Seeley worried about the increasing militarisation of Europe, of the great armies eyeing each other suspiciously from one end of the continent to the other.<sup>110</sup> He was wary of the dangers of revolution, and scathing of the Jacobite descent into terror. It was the association of the French Revolution with the thought of the *philosophes* that led Maurice to prefer the use of the term 'humanity' to the otherwise equally appropriate 'cosmopolitan' when outlining his own vision.<sup>111</sup> We can speculate – given his admiration for Maurice, his hatred of Revolutionary France, and the actual theological vocabulary that he adopted – that Seeley's view was similar. In *Ecce Homo* he was scathing about 'universal patriotism', which, without the instantiation of the state, was actually a form of 'Jacobinism'.<sup>112</sup> And in *Stein* he had sided with his hero's critique of the purportedly disembodied cosmopolitanism of Goethe and Herder, whilst, drawing on Coleridge, he defended instead the virtues of national patriotism.<sup>113</sup> However, as we can see from an earlier essay, his use of the term was qualified:

The abuse of patriotism is not to be cured by destroying patriotism itself; but patriotism is to be strengthened by being purified, by being deprived of its exclusiveness, and ultimateness. The Christian unity of mankind is to be taught as a final lesson, which will be easiest learnt, or rather will only be learnt, by those who have already realised the unity of the state.<sup>114</sup>

A non-exclusive form of patriotism, implausible as that may be, was for Seeley an ideal worth pursuing, and one demanded by his political religion. For Seeley the nation was not a parochial political order, the antithesis of wide human sympathies,

<sup>107</sup> Seeley, 'Our Insular Ignorance', p. 869. He continued: 'In the main I hold that it is healthy for a nation to live in society. Like an individual a nation should study its behaviour to its fellows, and for this purpose it should listen respectfully and anxiously to their opinion' (p. 869). See also the comments in *Expansion*, p. 225.

<sup>108</sup> Seeley, *Political Science*, p. 88.

<sup>109</sup> Seeley, *Natural Religion*, p. 200.

<sup>110</sup> See, for example, the comments in Seeley, 'The Eighty-Eights', *Good Words* (1888), p. 380.

<sup>111</sup> Maurice, *Social Morality*, p. 19.

<sup>112</sup> Seeley, *Ecce Homo: A Survey of the Life and Work of Jesus Christ*, ed. John A. T. Robinson (London: Dent, 1970 [1866]), p. 121. He was here critical of the purported abstract 'universal man' of Jacobinism, preferring to focus attention on individual, embodied persons and their communities. See also the discussion in Shannon, 'John Robert Seeley and the Idea of a National Church', pp. 245–6, and Maurice, *Social Morality*, pp. 122–3.

<sup>113</sup> Seeley, *Stein*, Part II, pp. 384–8.

<sup>114</sup> Seeley, 'The Church as a Teacher of Morality', p. 277. Coleridge had counterposed his conception of the national church (focusing on the Church of England in particular) with the universal church of Christ, which knew no legal or political borders. The two could coexist in the same space, but should not be confused. Coleridge, *Constitution of the Church and State*.

it was instead an essential component of such sympathies. Nationalism was a constitutive element of his cosmopolitanism. In this he followed, once again, the broad church ideologues, especially Coleridge and Maurice. Maurice had, after all, argued in a series of lectures delivered at Cambridge, that ‘Christ’s Kingdom of Peace’ was ‘a Kingdom for all *nations*. Unless there are Nations, distinct Nations, this Kingdom loses its character; it becomes a world Empire.’<sup>115</sup> And world empires were associated with despotism and the eradication of national distinctions.<sup>116</sup> It is little wonder that Seeley was so scathing about Napoleon and his attempt to revive the ideal of a universal monarchy; nor also that he was so keen to avoid the term empire in relation to Greater Britain, preferring instead to call it a ‘world-state’. However, Seeley’s cosmopolitanism was heavily circumscribed, as ultimately was that of Kant, the most widely regarded proponent of the old stoic philosophy.<sup>117</sup> For whilst Seeley’s ‘purpose’ was, like that of the great philosopher, to seek an ideal of national coexistence within a wider framework of progressive humanity, it simultaneously helped to defend, through its emphasis on the superiority of the Europeans, the existing power structures of international politics and the ethos of global hierarchy.

## Conclusions

The historical centrality, as well as the current and manifest power, of theological visions of politics and global order often seem strangely absent from contemporary academic IR.<sup>118</sup> The history of political thought, at least in the West, is in part a history of the struggle to work out the proper relations between the human and the divine, the sacred and the profane; it is only in the last few decades that the battle appears to have been decided, with religion demoted firmly to the private sphere in the name of a victorious secular liberalism.<sup>119</sup> (Or expunged completely – perhaps simply displaced? – in the quasi-religious quest for a ‘scientific’ understanding of world politics). This has been a pyrrhic victory, especially for those of a secular sensibility. Theologians, after all, continue to articulate complex political schemes, both in neo-Thomistic and more radical guises, and in public discourse throughout the world, religion remains, as it always has done, an authoritative

<sup>115</sup> Maurice, *Social Morality*, p. 209. Italics in original. The intimate connection between nationalism and internationalism was discussed widely at the time: Georgios Varouaxakis, ‘“Patriotism”, “Cosmopolitanism” and “Humanity” in Victorian Political Thought’, *European Journal of Political Theory* (forthcoming, 2005).

<sup>116</sup> Maurice, *Social Morality*, Lecture XIII. ‘I have endeavored to shew [*sic*] you how much mischief has proceeded from every effort to constitute a Universal divine Society which shall swallow up . . . distinctions into itself’ (p. 481).

<sup>117</sup> See here, Immanuel Kant, ‘Idea for A Universal History with a Cosmopolitan Purpose’ [1784] in Kant, *Political Writings*, ed. Hans Reiss (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), pp. 41–54. For a critique of the parochial qualities of Kant’s cosmopolitan vision, see James Tully, ‘The Kantian Idea of Europe: Critical and Cosmopolitan Perspectives’, in Anthony Pagden (ed.), *The Idea of Europe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), pp. 331–58.

<sup>118</sup> See also the comments in E. S. Hurd, ‘The Political Authority of Secularism in International Relations’, *European Journal of International Relations*, 10 (2004), pp. 235–62.

<sup>119</sup> As made most explicit in John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1971). The philosophical difficulties in the private/public distinction are elaborated in Raymond Geuss, *Private Goods, Public Goods* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2001).

feature.<sup>120</sup> In IR and political theory, however, the intellectual resources necessary to comprehend both the traditions of thought and the moral vocabularies that we have inherited and continue to inhabit, often subconsciously, have been decimated. Consequently, the ability to understand and to engage with, let alone challenge, the global renewal of religion, has largely vanished. This is not only a serious intellectual failing, but an ethical and political one also.

One way in which to try and recover this sense is to explore the history of the multiple and complex ways in which religion and politics have interacted, whether in practice or theory. In this essay I have employed the international political thought of J. R. Seeley as a case in point. Seeley mixed together Comtean positivism, Rankean historicism, German romanticism, the doctrines of broad churchmanship derived ultimately from Coleridge and transmitted through Thomas Arnold and F. D. Maurice, and threw in, for good measure, a dose of the Oxbridge fetish for the 'comparative method'. He was a whiggish liberal, blending the impulse to transform certain aspects of society – both domestic and international – with a Burkean gradualism and respect for tradition; welcoming limited reform but fearing (violent) revolution, happy, ultimately, to support and nourish many actually existing social and political structures. This liberalism was situated in and shaped by a theological cosmology, a vision of human unity encompassing culture and politics, morality and history. His conception of international order was an intrinsic component of this cosmology.

The complexity of human thought, mutating with the multiple contexts in which it is embedded and through which it is structured, is often, on close inspection, very difficult to reconcile with our often anachronistic and homogenising accounts of the manifold varieties of political thought. Seeley's intellectual persona was as multi-faceted (and at times as opaque) as any late nineteenth-century figure. And his intellectual trajectory, the vocabularies he inherited and adapted, as well as his comprehension of the real and ideal worlds of global politics, escapes the clutches of the reductive 'traditions' so popular with historians of international relations. Greater caution is required in characterising historical agents, all too often preoccupied with ideas and ideals which, whilst familiar in some ways, were also very alien from those of our own times.

<sup>120</sup> Neo-Thomism is especially prominent in discussions of the Just War tradition. For a recent statement, see Oliver O'Donovan, *The Just War Revisited* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003). On more radical departures in political theology, see John Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1990); Milbank, 'Sovereignty, Empire, Capital, and Terror', *South Atlantic Quarterly*, 101 (2002), pp. 305–23; Milbank, Catherine Pickstock and Graham Ward (eds.), *Radical Orthodoxy* (London: Routledge, 1998); and, from a somewhat different direction, Oliver O'Donovan, *The Desire of the Nations: Rediscovering the Roots of Political Theology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999).