



## Patriotism and Empire

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If we are “anxious about empire,” as the title of a recent collection of theological essays suggests we ought to be,<sup>1</sup> we ought to recognize as well an equally strong Lutheran—and, perhaps, not only Lutheran—inclination to be *eager* for empire. Since this eagerness is a little less apparent in centers of theological inquiry than one might expect, perhaps we ought to start with a theological argument for empire, and perhaps a Lutheran argument, at that.

The apostle Paul writes in Gal 3:28: “There is no longer Jew nor Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.” These words of the apostle are frequently interpreted as the foundation for Christian inclusivism. Politically expressed, we might read such a vision as a call for “Christian cosmopolitanism” or, guarding against a confusion of God’s right-hand reign and the reign of God’s left hand, we might just call it simply *cosmopolitanism*. The eagerness for empire, it may then be argued, follows from cosmopolitanism—empire is embodied cosmopolitanism, a genuine unity of all nations, not in Christ Jesus, to be sure, but at least a political unity that is not hostile to God’s reign in the world.

For those suspicious of this argument, recall the argument *against* American

<sup>1</sup>Wes Avram, ed., *Anxious about Empire: Theological Essays on the New Global Realities* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos, 2004).

*Patriotism may be virtuous—the recognition and appreciation of our wider web of associations; or patriotism may be vicious—an inordinate and idolatrous love of something good or a devotion to a state that wars against the good of community.*

patriotism one has heard rather frequently these last few years, foreshadowed in a criticism of Christians presented by Jean-Jacques Rousseau:

Although far from taxing the pure Gospel with being pernicious to society, I do find it in some way too sociable, embracing too much of the human race, for a system of law which ought to be exclusive; inspiring humanity rather than patriotism, and tending to form men rather than citizens.<sup>2</sup>

Rousseau suggests that the universal, inclusivistic inclinations of Christianity do not comport well with the exclusive character of nations and the patriotism that is appropriate for those who would be good citizens of some particular nation. Good citizens are patriots, Rousseau suggests, and Christians are not.

Christians, kneeling as we do before one who taught a neighbor-love that recognizes no national boundaries, find patriotism troubling. “Love your neighbor as yourself.” “Love your enemies; do good to those who hate you.” God is the Creator of all things and all persons. All are precious in his sight. The ethic of Jesus is an ethic of agape, of radical self-giving love for others—and not just those who are *my* others, *my* people, but for all others. The parable of the Good Samaritan establishes the priority not of *my* people or *my* nation, but of the needy, whoever and wherever they may be. In contrast, the patriot’s partiality arbitrarily favors those who have no special privileges or status before God. Jesus teaches a radical impartiality, a love that recognizes the equal worth of every person created in God’s image, a love that forbids special regard for me and mine.

Should a Christian be patriotic? Not according to this objection. But, of course, the plot of the story is thicker than this. To answer our question about patriotism we need, first of all, some clarification of the concept of patriotism. Following this clarification, I will argue, against the objection, that in fact patriotism may be virtuous, but that it may also be vicious. A robust understanding of Christian identity is most likely to remind us of the former and inoculate us against the latter.

What does this have to do with empire—American or otherwise? I shall argue that Christians may well be eager for empire, may well think that in the appropriate historical context empire may be salutary, but that whatever enthusiasm Christians muster for empire, it will never rise to the level of patriotism. In short, Christians should find it hard enough to be “good” patriots in a nation-state, never mind an empire.

#### ON THE NATURE OF PATRIOTISM

Patriotism, like fear, is an emotion or, better, an emotional complex. The certain way a patriot feels and that about which the patriot feels this way turn out to be rather complicated, as the philosopher David Archard has pointed out.<sup>3</sup> Ordinarily we think of love—love of country—as patriotism. Patriotism is also a matter of an

<sup>2</sup>Jean-Jacques Rousseau, “First Letter from the Mountain,” in *Political Writings of Rousseau*, vol. 2, ed. C. E. Vaughan (London: Cambridge University Press, 1915) 172; quoted in Reinhold Niebuhr, *The Structure of Nations and Empires* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1959) 185.

<sup>3</sup>David Archard, “Three Ways to Be a Good Patriot,” *Public Affairs Quarterly* 9/2 (1995) 101–113.

affinity for and identification with some people or place or things. “I belong to this; I’m a part of that.” Likewise, patriotism connotes enthusiasm or zealotry. Historian David McCullough writes of John Adams: “Patriotism burned in him like a blue flame”; he quotes Adams’s warning to Abigail, his wife: “I have a zeal at my heart for my country and her friends which I cannot smother or conceal.”<sup>4</sup> As Adams suggests, this love, this zeal, may be accompanied by additional emotions: for example, sympathy or a “feeling with” others—a delight in the happiness of certain others and a suffering with them in their sadness. This sympathy accompanies a special loyalty to one’s compatriots, a feeling that one owes them, before others, special consideration. Anger or indignation and their correlatives are, similarly, a part of the emotional complex of patriotism. A patriot may be indignant at slights to her country and angry about harms done to her homeland.

We have, to this point, identified a host of emotions and motivations (or desires) that are aspects of patriotism—pride, love, affinity, zeal, loyalty, sympathy, anger, indignation—but we have not identified the equally complicated object of these emotions and motivations. Exactly *what* does the patriot love, take pride in, display zeal towards, show loyalty to, etc.? In answering this question, a reasonable starting point is etymological. “Patriotism” comes from the Greek *patria*, referring to that which is of one’s father. Thus, patriotism is, most literally, the love of one’s father’s land, one’s father’s lineage or clan, and by extension, one’s own homeland, one’s own country.

Patriotism, thus, is an affection that originates in connections over which one has no control. We are given a *patria*, given families, given places to live; we do not choose to whom or where we are born, or into what way of life we will be raised. Patriotism originates in these natural relations, as a response to those persons to whom one is related by blood and as a response to that which is loved by one’s family—in fact, to that without which the family cannot be and cannot flourish. Remove kin from family, and the family will dissolve. Isolate family from near neighbors, and the family will lack resources essential for human flourishing. Alienate family from place, and the family will not develop a robust way of life that can sustain future generations. Failure to order the common life of families will result in chaos detrimental to all. Thus, patriotism, in its most basic forms, is shot through with “my-ness”—my family, my people, my country, my way of life. But this “my-ness” is an inheritance; it is not of our own choosing. And it is a “my-ness” in the absence of which I cannot know and understand myself. I never exist apart from this inheritance. My language and learning is a gift to me of this web of relations I did not choose.

Let us call this original form of patriotism, the emotional attachment to family and that without which a family cannot flourish, *intensive patriotism*. Intensive patriotism is most like that emotional complex associated with the family bond,

<sup>4</sup>David McCullough, *John Adams* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2001) 20.

with kinship, but later extended to the tribe, that is, to those who sustain family, who share a common life with one's family. We are, at last, in a position to identify the *object* of patriotism. The emotional complex that is patriotism has as its object some community to which one belongs, of which one is a member—one's family, tribe, and city. In what we shall call *extensive patriotism*, that membership is extended to a community of those who share common values, practices, customs, and traditions, a way of life oriented to some understanding of the Good.<sup>5</sup>

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Note, first of all, that patriotism as here construed requires no comparative assessment of the moral superiority of one's people. It isn't that one has compared others to one's own and found them wanting. The child who loves her parents does not love them because, having carefully examined the parents of her friends, she determines that her own parents best fill the bill. She loves them simply because they are her parents.<sup>6</sup> So the patriot may love the people and place in which her way of life is lived without thinking that her way of life is the best possible way of life, her place of life the most beautiful and fitting place for a way of life, or her people the best possible compatriots. They are what she has been given; they are what she knows; they are hers. That is enough.

Secondly, no mention has been made of the state, even though we have spoken of territorial jurisdiction. Referring as we have to territorial jurisdiction and the recognition of a law of one's territory, an ordering of one's place, this notion of patriotism is not *apolitical*. To be human is to be a political creature, with membership in not only a family but other ordered communities as well. Nevertheless, patriotism has no necessary connection to the modern state, alien as it may be due to its size, its distance, and its embrace of an array of understandings of the Good. In principle, one could live in the United States and be a patriot without loving the nation. Indeed, as we shall see, *national* patriotism may not be morally permissible, though on far different grounds than those suggested by the cosmopolitan.

Finally, at this juncture it will be helpful to distinguish patriotism from a related notion, *civic loyalty*, as David Archard has pointed out. He describes (weak) civic loyalty as the recognition of “an obligation to abide by and support the terms of political association which obtain in...[one's] country of residence.”<sup>7</sup> Duties of civic loyalty are contractual in nature, the virtue of civic loyalty simply the disposi-

<sup>5</sup>More accurately, a community consists of those “who do share or who have shared a place or way of life.” The patriot may recognize those who have died as her compatriots.

<sup>6</sup>To say they are her “parents” is not necessarily to attribute a genetic link, but to describe a role the individuals have played.

<sup>7</sup>Archard, “Three Ways,” 102.

tion to recognize and obey those duties owed to some state in response to benefits provided to residents. But there need be no “growing, gratuitous edge”<sup>8</sup> to civic loyalty, no necessary affective dimension to the relationship between citizen and state, and no moral space for either citizen or state to give differently or more than the stipulated duties of civic loyalty. The goods of democratic citizenship—for example, safety and the freedom to pursue one’s own understanding of the Good without the undue interference of others—are secured by means of civic loyalty; patriotism is not required for the realization of these goods.

### IS PATRIOTISM A VIRTUE?

Patriotism, then, is that emotional complex of love, pride, affinity with, zeal, sympathy, shame, and anger evoked by membership in some discrete community or way of life. The patriot loves her people and their places, customs, and traditions. Pride is stirred in her by symbols of that way of life, or shame when the ugly underside of her tradition is visible. Indignation and anger result when her people are belittled or threatened, and all this simply because they are hers. Could such patriotism be virtuous?

To make the case for patriotism as a virtue, let us begin by thinking more about what it means to be human. Alasdair MacIntyre has recently observed, “Human identity is primarily, even if not only, bodily and therefore animal identity and it is by reference to that identity that the continuities of our relationships to others are partly defined.”<sup>9</sup> Thus, to grasp adequately the responsibilities of parents and children requires consideration of our animal identity and our nature as animals. Perhaps the most striking component of animal identity is parental affection and concern for offspring—an “appetitive inclination” in Thomas Aquinas’s terms—a natural commonality of humans and other species. We, like other animal species, are “hard-wired,” as it were, to care for offspring. Nature has entrusted the nourishing and nurturing of the infant to its mother (and father, in the case of the large and lengthy task of raising human offspring). So, the baby cries for food or warmth, and the parent responds. The parent sees some threat to his dependent and intervenes to protect. As the child grows into independence, parental protection and education extend further until a threshold is met and the identity and reason of the child are developed sufficiently for the child to be recognized as an independent, moral equal. The more intelligent species will most closely resemble one another in their practices of child care and child rearing, but every species aims, naturally, at the flourishing of its offspring.

One good of human life, then, is participation in the existence of and flourishing of offspring and those in one’s care—certainly not the greatest good or the

<sup>8</sup>On covenant and contract, see William F. May, *The Physician’s Covenant: Images of the Healer in Medical Ethics*, 2nd ed. (Louisville: Westminster-John Knox, 2000) 128.

<sup>9</sup>Alasdair MacIntyre, *Dependent Rational Animals: Why Human Beings Need the Virtues* (Chicago: Open Court, 1999) 8.

only good, but a genuine good, nevertheless. To attend to that good of the flourishing of offspring is appropriate for animals, for creatures such as we are. Indeed, to attend to the good of the flourishing of offspring partially constitutes our own individual human flourishing. A good person will, if a parent, employ her practical reason in discerning what care and education is appropriate for her children. To fail to consider and assign a significant priority to the interests of one's children is to fail to perform the role that nature has entrusted to parents.

Love of parents, affection for siblings, and pride in family are the fitting response to the good offices of nature executed by parents and siblings. The child recognizes and appreciates her place in the family. She loves her parents and cares for her siblings, not because they are more worthy of her love and care than others, but because they are hers, because her story is inextricably tied up with theirs, because they are a part of who she is, because she knows herself only through conversation with these others. Thus, threats to her family are threats to her, so she jealously protects the family. The family, in welcoming her into their life, has said, "It is good that you exist." The recognition of the familial bond is her recognition of and affection for the good of the existence of the family.

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Likewise, patriotism is the recognition of a wider, more extensive bond. The family into which she is born shares a rich and complex web of associations with others. In being born into a family, this complex web of associations becomes one's own, becomes part of one's identity. We are educated and initiated not only into the ways and traditions of our families, but into the ways and traditions of the community of which our families are a part and which sustains our families. Our identities, who we are and who we may become, are rooted not only in biology, but also in our history of memberships in family and community.

Furthermore, as Alasdair MacIntyre has pointed out, one's understanding of morality and one's motivation to be moral is a gift to us from our family and its community. "It is in general only within a community that individuals become capable of morality, are sustained in their morality, and are constituted as moral agents by the way in which other people regard them and what is owed to and by them as well as by the way in which they regard themselves."<sup>10</sup>

Now we are able to see exactly what is wrong with the cosmopolitan construal of morality. Cosmopolitanism asks us not only to imaginatively extend our moral concern to others outside the communities of which we are members (there could be no problem with that), cosmopolitanism asks us to transcend our human na-

<sup>10</sup>Alasdair MacIntyre, "Is Patriotism a Virtue?" in *Theorizing Citizenship*, ed. Ronald Beiner (Albany: SUNY, 1995) 217.

tures, to ignore our embeddedness in a particular history, to neglect the affections and attachments that embellish and enrich human life, in short to forsake our identities.

Is that not the selflessness to which the gospel calls us? I don't think so. The selflessness to which the Christian is called is not a loss of identity, but rather an abnegation of the assessment of self as more worthy than others. When the apostle Paul writes that in Christ there is neither Jew nor Greek, male nor female, this is not a call to forsake our identities; no more a call to the transnationalism of empire or cosmopolitanism than a call to a transgendered or unisex self-understanding. The confession of God as good Creator of a universe that is good entails an acknowledgement that it is good to be human, good to be born into memberships that define us without determining us, good to have a history with some particular people, good, in short, to have a *patria* and to be attached to that *patria*, good, that is, to be patriotic.

The problem with cosmopolitanism, thus, and the problem with its Christian imitators, is that it is an ethic for angels, not for the creatures of heart, soul, and mind that we humans are. If the cosmopolitan is correct that neither biology nor history is destiny, she is wrong in thinking that both biology and history ought to be transcended by the pure rational creatures that we are. On the contrary, patriotism may be virtuous, expressive as it is of a love for others, of a recognition of the goodness of practices and traditions not of one's own making, a construal of the world as a sort of place to which one may belong and in which it is good to belong.

Patriotism may be virtuous, but to say that patriotism may be virtuous is not to say that patriotism is always virtuous. Patriotism may be vicious, as the cosmopolitan recognizes, or demonic, to use C. S. Lewis's term. Let me mention two forms of vicious patriotism, one fairly straightforward, the other subtler than the first. The first type of vicious patriotism is that expressed in the slogan "My country, right or wrong." One might muster some enthusiasm for this slogan if we could understand it only as a declaration of the importance of fidelity. But that is not plausible. Rather, the slogan implies an assessment that the speaker's country is worthy of this extraordinary loyalty because, whatever its particular moral failings, it is overall good—not necessarily *morally* good, but good all things considered, good, perhaps, because it is mine. This love is idolatrous and, hence, demonic.

The evil of the second type of pernicious patriotism is a matter of misplaced affection and not, as in our prior case, a matter of inordinate love for something good. Recall that the primary patriotism about which we have spoken, *intensive patriotism*, was a construal of one's family and one's place and the order, or territorial jurisdiction of place, as good. We distinguished that from *extensive patriotism*, an emotional complex directed towards that associated with family and place, but at a more distant remove. However, we have not established how far this extensive patriotism can be extended without breaking. Most would assume that patriotism

can be extended as far as the contemporary nation-state and, in the appropriate historical circumstances, even to empire. But that is unlikely.

What sense can we make of Horace's "*Dulce et decorum est pro patria mori*" (It is sweet to die for one's country)? One might willingly die to protect a member of one's family. And one might be willing to die to preserve the practices, customs, and traditions that have been the conditions for the flourishing of one's family. But should one be prepared to die for a nation-state? Should one love a nation-state as protector of a way of life that is one's own? We can imagine circumstances in which that has been the case and cases in which that might still be the case, cases in which a national identity, protected by a state, was so intertwined with the identity, with the particular ways of life of a people, that to die for the nation-state might be to die in the service of the particular community of a person. But that is almost unthinkable in the contemporary Western world. And that is most certainly the case with empire.

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Try as we might, we are hard-pressed to identify a coherent set of practices, customs, and traditions to which modern bureaucratic states are committed. If there is now an American way of life, that seems to have to do with little more than the institutions and practices of consumption, encouraged and protected by our national government—institutions and practices that are proving as erosive of our natural world as they have been corrosive of earlier social worlds. The link between a way of life that is my own and the goods and ambitions of modern America is too weak to bear the love and pride that is patriotism. One may be grateful for the order that permits one to live in peace, but that order that neither hinders nor encourages my pursuit of the good is worthy only of deep appreciation, not the love and pride that are part of patriotism.

Let me make clear, there may be good reasons for a Christian to be willing to die for a particular modern bureaucratic state. It may be a matter of civic loyalty—having received genuine goods from the state, one owes obedience to the state. It may be a matter of a more explicit contract—in exchange for these benefits provided by the state, I agree to lay my life on the line. It may be a matter of a commitment to some cosmopolitan liberal ideals—goods of liberty and democracy. Or it may be a matter of a commitment to a particular national or international project—I have chosen to commit myself to the sustenance and improvement of this particular political association. But these are not the same as patriotism. The expectation that citizens of the modern bureaucratic state should love that state enough to be willing to die for it is, thus, not patriotism writ large, but cosmopolitanism writ small.



Why does this matter? It matters precisely because real patriotism is a virtue. Because rootedness, attachment to a particular place and people, and standing in a tradition are, as the patriot recognizes, requisite for the flourishing of the kind of creatures we are, and not only our own flourishing, but our world's.

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Is patriotism virtuous? Well, it depends. If they are authentic patriots, filled with zeal for something that is a real *patria*, then he or she, to that extent, recognizes the goodness of the sorts of creatures we are; born into rich webs of histories and relations, his or her patriotism may be virtuous. But if she is a sham or sentimental patriot, loving a modern nation-state or empire whose size, whose context, and whose history militate against the goods of embodied and embedded human life, her soul is in peril. Such a state she may tolerate as the best she can currently do. A state that wars against the good of community, of a real way of life, may be worthy of her civic loyalty, though only just, but not worthy of the love that is patriotism.

The best way to be a patriot, in fact, the best way to be characterized by a patriotism that avoids both the otherworldliness of cosmopolitanism as well as the vices of inordinate love and misplaced affection may be to love one's *patria*e, one's homelands, one's countries, to recognize oneself as possessing dual citizenship. The confession of God as Creator of heaven and earth reminds us that we dare not love our *patria* too little. The confession of God as Redeemer of the world in Christ Jesus reminds us of our citizenship in the heavenly city, a city in which we are joined by those of many other *patria*e in our common love of the Good who is God. This citizenship forbids us to turn against other citizens of the heavenly city in our appropriate love of the earthly city, and offers us the promise of a real *patria* that never smothers nor stifles, a *patria* in which humans will, finally, flourish. ⊕

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