



Ubi Panis Ibi Patria: Reflections on American Identity

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The customary starting point for any historical consideration of American identity is Michel-Guillaume Jean de Crèvecoeur's question of 1782 in his *Letters from an American Farmer*: "What then is the American, this new man?" His answer (slightly sanitized to remove any hint of racial bias) is also frequently quoted: "He is an American, who, leaving behind him all his ancient prejudices and manners, receives new ones from the new mode of life he has embraced, the new government he obeys, and the new rank he holds. He becomes an American by being received in the broad lap of our great *Alma Mater*." Historians have long known that this picture of an egalitarian, democratic, simple agrarian society was more "ideal type," an intellectual model, than a "real time" statistical measure, more convenient "fiction" than conventional "fact," more European Enlightenment imagination than American "pragmatic" realism; but that is not my main concern in this essay. Rather, I want to examine the basis of his position and its implications for our current "crisis of identity," both "sacred" and "secular."

I. AMERICAN POLITICAL IDENTITY

The passage that precedes Crèvecoeur's famous question deserves careful consideration and is quoted here:¹

What attachment can a poor European emigrant have for a country where he had nothing? The knowledge of the language, the love of a few kindred as poor as himself, were the only cords that tied him: his country is now that which gives him land, bread, protection, and consequence: *Ubi panis ibi patria*, is the motto of all emigrants.

¹J. Hector St. John de Crèvecoeur, *Letters from an American Farmer*, ed. W. P. Trent (New York: Fox, Duffield & Co., 1904) 54.

Ubi panis ibi patria—"Where [there is] bread, there [is my] country." More broadly interpreted, perhaps, "Where my bread is earned, there is my country."

Taken literally, and looked at with a jaundiced eye, his attributes of immigrant identity and patriotism seem to have been cruelly mocked in recent days. Land? It is either being eroded away, mortgaged and foreclosed, sold to "alien" owners, or bulldozed, built upon, and cemented or blacktopped over. Bread? It is either too white or non-nutritious, too bran-filled and inedible, or too expensive, especially if you're unemployed, a single parent householder with minimal wage earnings and maximum appetite children, or retired on social security. Protection? Like

Crèvecoeur's farmer perhaps, some modern Americans are prone to bar the door, keep a gun handy, and take the law into their own hands if the government fails to protect them or even to do all of the above in the belief that it is necessary to protect themselves *from* the government. Consequence? What could seem more inconsequential than the isolated individual in a modern multinational corporation, a megalopolitan urban environment, or the vast anonymous audience of the media market? If *ubi panis ibi patria* is literally our motto, then a significant number of Americans have no country.

Looked at symbolically, *ubi panis ibi patria* has a special significance for understanding the question of identity in America. Historically, a better chance to earn one's bread has been an important theme in American self-understanding. Whether embodied in the frontiersman's demand for cheap land, the immigrants' "American dream" of secure urban employment, or the "Yuppies" yearning for never-ending upward mobility and "upscale" consumption, equality of opportunity to become wealthier than one's predecessors or one's own past has been a persistent theme both of American history and of our political and cultural interpretations of that history. Crèvecoeur, in the fashion of the eighteenth century Enlightenment liberal, was direct and blunt about the basis of such desires: "Here the rewards of his industry follow with equal steps the progress of his labour; his labour is founded on the basis of nature, *self-interest*; can it want a stronger allurement?"²

James Madison in the Federalist papers, Number 10 (November 22, 1787) was equally blunt and to the point:³

As long as the reason of man continues fallible, and he is at liberty to exercise it, different opinions will be formed. As long as the connection subsists between his reason and his self-love, his opinions and his passions will have a reciprocal influence on each other;...The diversity in the faculties of men, from which the rights of property originate, is not less an insuperable obstacle to a uniformity of interests. The protection of these faculties is the first object of government.

But notice, it is *not* the protection of the rights of property *per se* which is the first object of government, nor even the basis of American political identity. Rather, it is the protection of the "diversity in the faculties of men" that is the first object of government. Why? Because diversity of interests rests on the unity of in-

²Ibid., 55.

³*The Federalist Papers*, ed. Roy P. Fairfield (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1966) 16.

stinct—reason and self-love—which is the true basis of our common political identity. Put in other terms, reason involves the ability to comprehend the common good, the interests of *others* as well as our own; emotion (self-love) involves the inevitability of apprehending our own good more keenly than that of others. Classic republicanism—which entrusted education, Stoic philosophy, or disinterested virtue with the task of curbing self-interest in the face of the demands of the public interest—while suitable perhaps for small, virtuous homogeneous democracies, had proved inadequate to the demands of a large, heterogenous, confederated republic. Rather, Madison proposed a new kind of republicanism, a belief in the ability of proper

institutional arrangements to curb the divisive *effects* of “faction” (not to remove their causes), “to refine and enlarge the public views,” and “to guard against the confusion of a multitude.” We may call it *institutionalism*, a belief in the necessity of institutional order rather than in the efficacy of enlightened self-interest or individualism: “In the extent and proper *structure* of the Union,” Madison concluded, “we behold a republican remedy for the diseases most incident to republican government. And according to the degree of pleasure and pride we feel in being republicans, ought to be our zeal in cherishing the spirit and supporting the character of federalists.”⁴

In religious terms, the issue rests on a proper understanding of the injunction “to love your neighbor as yourself.” Healthy self-love is a premise or prior condition for binding other-love. Morbid self-abnegation, excessive guilt, “hairshirt” histrionics are not the basis for collective selfhood nor an adequate foundation for the mutual give-and-take of democratic citizenship. Neither are the excessive pride of racial or ethnic chauvinism and the callous indifference of a “devil take the hindmost” attitude. A political stance that supports prerogatives for one’s own group at the expense of others is a position that is universally recognized as one resting on injustice. By the same token, a political stance that advocates principles of behavior for others which one is not willing to apply to oneself is quickly suspected of hypocrisy. It is the tension and balance between self-love and other-love that enables individuals and groups to act responsibly in the *respublica*. *Ubi panis ibi patria* is not as narrow as it first seemed or, perhaps, as narrowly economic as Crèvecoeur’s eighteenth century term “self-interest” might imply. “Wives and children, who before in vain demanded of him a morsel of bread,” Crèvecoeur observed, “now, fat and frolicsome, gladly help their father to clear those fields whence exuberant crops are to arise to feed and to clothe them all;....”⁵ Self-love/other-love, reason/emotion, self-interest/public good all working together create the basis for community—whether in the home, the community, or the nation.⁶

To most Christians, including readers of this journal, the *panis*, the bread, of the slogan *ubi panis ibi patria* has a twofold and deeper signification. It is both the eucharistic body/bread broken—“given for you”—and the evangelistic “bread for the world” of redeeming word and righteous deed. Here we may

⁴Ibid., 23.

⁵Crèvecoeur, *Letters from an American Farmer*, 55.

⁶Ibid., 55-56.

challenge Crèvecoeur’s placid eighteenth century assumptions (or their current twentieth century versions) about the minimal relevance of religion to the American collective experience. Consider the following passage from Crèvecoeur:⁷

Let us suppose you and I to be travelling; we observe that in this house,...., lives a Catholic, who prays to God as he has been taught, and believes in transubstantion [sic.];...., he has a large family of children, all hale and robust; his belief, his prayers offend nobody. About a mile farther on the same road, his next neighbor may be a good honest plodding German Lutheran, who addresses himself to the same God,...., agreeably to the modes he has been educated in, and believes in

consubstantiation; by so doing he scandalizes nobody; *What has the world to do with his Lutheran principles?*...Next to him lives a seceder [“radical” sectarian]; his zeal is hot and fiery, but separated as he is from others of the same complexion, he has no congregation of his own to resort to, where he might cabal and mingle religious pride with worldly obstinacy....Next again lives a Low Dutchman, who implicitly believes the rules laid down by the synod of Dort [Calvinist]. He conceives no other idea of a clergyman than that of a hired man; if he does his work well he will pay him the stipulated sum; if no he will dismiss him....Each of these people instruct their children as well they can, but these instructions are feeble compared to those which are given to the youth of the poorest class in Europe. Their children will therefore grow up less zealous and more indifferent in matters of religion than their parents...[They] have no time,..., and thus in a few years, this mixed neighbourhood will exhibit a strange religious medley, that will be neither pure Catholicism nor pure Calvinism.

There is something characteristic in Crèvecoeur’s collapse of American religious diversity into the presumably polar opposites of Catholicism and Calvinism. Something more than rhetorical alliteration is at work in this passage. Scholars in the American Studies movement for many years did indeed echo these categories (with an occasional nod toward Jewish identity/anxiety and American pluralism as in Will Heberg’s famous *Protestant, Catholic, Jew* or Franklin H. Littell’s *From State Church to Pluralism*).⁸ American literary identity (until the recent revolt by feminists, Hispanics, and black scholars) has been portrayed as the wrestling of the American soul with the strictures of Calvinism. American political identity has been viewed as the struggle of the immigrant, largely Catholic, masses to achieve legitimacy and political power against the cultural domination and tenacity of the WASP elites. Recent events are interpreted by the media as a battle between an institutionalized Catholic “left” (the Catholic bishops, after all, have been criticizing the capitalistic ethos of Reaganite America) and an insurgent Protestant evangelical “right” (all those “born again” televangelized “armies of the right” seem alarmingly “Puritanical” aka Calvinist to secular commentators).

⁷Ibid., 63-65. Italics added.

⁸Cushing Strout, *The New Heavens and New Earth: Political Religion in America* (New York: Harper & Row, 1974), for example, devotes considerable attention to Calvinism and Catholicism in American political religion but very little attention to Lutheranism.

II. WHERE ARE THE LUTHERANS?

Where in all of this scholarly and popular confusion do the Lutherans fit in? Or, to put the matter in Crèvecoeur’s phrase, “What has the world to do with his Lutheran principles?” As the late Joseph Sittler said at a seminary luncheon before the creation of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, Lutherans have yet to make their impact on American life clear, visible, and understandable to the rest of American society. The ELCA has, from my perspective, a unique opportunity to redeem the word “evangelical” and take it back from the TV evangelists who have perverted it (“What you can do for me, for God’s sake” or “what you can do for yourself with God’s help and a contribution to me”) and return it to its historic Reformation meaning: the

proclamation of what *God has done* for us in Christ Jesus and the call to repentance and renewal in *response* to that saving act. In Lutheran theological terms, of course, this is simply the affirmation that salvation is by *grace*; justification is by *faith*; sanctification is by *deeds of love* for the neighbor and by corporate acts of praise and thanks to God.

How might such a Lutheran interpretation of American culture help to clarify American literary identity? Take, as one example, the much disputed question of the status of the writings of John Updike. As Frederick Crews has recently pointed out, the critics are more than usually divided on this topic:⁹

According to Joseph Epstein among others, Updike lacks anything much to say and is thus habitually thrown back on “overwriting and sex, and overwriting about sex” ; he “simply cannot pass up any opportunity to tap dance in prose.”...But on the other side we find a formidable array of critics, most of them English professors, who consider Updike a powerful social chronicler, a master of physical texture and psychological nuance, a profound moralist, a symbolist, a Christian philosopher, in short a living classic....Who is kidding whom?

Crews sides with the English professors in the belief that Updike’s religious perspective is crucial to understanding his canon. Having made this concession, however, Crews immediately faults Updike because “he has radically divorced his notion of Christian theology from that of Christian ethics.”¹⁰

What is implicit in such criticism is the characteristically Calvinist notion of the great disjunction: the eternal either/or. *Either* one is a sinner *or* one is a saint. Either the character in the novel is saved or he/she is damned. Either Updike must write consistently out of an awareness of such religious dichotomies or he is confused, hypocritical, or cynical. The point here is the *critical categories* being used to relate the author to the American scene. Crews’ criticism is more sophisticated than the naive complaint, “If Updike is so Christian, why does he write so much about sex?” Nevertheless, Crews, too, sees Updike as a latter-day, albeit Barthian, backslider. “In Barth,” he concludes, “Updike has found a

⁹Frederick Crews, “Mr. Updike’s Planet,” *New York Review of Books*, December 4, 1986, p. 7. The essay is a review of John Updike, *Roger’s Version* (New York: Alfred Knopf, 1986).

¹⁰Ibid.

means of talking back to a prickly conscience and a set of reasons for believing that, regardless of his conduct, he may yet be counted among the saved.”¹¹

Let me propose a counter set of critical categories (“Lutheran” rather than “Calvinist”) and a counter-thesis: *simul iustus et peccator* (simultaneously a righteous person and a sinner). Instead of the everlasting either/or, let the critical categories be the temporal both/and. The recent Lutheran and Catholic dialogue on justification by faith has reminded us that “the Reformation wanted to restore Augustinian emphases on sin *and* grace....The imputed alien righteousness of Christ creates a new situation in which sin is exposed as *both* presumption and despair *and* is attacked in its totality. Only when so exposed and confessed can sin no longer reign.”¹²

John Updike’s prototypical Everyman, Rabbit Angstrom, and the various protagonists of

his short stories and quasi-autobiographical novels are sinners/saints caught up in the presumptions of post-1950s, consumer-oriented, hedonistic, “nobody can tell anybody not to do anything” America. They are afflicted with despair, not of denial and failure to attain moral perfection, but of ennui, satiated desire, and the failure of cultural institutions. If they have not yet attained the insight that comes from the exposure of sin *as sin* and cannot consciously confess their collective sins as a prelude to forgiveness, it is, in part, because the church has failed them (that is, it has not preached *both law and gospel*). Hence that anger in Updike’s more recent works that Crews notes: “The chief target of that anger has been ‘limp-wristed theology’ and—‘androgynous homogenizing liberals’...the apparently feminine, sympathy-bestowing element that is supposedly anathema to the Barthian outlook.”¹³ Whatever may be Updike’s “macho”/mock-heroic debt to Karl Barth, there is a substratum of Pennsylvanian Lutheranism still at work in his fiction and in his moral/immoral vision: *simul iustus et peccator*.¹⁴ (Or, at least, one can look at Updike’s corpus with such critical categories and see the artistic-cultural *unity* of his enterprise.)

How might such Lutheran categories also help us to understand the strains in the Madisonian legacy of reason/self-love; opinion/passion; diversity/identity; interests/institutions after two centuries of political stress and constitutional interpretation? Again, let the Lutheran both/and rather than the Calvinistic either/or be the basis for the critical categories. Whenever we as a nation have emphasized one pole of the Madisonian spectrum at the expense of the other we have distorted our political life. An excessively rational “calculation of national interest” in foreign policy leads to morally questionable operative distinctions between “authoritarian” (friendly) and “totalitarian” (unfriendly) regimes that box us into embarrassing situations. Excessive preoccupation with the “bottom line,” rational calculation of interest, cost-benefit analysis in domestic policy rends the fabric of mutual concern and renders the social “safe-

¹¹Ibid., 8.

¹²*Justification by Faith: Lutherans and Catholics in Dialogue VII*, ed. H. George Anderson, T. Austin Murphy, and Joseph A. Burgess (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1985) 22-24. Italics added.

¹³Crews, “Mr. Updike’s Planet,” 8.

¹⁴On Barth, see John Updike, “Faith in Search of Understanding,” *Assorted Prose* (Greenwich, CT: Fawcett Crest, 1966) 212-19.

ty net” an empty rhetorical flourish. The point is that we need *both* the reasonable restraint necessary for the preservation of the common good *and* the emotional self-love/other-love sensitivity that is essential to the achievement of justice and equity.

Let one example stand for many in this area. Recently a distinguished Spanish professor sat in my office, and we discussed various aspects of American constitutional history. He called my attention to a phenomenon so ordinary, so commonplace, that we seldom think about it. The Madisonian republican faith in institutional safeguards rests on what he called “Constitutionalism,” the prior assumption or commitment that we will obey, however grudgingly, the set of rules embodied in the constitutional system.¹⁵ I thought of an analogy in Lutheran-Catholic dialogue, a phrase from a post-Vatican II ecumenical gathering: “Catholics are learning to appreciate the *faith* that precedes obedience; Lutherans are learning to appreciate the *obedience* that is entailed in faith.” Faith in the democratic system precedes obedience to the

constitutional constraints. It is not enough to demand obedience to the “original intent” of the Founders or to one center of authority in the constitutional/institutional system. Rather, both the faith and the obedience are necessary to make the system work peacefully and equitably in an increasingly pluralistic society.

Is *ubi panis ibi patria* still an adequate basis for a critical, Christian understanding of American identity? Viewed in its rich symbolic *sense*—*panis* as the presence of both “daily bread” and “the bread of life,” and *patria* as the collective *simul iustus et peccator* of individual faith/institutional obedience—in this sense, yes, it can be. And which of you, if your son [or daughter] asked for a loaf, would give a stone?

¹⁵Pablo Lucas Verdu, *Curso de Derecho Politico* (3rd ed.; Madrid: Editorial Technos, S.A., 1986), Volume II, Part III.