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Theological Problems with Patriotism in Worship

CRAIG M. WATTS

INTRODUCTION

In the months following the terrorist attacks of 9/11, evidence of patriotism was omnipresent. Bumper stickers, tee shirts, buttons, and especially flags declared devotion to America. Every nook and cranny of the country seemed to be adorned in red, white and blue. Many people believed the church should follow suit. And often it did. Shortly after the terrorist attacks, *The Dallas Morning News* observed that, “the American flag has replaced the cross as the most visible symbol in many churches across the country.”¹

An editorial in a leading Christian journal boldly called the church to “Rally Round the Flag.”² In many places that is exactly what happened without reservation. Some churches handed out miniature American flags. One congregation with which I am familiar made flags available for purchase. Some congregations pledged allegiance to the flag during worship services. The national anthem was performed in a church service I attended, and patriotic hymns were imported into worship with greater frequency in many places. Some Christians surely question the appropriateness of the flag ever becoming “the most visible symbol” in the church. But the patriotic displays in church immediately following 9/11 were not unique in kind but only in degree. Special services for Independence Day and Memorial Day, for example, have long been observed in many churches. Few, it seems, question the legitimacy of such patriotic expression in worship. After all, the United States is a nation that has its origins with people of faith. It is a great defender of the freedom of religion. Christian values have had a significant impact on its laws and institutions. And, so the reasoning goes, it is only right that the churches in the United States should promote patriotism, especially in times of crisis.

Bumper stickers, church marquees, songs and political speeches have voiced the call, “God Bless America!” Certainly it is a natural desire on the part of Christian citizens to want the blessings of God upon the nation. It is equally appropriate for the individual Christian to want God to bless his or her family. I certainly pray that God bless the Watts family. But I question whether in any exclusive way this is a legitimate theme for the church. The church must maintain a view to the blessings of much more than my family or even the country I love as home. “Church” is defined by neither my family identity nor my nationality. And the Christian message is not particularly focused on either my family or the nation in which I reside. The Christian message is that “God so loved *the world* that he sent his only begotten son...” (John 3:16).

PATRIOTISM

Patriotism is a natural feeling of love and appreciation for one’s homeland. A patriot is one who has affection and devotion to his or her nation. In his study on *The Psychology of Nations*, G.E. Partridge defined patriotism as “the sum of the affections a people has for that which is its own.”³ More recently

1. Cited in editorial, *Christianity Today*, 45/14 (Nov. 12, 2001) 36.

2. Ibid.

3. Cited in Louis Snyder, *The Meaning of Nationalism* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1968) 156.

Walter Berns proposed that “a patriot has to be more than a citizen or mere inhabitant of a nation; he has to be devoted to his nation and be prepared to defend it.”⁴

In his study on the morality of patriotism, Igor Primoratz offered a definition beyond the basic “love of and concern for one’s country.” Elaborating and clarifying the definition, he said that “patriotism must involve *special* concern for one’s country and compatriots. Patriotism is not the same as love of and concern for humanity; a patriot loves her country *more* than any other, and is *more* concerned for the interests of her country and compatriots than for the interests of other countries and their inhabitants.”⁵ Key to patriotism is the loyalty to a particular people and place above all others.

In a time of crisis natural feelings can become exaggerated and misshapen. An excessive focus on pursuing the interests of “one’s own” can turn a natural love into a pathological passion. “It is characteristic of patriotism in war time that the group personality become temporarily deranged...” wrote Louis Snyder in his study on *The Meaning of Nationalism*. “Every social institution is brought into line and every objection to national policy is stifled as anathema ... no longer a benign love of county, patriotism becomes epidemic.”⁶

Great church reformer Alexander Campbell had a deep love and appreciation for America. Yet at the same time he was wary of patriotism. Campbell referred to it as a “pagan virtue” and declared that “patriotism ... has no special place in the Christian religion. Its founder never pronounced a single sentence in commendation of it. The reason is that the world was his field, and as patriotism is only an extension of the principle of selfishness, he deigned it no regard; because selfishness is now the great and damning sin of [hu]mankind”⁷ Campbell saw such patriotism as contrary to the broader love Christ demanded of his followers.

Nothing in the teachings of either Christ or the apostles calls for love or loyalty to one nation above others. All that is expressly urged in scripture is that disciples honor and pray for governing leaders and obey laws that are not contrary to God’s will. Love and allegiance for any earthly realm is neither commanded nor commended in scripture. Hence, there is nothing essentially Christian about patriotism. But, I would suggest, neither is patriotism necessarily contrary to Christian faithfulness, so long as it does not entail exclusive loyalty to and love of one’s own. A natural love for one’s own country coupled with a dedication for the well-being of all is a form of patriotism compatible with discipleship. There are ways that Christians as individuals can appropriately display patriotism.

PATRIOTISM AND THE CHURCH

But the same cannot be said for a church. Because of the nature of the church’s identity and mission, patriotic expressions have no legitimate place in its worship and ministry. This is not because all forms of patriotism are wrong in themselves. Rather it is because despite the makeup of a particular congregation, the members do not rightly come together as anything but Christians, a people created by God through faith in Jesus Christ. This being the case, patriotic and nationalistic displays must not be welcomed in the life of the church—particularly in worship—for several overlapping reasons.

First, the church in America is not American. The church is a new creation. The rightful identity of the church is not determined by its place of residence, the complexion of its members or the culture which surrounds it. The rightful identity of the church—and every congregation that is part of it—transcends the divisions and distinctions of humankind. “Here there cannot be Greek or Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave, free, but Christ is all, and in all” (Col 3:11). When the church promotes

4. Walter Berns, *Patriotism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001) 1.

5. Igor Primoratz, “Patriotism - Morally Allowed, Required, or Valuable?” in *Patriotism*, ed., Igor Primoratz (Amherst, NY: Humanity Books, 2002) 188.

6. Snyder, 158.

7. Alexander Campbell, *Popular Lectures and Addresses* (Philadelphia: James Challen and Sons, 1864) 184.

the celebration of and identification with local loyalties or incidental characteristics, as occurs with patriotic displays, it betrays its expansive God-given identity.

A recurring theme throughout the New Testament is that in Christ barriers between peoples are shattered. Old self-understandings and allegiances are challenged, old enmities have been overthrown so that all might be “brought near by the blood of Christ ... For he is our peace ... that he might create in himself one new humanity” (Eph 2:14-15). The reality of being in Christ confronts every other reality. Every identity is subverted by faith. In the life of the church the divisions of humankind are transcended. And so the church can never be rightfully aligned to any specific nation, race, class or culture.

When we import into worship anything that reinforces the perception that our worth, pride and purpose hinges on our nationality we deny the truth of the new creation. By faith we are to see ourselves and all people in light of the re-creating power of God in Christ. “From now on, therefore, we regard no one from a human point,” wrote Paul (2 Cor 5:16). But when we celebrate national identity in the very context of worship, we deny Paul’s assertion that “the old has passed away, behold, the new has come” (2 Cor 5:17). Faithful worship reflects nothing less than the new reality and identity created by Christ.

Second, patriotic expressions in the life of the church present obstacles to both fellowship and evangelism. Nation-centered songs, rituals and symbols implicitly deny that, in the words of the great hymn, “the church’s one foundation is Jesus Christ the Lord.” Loyalty to Jesus Christ is not enough for those who insist that their patriotism be given voice

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in the worship and life of the church. By doing so, it is as if we lay an alien cornerstone for the foundation of the church’s fellowship. Moreover, the citizens of the U.S. are thereby given privileged status. Those who are not citizens may be accepted as welcome guests but they are implicitly denied equal standing unless they conform to patriotic practices and accept the patriotic symbols or rituals incorporated into worship, though such things have nothing to do with the faith “once delivered to the saints’ for all times and places (Jude 3). Furthermore, unbelievers who may visit our assemblies and who may not share our patriotism are likely to be impeded in their search for God. The celebration of nation stands as a hurdle they must clear to get to Christ. Their salvation is made to depend—not by design but by implication—on faith in Jesus *and* love of country. “Love It or Leave *Him*.”

Against this, genuine Christian openness to others leaves no room in the corporate church for patriotism or for the promotion of other limited loyalties. Regardless of the makeup of a local congregation, the church is multicultural, multiracial, and multinational by its nature. Nothing must be done in the life of the church to suggest otherwise. Each local church is a part of a world-wide ecumenical community created by the blood of Jesus. As such, each church, no matter where it might be found, is more deeply attached to that global spiritual body than to any nation or identity group. In a world where fractious tribalism is a continual threat, the church should avoid anything that would suggest alignment with any one group of humanity to the neglect, exclusion, or hatred of others. Philosopher Marcia Baron is surely correct in saying, “Appeals to patriotism are often inseparable from hate campaigns: those who show insufficient hatred are branded unpatriotic.”⁸ In contrast, the church is to practice a hospitality that has no regard for the divisions and distinctions of humankind.

The church must ever keep before its eyes Jesus the Lamb whom the angelic hosts praise, saying, “You are worthy ... for you were slaughtered and by your blood you ransomed for God saints from every tribe and language and people and nation” (Rev 5:9). The church cannot faithfully echo the spirit and truth of the

8. Marcia Baron, “Patriotism and ‘Liberal’ Morality” in *Patriotism*, ed., Igor Primoratz (Amherst, NY: Humanity Books, 2002) 60.

clear-sighted angelic worshipers while paying honor or offering special recognition to a single tribe, language, people, or nation. The natural love we have for our own people and homeland is no justification for invading the worship of the Savior and Lord of all with songs, symbols and rituals of tribute for some, to the exclusion of others. To do so is to practice a not-so-subtle form of self-praise. In Christian worship we celebrate a reality much more important than the nation or culture to which we belong.

It is a curious thing that Christians who would be appalled at the notion of singing songs in worship celebrating the shared race of the members of the congregation, do not give a thought to singing songs that pay tribute to their nationality. Yet both race and nationality are accidents of birth, not choices of faith. Both, when celebrated in worship, would leave a significant portion of the church worldwide excluded and very

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likely insulted. Neither expresses anything essential to Christian belief or identity.

Third, any practice in the church that lends support to divisive identities contradicts the meaning of the loaf and cup of communion, making the holy meal an inadequate expression of the unified reality

that is in Christ. Or, as Paul put it, “When you come together, it is not really to eat the Lord’s Supper” (1 Cor 11:20). Wherever our worship supports the fragmentation that plagues this world, there those who come to the Lord’s table do so in “an unworthy manner” and, according to Paul, “will be answerable for the body and blood of the Lord” (1 Cor 11:27).

In sharp contrast to those who lend legitimacy to and bestow honor on America in worship, Christians are called to “discern the body” as they share Christ at the Lord’s table. Paul condemned those in the ancient Corinthian church who allowed the social distinction between rich and poor to intrude into the church. When the wealthier members failed to fully embrace and share with those who were poorer, they were “guilty of desecrating the body and blood of the Lord” (1 Cor 11:27). We are called to a Christ-centered oneness at the Lord’s table. This practice allows no room for any activity that could compromise that oneness. At the table, nationality is irrelevant.

Augustine observed, “Since you are the Body of Christ and His members, it is the mystery of yourselves which lies upon the Lord’s Table: it is the mystery of yourselves which you receive.”⁹ We who are Christians have an identity which the world cannot give. We have a unity that the world cannot provide. These things are not given to us with our birth but with the mystery of rebirth in Christ. When practiced rightfully, eating and drinking at the Lord’s table reinforces our oneness with Christ and our oneness with all others everywhere who draw life from him. In this there can be no place to celebrate national identity.

The very practice of communion calls us to a unity far different from the patriotic “United We Stand.” “Because there is one loaf” wrote the apostle Paul, “we, many as we are, are one body; for it is one loaf of which we all partake” (1 Cor 10:17). At the table of the Lord, God draws us from lesser loyalties and local identities to be one new people. The importance of peculiarities based on place, race, or social status is undermined at the table. Both pride in “one’s own” and enmity toward others is challenged as worshipers gather with Jesus for communion.

Fourth, the capacity for faith-filled discernment can be seriously wounded by importing national symbols, rituals, or songs into the life of the church. Blending the patriotic with the sacred increases the difficulty of discerning one from the other. Consequently, Christians can come to perceive less of a need to qualify their loyalty to the nation. They come to have a diminished ability to critically assess so-called “national interest” in light of the words and example of Jesus Christ. Allegiance to the nation can be viewed simply as an expression of faith in God. After all, this is “one nation under God,” isn’t it? Hence, the unqualified loyalty that is rightly given to God alone can end up being offered to the nation.

9. Cited in William H. Willimon, *Worship As Pastoral Care* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1979) 194.

The more national songs and rituals come to the foreground in the church, the more the cross drifts to the background and loses its rightful place as the criterion for all Christian thought and action. The ability to see the call to discipleship standing in tension with certain national endeavors can easily be lost. In the worship service at a local church, for example, the congregation stood to pledge allegiance to the flag of the United States, followed by a pledge to the Christian flag. How can such a practice fail to convey the notion that the two loyalties are mutually supportive and harmonious? Such behavior deals a solid blow to critical, Christ-centered reflection on the limits of national allegiance.

How can Christians be prepared to recognize, when it comes, a real choice between God and country, if their churches urge the adoration of country along with praise to God? The so-called patriotic hymns are most often songs of praise to a personification of the country and not a means of truly glorifying God. "My country, 'tis of thee, sweet land of liberty, of thee I sing," or "America, America, God shed his grace on thee." The "thee" is not God but country. If these are songs of worship, it is false worship. God is mentioned as a supporting figure, a means to bolster the greatness of the nation, which is the real object of adoration in the hymns. We should label this for what it is—idolatry.

Certainly these hymns convey statements that can be rightly embraced by Christians in America. It is natural to want the blessings and protection of God on the nation that we love as home. It is right to appreciate the benefits we enjoy in America. But we must be diligent not to confuse that which is creaturely—the nation—with the God who alone is worthy of all honor and worship and praise. When we sing of the greatness of America, whether we consciously intend to or not, we suggest that America is deserving of God's support. As political leaders have said, "America is great because America is good." These are words of national self-importance and pride of which Christians should be wary. Everything we have from the hand of God comes by grace, not merit.

Even as we appreciate much about America, we must keep at the forefront of our minds the fact that sin and brokenness are at the heart of America, as well as every other nation. It has always been so. America is not an extension of the being of God, worthy of worship and unqualified loyalty. It is a work of human hands and as such it is inevitably flawed. The church must be vigilant in identifying those flaws that may compromise our witness to Jesus as Lord. We cannot, we dare not, assume that national interest and the will of God are harmonious and mutually supportive. The motto, "In God We Trust" is more often said than done. Nations do not "walk by faith rather than sight" (2 Cor 5:7). But Christians must.

Patriotism in worship commingles devotion to nation and devotion to God. But something very different should take place in worship. Worship should provide a perspective that transcends both nation and culture. Rather than sanctifying local loyalties, Christian worship should scrutinize such loyalties in light of the cross.

Miroslav Volf, a Croatian theologian now at Yale, who watched his homeland in the former Yugoslavia torn apart as religious leaders legitimated the ethnic conflict, observes, "Our coziness with the surrounding culture has made us so blind to many of its evils that, instead of calling them into question, we offer our own versions of them—in God's name and with a good conscience."¹⁰ The church cannot be the "salt" and "light" of the world that Christ calls for (Matt 5:13-16) if the distinctiveness of discipleship is lost in a blending of patriotism and piety.

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10. Miroslav Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1996) 36.

Finally, national songs, symbols and rituals have no place in worship because America—along with all other nations—is part of the world that is passing away (1 John 2:15-17; 2 Pet 3:10). While we live in this world, our worship should not seek to intensify our attachment to it. Though we accept appropriate responsibility for improving the well-being of others around us, in worship we are to be reminded that the governments of nation-states are not of ultimate concern.

Governments and empires are not the primary and permanent actors on the stage of reality, according to scripture. God can and has employed them for his own purpose, but no nation is either indispensable or permanent. As prophetic words declare, “Behold, the nations are like a drop from a bucket, and are accounted as dust on the scales ... All the nations are as nothing before God. They are accounted by him as less than nothing and emptiness” (Isa 40:15, 17).

Rather than under girding national self-importance in worship, it is more faithful to “let the nations know that they are only human” (Ps 9:20). Nations are unworthy of the praise and devotion reserved for that which is eternal. All commitment to the nations and institutions of this world is provisional. Even while appreciating the best in the nation and working for its good, a certain detachment is necessary. This is in keeping with Paul’s admonition that “those who deal with the world do so as though they had no dealings with it. For the form of this world is passing away” (1 Cor 7:31).

If Jesus Christ is the fulfillment of history, then the future of civilization or even the survival of humankind does not depend upon the success or survival of any particular nation. The church, rather than the nation-state, is God’s primary instrument in the outworking of his intention for the world. It was of the church, and not America or any other nation, that Jesus said, “The powers of death shall not prevail against it” (Matt 16:18).

Worship is a practice of life in a new realm. The love, acceptance, generosity, and forgiveness that characterize “the realm that cannot be shaken” (Heb 12:28) is rehearsed in the worshiping community. The story of the self-giving, promise-making God is told again and again in worship. This story contrasts and challenges the story of every tribe and nation. In worship, hope is redirected from the principalities and powers of the present to that which is coming. Rather than sanctioning any present nation, the church, if faithful in worship, practices for what it prays for: “thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven” (Matt 6:10). In this there is no room for patriotic celebration.

CONCLUSION

The emotional appeal of patriotism is powerful. Surely Bernard Joseph was right to say that “patriotism is that part of nationality which may be compared to faith in religion.”¹¹ And this is precisely why patriotic displays must be given no place in Christian worship. God, as scripture repeatedly attests, has never been friendly toward competitors. Thus the church cannot rightfully promote in worship any loyalties, values, or identities that are not given by faith. Only the God revealed in Jesus Christ is worthy of the honor, glory, and praise of the church in worship.

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11. Bernard Joseph, *Nationality: Its Nature and Problems* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1929) 342.