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# Beyond the Nation-State

## Defining a Transnational Vision for the Contemporary Church

by Dean C. Curry

Since the inauguration of Ronald Reagan, the United States has witnessed a return to an "era of good feelings" reminiscent of the 1820s when nationalism intensified its influence over the country's ethos. The people have been assured by their President that their country is again on the road to prosperity and greatness. Indeed, after the malaise which was an ubiquitous reality of the sixties and seventies, there are signs that the United States is once again an optimistic nation. The journal *Public Opinion* has reported a dramatic rise in the "Gross National Spirit." Other national opinion polls report that 80% of the people are "extremely proud to be an American" while over 90% believe the "U.S. is the very best place to live."

Perhaps no group in U.S. society has been more supportive of this vision of a "born again" nation than evangelicals. Christians in the United States have always closely identified with their nation. In colonial times, many within the church assumed that the new society would be the vehicle through which God would usher in the millennium. By the early nineteenth century this Christian millennialism became an integral part of the national spirit, and by 1850 it became the moving force behind much of U.S. domestic and foreign policy. According to those within both the church and government, the United States was a manifestly destined nation with a divine mission to redeem civilization. In the words of political scientist Irving Kristol, "the United States was to be a city . . . set on a hill, a light unto the nations." Through the years many peoples of the world have certainly questioned the divineness of this mission; yet, the American people have not. This point is well illustrated by a recent national opinion poll which reports that 84% of the public believes that the "U.S. has a special role to play in the world." This viewpoint is consistent with the theology of many evangelicals today.

To many of these evangelicals the relationship between their faith in God and faith in country is a simple one. God has always had a special plan for the United States. In an interview with *Christianity Today* Jerry Falwell remarked that "God has raised up America. . . . America has become the greatest nation on earth." Yet this sentiment is not the exclusive property of the fundamentalists of the far right; it is also shared by many in the mainstream of evangelicalism. Implicit in their theocentric nationalism is the belief that what is good for the United States is good for the Christian Church. In this sense, faith in the nation-state, loyalty to the United States, is a sacred obligation. Since this nation-state is a sacred vessel, expression of, and support for, nationalism is not only a patriotic duty but, more importantly, a sacred duty. The implication is that the United States is the New Israel and we, as its citizens, are God's chosen people.

Such a perspective I believe to be dangerous. It ignores both the transnational message of Jesus Christ and the changing realities of the contemporary world. To the extent that evangelicals continue to identify the interests of the Church with the revival of U.S. nationalism, they are in part responsible for perpetuating an idolatrous environment, an environment that is potentially harmful to the global witness of the church and the humanitarian interests of humankind. Evangelicals in the United States, and for that matter evangelicals throughout the world, must be careful how they identify with their nation-state. While patriotism *per se* is not inconsistent with Christian discipleship, uncritical, unquestioning nationalism is. In struggling with this issue we must begin by understanding the nature of the nation-state.

Humankind has organized and defined itself in terms of nation-states

for only a little more than three hundred years. Prior to the seventeenth century individuals thought of themselves in terms of universal, personal, and religious concepts. Feudal serfs defined themselves in relationship to their feudal lords. This relationship was a personal one. The idea of giving one's loyalty to an abstract concept such as a nation-state was inconceivable to the medieval mind. The feudal lords and princes gave their ultimate loyalty not to a nation but to the Holy Roman Empire—the universal Christian republic.

By the sixteenth century, however, the medieval world order was in a state of turmoil. The rise of manufacturing and trade resulted in the beginnings of a new capitalist order. As a result, the feudal order began to dissolve as the basis of society shifted from the self-sufficient feudal manor to the emerging towns and cities. Moreover, continuous conflict between the imperial pretensions of the Pope and the Holy Roman Emperor reached the point where religious strife became an endemic part of European life. The medieval order was crumbling; the foundations of Western society were in the midst of transformation.

In response to this transformation Western philosophers sought to create a new basis for social order and stability. In 1513 Machiavelli paved the way. In *The Prince*, Machiavelli suggested that rulers should abandon what he considered to be the fiction of a universal harmony of humankind. In its place he suggested that princes should govern on the basis of what he called the "reason of state." Machiavelli's idea was as much revolutionary as it was heretical. Princes were exhorted to use any means—even those previously considered immoral—to further the interests of their domain. In other words, Machiavelli suggested that the prince's ultimate loyalty should be directed toward the state, not towards a *respublica Christiana*.

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### ***The message of the gospel demands that we look beyond the national interest.***

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It was the sixteenth-century French lawyer Jean Bodin, however, who with his doctrine of state sovereignty would legitimate the notion of the secular state. According to Bodin, sovereignty is the essence of statehood. The state is all-powerful; no authority exists above the state. With the later development and popularization of this idea, Bodin provided the justification for the emerging secular European state. Henceforth it was accepted that there was no authority above the state—not the Pope, not the Holy Roman Emperor, not even God.

In a real sense Bodin paved the way for the Peace of Westphalia in 1648. This formally ended the Thirty Years War, but, more importantly, it signalled the demise of the worldview which saw Europe as a hierarchical, universal, Christian republic. From this time forward the world would be viewed as a collection of secular, sovereign states, each one subject to no higher authority and having as its sole *raison d'être* to exist and serve itself.

The development of the secular-parochial state coincided almost simultaneously with another revolutionary transformation which has fundamentally affected human loyalties to our present day. As a result of the secularizing impact of the Enlightenment, religion and its symbols slowly lost their grip over the minds of Western humankind. In contrast to the otherworldly focus of the medieval period, eighteenth-century men and women began to identify and define themselves not in terms of the Church or the Holy Roman Empire but in terms of "their" nationality. The prerequisites of nationality—common language, common descent, common customs, common territory, and

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common religion—had existed prior to the eighteenth century, yet nationalism was nonexistent. What was lacking was a corporate will; a decision to identify with the nation. As Western society became more secular, Western men and women needed an emotional reference point which religion could no longer provide but which the nation could. The nation became a secular substitute for earlier religious forms. The aspirations, dreams, and unlimited potential for progress which the Enlightenment engendered found expression in the nation. In the French Revolution, Bodin's idea of the sovereign state and the forces of nationalism were fused. A new age had dawned: the age of secularism, the age of the nation-state.

Since the late eighteenth century, therefore, men and women have defined themselves in terms of their nation-state. Nationalism and the "we-they" distinction which is inherent in the concept intensified throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. After waning somewhat following the First World War, nationalism again became a potent force immediately before World War Two and today is one of the most significant factors in international relations. In particular, American nationalism appeared nearly to die during the trauma-filled years of the Vietnam conflict but, as we have already noted, has experienced an almost miraculous revival more recently.

As suggested earlier, no group has been more supportive of, and perhaps even more responsible for, the resurgence of American nationalism than the evangelical Christian community. Blind nationalism, however, is frequently harmful to the interests of humankind in general and of the Body of Christ in particular. The nation-state is not an ancient, permanent, and sacred institution. It is a relatively young institution which developed in response to specific historical forces and the emergence of a new dominant worldview. Just as the nation-state has not always existed, so there is no reason to believe that it will not also be superseded by some other form of socio-political organization in the future. In other words, there is no reason to believe that human loyalties will not again shift. There is simply no evidence—historical or biblical—to support the contention that the nation-state is sacrosanct.

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### ***State sovereignty denies the sovereignty of our Holy God.***

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Because our God is the sovereign Lord of history, we can affirm that during the past three hundred years he has worked his will in and through nation-states. Nevertheless, there is no scriptural evidence to suggest that God has ordained that humankind should forever organize itself—*divide* itself—among nation-states. To the contrary, there are compelling reasons, I believe, for the Christian Church to reevaluate its uncritical support for this form of socio-political organization. Initially the Church must ask itself: Is a world of nation-states conducive to the spread of the Gospel? Does a world of nation-states contribute to a more just and peaceful world? There are no easy or simple answers to these questions. One can certainly argue—as many who call themselves "realists" have done—that in a fallen world *national* power is the only way in which the forces of evil can be deterred and the peace guaranteed. To put it another way, it is "our" missiles which allow us peace. On the surface this logic seems paradoxical if not incomprehensible. Nonetheless, one cannot deny that both human civilization and Christianity have made their greatest advances during this age of the nation-state.

On the other hand, it is becoming increasingly apparent that the contemporary world is on the verge of another transformation which may be as significant and revolutionary as that which spawned the age of the nation-state. There is reason to believe that the nation-state is slowly becoming an anachronism; that humankind in the late twentieth century is again searching for new forms of socio-political organization to guarantee order and stability. There is evidence that the idea of the nation-state does not reflect the realities of the contemporary world and therefore is an inappropriate response to the problems which beset humanity. Before discussing the implications this has for the church's vision, it will be useful to examine those forces of change which today pose a challenge to the nation-state.

The essence of the nation-state—sovereignty, or the notion that

nation-states are independent, equal, and impermeable entities—no longer accurately serves to describe the nature of today's world. The presence of thermonuclear weapons has rendered this idea obsolete. Nation-states can no longer guarantee the absolute well-being and security of their citizens. Strategically, the nation-states of the world are dependent upon the rationality of one another for their future existence. Economically, the national economies of the world are intimately tied together in such a way that the economic stability—and therefore political stability—of most nations is dependent upon the economic policies of "outsiders." Moreover, as we have been made painfully aware in the past decade, nearly every nation-state is dependent on other nation-states for vital raw materials, minerals, energy and food. Finally, pollution, desertification, forest denudation, and other environmental traumas create ecological problems which do not respect national boundaries.

In short, thermonuclear weapons, global interdependence, and resource shortages call into question the foundations upon which nation-states evolved and upon which humanity has organized itself since the seventeenth century. Nation-states are simply no longer all-powerful, independent, equal, and impermeable institutions. The implications of this reality are profound. The *global* problems which confront humankind demand a *global* response. This is not to say that nation-states have been totally ineffective in dealing with these issues; rather, it is an acknowledgement of the inherent parochial perspective which each nation-state brings to these issues. To view the world's problems as well on one's own nation's problems through the lens of national interest is to distort the true picture of reality. As children of the Lord of the universe we must be sensitive to the fact that global peace, economic welfare, social and political justice as well as ecological stewardship are values which can and frequently do conflict with the interests of nation-states.

Citizens of all nations, but particularly of the United States (because of the theology and eschatology which are such a part of the national ethos), accept the assumption that national policies (domestic and foreign) are rooted in the highest of ideals. This assumption, however, must be questioned. Nation-states are not people. They are not ultimately guided by any system of moral principles. The *raison d'être* of the nation-state is to exist and to serve itself. Nation-states are bound by only one higher law: the national interest. Nation-states will never pursue objectives which threaten their existence.

This suggestion would be difficult for most U.S. citizens to accept. It defies the two-centuries-old belief that the United States has not been tainted by the "evils" of European power politics; that the United States is a nation-state called apart, driven by its manifest destiny and the highest of moral, even divine, principles. That vision, once again a powerful force in today's society, has influenced a large segment of the evangelical Christian community. It is, however, a dangerous vision, and the Church must recognize its limitations.

As Christians in the United States we must be prophetic enough to realize that ours is a transnational calling. The message of the Gospel—that of spiritual redemption, justice, peace and stewardship—demands that we look beyond the national interest. Ultimately the nation-state and the body of believers define their interests according to two completely different and frequently irreconcilable standards. State sovereignty—the foundation of the nation-state—denies the sovereignty of our Holy God. Therefore Christians should not be nationalists. The more the Church in the United States recognizes the pitfalls of its nationalistic vision, the more effective it will be in its witness both home and abroad.

While suggesting that Christians should not be nationalists, I am not suggesting that we should not be patriots. To the extent that the United States' objectives and policies are consistent with the values and principles taught in the Word of God, the Christian is commanded to obey them. Government itself—the institutional apparatus of the state—is ordained of God. To the extent that the United States government or any other government fulfills its God-given mandate in providing protection, order and justice to its citizens it legitimately commands the Christian's loyalty and support. The Lord has blessed the United States in manifold ways. As Christians we should always be thankful to God for these blessings. Ultimately, however, Christians must be discerning in their attitude toward their nation-state. While Christians have been clearly mandated to redeem the political order, they must continually keep in mind where their ultimate loyalties lie.