

In this patriotic season, is nationalism idolatry?

All Nationalism Is Idolatry" blared the headline of an opinion paper in California, arguing that "the Christian scriptures contend that all allegiance to the God of love is paramount, and yet all modern (and ancient) nation-states enact a religious pageantry that demands the total allegiance of its citizens."



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Of course, this is a serious accusation. According to Reinhold Niebuhr, in "Moral Man and Immoral Society," "the selfishness of nations is proverbial. It is therefore probably inevitable that every society should regard criticism as proof of a want of patriotism." Nevertheless, at the risk of being called unpatriotic we shall venture on.

Nationalism is sweeping the country today, with President Donald Trump leading the parade, flatly and publicly declaring his fealty to nationalism and claiming that he will take every advantage to make America even greater than it is.

But let's have some definitions:

► Patriotism — a healthy pride that brings out feelings of loyalty and a desire to help others

► Nationalism — a belief that our country is superior to all others, without question or doubt;

► Jingoism — extreme nationalism, especially

promoting a warlike foreign policy.

We find it easy to drift from patriotism into nationalism because, due to their similarities, we can harbor attitudes of nationalism and make it look like patriotism. French President Emmanuel Macron called nationalism a betrayal of patriotism.

Nationalism becomes idolatry when it replaces the Scriptural values of love and peace and replaces them with secular values of power, arrogance, contempt and hate.

One pastor said that nationalism makes a religion out of the nation, with the flag commanding loyalty that belongs to God. (The golden calf is back.)

Nationalism results in consequences that penetrate all of society. To foster and feed nationalism, our budget priorities get warped so that we end up with a disproportionate amount of money for a bloated military at the expense of care for our people, medical help for the ailing, rebuilding of our infrastructure and scores of other unmet needs.

Nationalists also reject the Scriptural call for kindness to the stranger. In practice we are doing the opposite, indiscriminately punishing the poor and needy at the gate, even to the point of spending billions for a wall to stop them. (The tower of babel is also here.)

As Nationalists, we swagger across the globe, confident that we can outdraw any other

country. But swaggering is dangerous and has led to crucial mistakes. Right now we think we are swaggering around only Iran and North Korea but we don't know what deals are being made behind the scenes. One slip of the swagger and people die.

On several occasions, the United States has gone beyond nationalism to jingoism. The period just before the Civil War we cheered something called "manifest destiny" which was nothing more than an excuse to grab what we could. So we engineered a war with Mexico and took half of their country. And now that some Mexicans want to come and live on their land, we are going to build a wall to keep them out.

Under the leadership of Jingoist Teddy Roosevelt, we drummed up a war with Spain so we could increase our empire in the Caribbean and Pacific. He was out-and-out warmonger until his favorite son, Quentin, was killed in a dogfight over Germany. That transformed his thinking. (North Dakota will build him a library anyway.)

So is nationalism idolatry? Instead of nationalism, the Scripture suggests that we move in the opposite direction.

"Therefore, come out from their midst and be separate." "Therefore, whoever wishes to be a friend of the world makes himself an enemy of God."

Serious Christians have a tough choice to make — humble patriotism or arrogant nationalism.

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