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BOOK REVIEW

America Has Tried Three ‘Narratives of Belonging.’ None Worked as Planned.

How a sober look at failed projects of nationalism can help Christians envision a better way.

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Three days after polls closed on one of the most divisive elections in recent American history, Joe Biden delivered a victory speech intended to unite a fractured nation. “I’ve always believed we can define America in one word: possibilities,” Biden said. Yet more than six months later, a majority of Republicans still insist the 2020 election was not conducted fairly, and just fewer than one-third of all Americans don’t consider Biden to be the legitimately elected president. Samuel Goldman’s new book, *After Nationalism: Being American in an Age of Division*, helps to place both Biden’s attempts at unity and national partisan polarization in a broader historical context.

*After Nationalism*is a gripping, fast-paced, and probing study into how American political leaders and thinkers—ranging from John Jay to Abraham Lincoln to Fredrick Douglass to Dwight Eisenhower—have debated the essence of American identity and what binds the nation together. Goldman, a political scientist at George Washington University, tells a history of repeated failed attempts by these American elites to sustain compelling “narratives of belonging.” He offers three symbols, or myths, of American identity that progress chronologically: covenant, crucible, and creed. Drawing inspiration from philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre’s *After Virtue* (1981), which identified fundamentally different conceptions of virtue “in which people mean

different things by the same words," *After Nationalism* points to a similar ambiguity surrounding the word *nationalism*.

Like MacIntrye, Goldman does not just describe a situation but also suggests a path forward. Instead of endorsing another attempt to define a single American nationalism, Goldman calls for embracing pluralism and strengthening the "institutions of disagreement" that can lead to compromise between communities.

This is an ambitious, possibly unfeasible proposition. Yet it charts a path forward for a polarized American society and, though it is not Goldman's focus or concern, an equally polarized American Christianity. When Christians are confronted with a surging Christian nationalist movement that assures their centrality to American identity, a sober look at past projects of nationalism can spoil the allure, dampen the zeal, and spark the Christian imagination toward different, and better, narratives of belonging that honor the gospel.

Covenant, crucible, and creed

Any singular "origin story" of American national identity is flawed. The 1619 Project has recently been at the center of academic and popular debate in part because it posits that traditional nationalist motifs of pilgrims and yeoman farmers are incomplete without slaves, indentured servants, and displaced Native Americans. The myths of nationalism that Goldman catalogs and explores fail for many reasons, but one consistent bug is that none manages to acknowledge this complexity.

The elites of the American Revolution and early republic, many of whom envisioned a broader citizenry in the future but framed the nation for white male property owners, based their earliest attempts at nation-building on the shared mythology of New England Puritanism. Seventeenth-century New Englanders had propounded the classic Calvinist conception of a covenantal relationship between obedient humans and God's favor. After the American Revolution, the covenantal ideal was revived by some founders as the basis for defining the new American nation.

This attempt, one of many in the early republic, was a mixed success at best. Covenantalism originated in the ethnically and religiously homogenous communities of New England, which were governed in cooperation with church authorities. The concept was a poor fit for a new nation that spanned 13 former colonies, contained diverse ethnic and religious communities, encompassed slave and free states, and pursued a federal separation of church and state. Yet a critical mass of New England founding fathers, especially John Adams and John Jay, and supportive New England intellectuals such as Yale president Timothy Dwight and lexicographer Noah Webster, took the "New England origin myth" of American greatness and tried to shoehorn it into the new nation.

Grading on a curve, covenantal nationalism was more coherent than what came later. But even by the early 19th century it had failed to solve the problem of national identity, address the sin of chattel slavery, or anticipate looming demographic changes. The republic was becoming far more theologically diverse (if still overwhelmingly Protestant), and New England no longer dominated its culture. Waves of European immigrants made the country less ethnically homogenous and geographically confined, and the symbol of a

crucible (or a melting pot; Goldman uses the two terms interchangeably) to describe American identity emerged to accommodate this new reality for the next century.

The idea of a crucible, writes Goldman, was "optimistic" and "open-ended," which made the symbol "a very different image of American origin and purpose to the New English covenant." Where the covenant had rooted itself in patriarchs who established a sacred community, the crucible looked to the future, to a new type of human and a new type of nation, to something far more innately good and innocent than a Calvinist would allow.

A crucible is intrinsically violent to the things you throw into it, and the American crucible was no exception. The increasing diversity of the nation's population led to ethnic strife, urban mobs, and actual wars, including the Civil War, as more immigrants from more parts of the globe (still mostly Europe, but now including eastern and southern Europe as well as East Asia) joined the body politic. Many did so only partially, with enclaves like the "German Triangle" between Milwaukee, Cincinnati, and St. Louis maintaining significant autonomy until the xenophobia of World War I led to its demise.

Both chattel slavery and the rise of Jim Crow segregation overlapped with the height of crucible nationalism. The durability of anti-Black racism and the predominant feeling among white elites, from politicians to intellectuals to new social scientists, that African Americans were prototypical "unmeltables," prompted observers, Fredrick A. Douglass chief among them, to hammer on the shortcomings of the melting-pot ideal. Douglass emerges as one of Goldman's favorite thinkers for his insights into the limits of American identity based on ethnic, religious, and cultural fusion. Douglass saw earlier than most that anything less than "perfect civil equality to the peoples of all races and of all creeds" would leave African Americans out.

Douglass uttered these words in 1869. Nothing close to "perfect civil equality" was on the horizon until the mid-20th century and the rise of a new metaphor for national identity: the creed. The line from Douglass to Martin Luther King Jr., who perfected the call for white Americans to finally fulfill their creedal destiny, was anything but foreordained. Creedal nationalism arose in response to new pressures, to a unique moment in and around World War II that fostered a vision of national unity among ever-increasing pluralism. As the US absorbed great numbers of European immigrants into a de-ethnicized whiteness while emerging as the primary global challenger against fascism and communism, Americans increasingly articulated a shared identity supposedly unencumbered by, and unrelated to, racial, ethnic, religious, geographical, or cultural difference.

This attempt at a creedal identity failed, too. Racial tensions, including expanded immigration from the Global South, white resistance to desegregation, and urban violence, dismantled the creedal vision that King and many other Americans endorsed. The Vietnam War shattered any semblance of creedal consensus. In its place was a "new tribalism" that rejected the melting pot, exposed the failed promises of unlimited growth and mobility, and called into question the basic values on which the American creed supposedly rested.

Christianity and national identity

In Goldman's telling, we live on the other side of creedal nationalism with no clear successor. Historians have experimented with new formulations, including systemic critiques of the American project like Howard Zinn's *A People's History of the United States*(which Goldman notes could better be titled *A Peoples' History ...)*. Zinn's work is just one element of a much wider contemporary debate over public school curricula. Conservatives, including many evangelicals, have responded with their own interpretations of American history that often include covenantal, crucible, and creedal tropes. Still others have not given up on the creedal dream. Jill Lepore's recent volume, *These Truths*, is a valiant effort, in Goldman's estimation, to update the consensus creedalism of the mid-20th century, even if he believes it fails, in its more than 900 pages, to navigate the tensions between unity and inclusivity.

When Biden delivered his victory speech in November 2020, he recycled some of the classic tools of covenantal, crucible, and creedal nationalism. He called Americans to join him in "embark[ing] on the work that God and history have called us to do." He appealed to the promise of America "for everybody, no matter their race, their ethnicity, their faith, their identity, or their disability." He fixed the nation's goodness on "the slow, yet steady widening of opportunity." Biden made these gestures in an era of waning nationalism, but his faith seemed undaunted.

The rhetoric of American nationalism has always featured a Christian edge. Biden, a Catholic born in 1942, grew up at the height of Judeo-Christian civic religion and creedal nationalism, the very pressures that produced an exceptional, if incomplete, expansion in religious pluralism and racial equality. His maintenance of a type of creedal exceptionalism—that "at our best America is a beacon for the globe"—has been one popular response to forestalling the absolute collapse of American nationalism.

Another response has been the hard-edged Christian nationalism that evokes many of the same nationalist myths and tropes but in the service of a narrower identity that seeks to circumscribe rather than embrace pluralism. There have been many thoughtful theological critiques of Christian nationalism, in CT and elsewhere, and many of them do more than rebut ethnocentrism. They raise the uncomfortable question of how Christians should then understand their relationship to national identity. Should Christians cheer the end of nationalism or seek to revive it on their preferred terms? Should they go local, fixing their identity to their neighborhoods and congregations? Or should they go international, seeing themselves foremost as members of the global church?

Goldman spends frustratingly little time on prescriptions. Even so, there is something enduring about Fredrick Douglass's "composite" ideal that demands neither homogeneity nor separation and warns against "the almost inevitable concomitants of general conformity" when sameness is the sought end.

Goldman's final suggestion to embrace difference as the driving characteristic of American society, and to strengthen institutions of disagreement that allow for mediated compromise between communities, is one Christians can consider. Christians should contemplate the limits of a covenantalism that applies biblical promises intended for ancient Israel and the church to a modern nation, a crucible-ism that invests the nation with vast coercive powers over diverse communities, and a creedalism that sees a particular nation, and even a particular historical moment in a nation's life, as revelatory of God's ultimate ways. As the Catholic historian Carlton Hayes wrote almost 100 years ago, in the wake of the First World War, nationalism taken to

its logical conclusion becomes a religion of its own. When it does, "it represents a reaction against historic Christianity, against the universal mission of Christ." This should be the first acknowledgment in any Christian attempt at grappling with American identity "after nationalism."

Which is not to discount that Christians have obligations to their fellow citizens and to their nations. Goldman claims for himself the word "patriot" as a way to acknowledge "that this country is, if imperfect, worthy of loyalty, celebration, and, when necessary, defense." The difference between a nationalist and a patriot is often one of semantics, but Goldman insists there is an important distinction. "If there is a difference," he writes, "it lies in whether one treats 'we, the people' as generated and sustained by our interactions under specific institutions in a particular place [nationalism], or bases the legitimacy of our institutions on an independent and previously existing communities [patriotism]."

As people who confess along with the psalmist that all the nations are God's inheritance and under God's judgment (82:8), this distinction is vital. In times of competing nationalist religions, just as in times when nationalist myths are ascendant, Christians will be tempted to conflate the tropes of the nation with the tenets of their faith. Wisdom may be the difficult task of untangling both without discarding either.

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