1

Loyalty and Limits

I. Against Cosmopolitanism

In Anglo-American philosophical circles—and even, it seems, in reaches of British government—the view is rising that there is no virtue in national loyalty.[1] Since all human individuals are of equal value, we have no good reason to prefer those who speak our language, share our customs, occupy our patch of the globe, or participate in our political community. Indeed, particular loyalties, whether to family or nation, are vices, moving us to discriminate unjustly against those whom Fate has cast outside the boundaries of our favoured group. Rather, enlightened by the speed and ease of global communications, we should transcend the benighted tribal attachments that have spawned so much human conflict and misery in the past, and embrace a new, cosmopolitan identity.

I suspect that a basic reason why my clergyman friend was so sure that the nation-state is in fact *passé* is that he was sure that it *should* be so.[2] Perhaps he was a nascent—and rather *avant garde*—cosmopolitan.

1. David Goodhart (*The British Dream,* xxv) tells the following story of an exchange over dinner at an Oxford college in the Spring of 2011: "When I said to my neighbour, one of the country's most senior civil servants, that I wanted to write a book about why liberals should be less sceptical about the nation state and more sceptical about large-scale immigration, he frowned and said, 'I disagree. When I was at the Treasury I argued for the most open door possible to immigration. . . . I think it's my job to maximize global welfare not national welfare.'" I have heard reports of similar sentiments currently held by civil servants in the U.K.'s Department for International Development.

2. See page xiii above.

After all, at first glance Christians have some obvious reasons for being so. Although Jesus did not cease to identify himself with the Jewish nation, he did distance himself from militant nationalist resistance to Roman imperial domination. We are told explicitly in the Gospel of John that he evaded those who would make him "king."[3] More generally, however, the pacific tenor of his teaching and conduct indicated a vision of God's reign alternative to that espoused by militant nationalism. Moreover, Jesus distanced genuine religious faith from the rites and authority of the Temple in Jerusalem, recognized that it was not the monopoly of his own people, and acknowledged its presence in Samaritans and Gentiles.[4] After Jesus' death, St. Paul further loosened the connection between faith on the one hand, and blood and land on the other. Although he too insisted on maintaining and asserting his Jewish identity, he nevertheless developed an understanding of religious faith that is not oriented toward the particular location of Jerusalem, which transcends ethnicity, and which has no proper interest in the restoration of a Jewish nation-state. Out of such an understanding emerged the trans-national religious community known as the "church."

Given these origins, it should not surprise that some interpret Christianity as implying a liberal, cosmopolitan stance over and against a partisan, nationalist one, and as preferring love for humanity in general over love for a particular nation. One expression of this can be found in Richard B. Miller's argument that Christian love for others is properly indiscriminate and unconditional: "Christianity requires an indiscriminate, unconditional love of others, irrespective of political, social, or national affiliation. . . . Christian *agape*, exemplified by Jesus' teaching and example, is altruistic and cosmopolitan."[5]

This claim has two main grounds, one biblical and the other theological. The biblical ground comprises those passages in the New Testament where "natural" loyalty to family is severely downgraded. Among them are those in the Gospels where Jesus is reported as saying that only those who hate their mothers and fathers can be his disciples,[6] that those who would follow him must "let the dead bury the dead,"[7] and that his "family" now consists of those who have joined him in his cause;[8] and also,

3. John 6:15.
4. Matt 8:5; 27:54; Mark 15:39; Luke 7:3; 23:47.
5. Richard Miller, "Christian Attitudes towards Boundaries," 17.
6. Matt 10:37; Luke 14:26.
7. Matt 8:22; Luke 9:60.
8. Matt 12:46–50; Mark 3:31–35; Luke 8:19–21.

by implication, those passages in the Epistles where St. Paul recommends virginity or celibacy as a higher good than marriage.[9]

The theological ground consists of the typically Protestant concept of God's love as showered graciously on every human creature regardless of their moral status—a concept that was most fully developed in the 1930s by the Swedish Lutheran theologian Anders Nygren. According to Nygren, God's love is utterly spontaneous and gratuitous; it is not attracted to the beloved by any of their qualities (how could it be, since those whom it loves are all sinners?) and it is in no sense beholden to them; it is simply and absolutely gracious.[10] As God loves us, so should we love our neighbors: with a pure altruism that entirely disregards their qualities. It is quite true that Nygren himself was not directly addressing the question of whether or not a certain local or national partiality in our affections and loyalties is justifiable; and that his focus was on the religious relationship between God and sinful creatures. Nevertheless, he made it quite clear that Christians are to mediate to their neighbors the same unconditional and indiscriminate love that God has shown them.[11]

What should we make of these biblical and theological grounds? Do they really imply that Christian love should be oblivious to local and national bonds? I think not. Certainly, the so-called "hard sayings" of Jesus imply that natural loyalties are subordinate to the requirements of loyalty to God; and that sometimes the latter might enjoin behaviour that contradicts normal expressions of the former. But, given that Jesus is also reported as criticizing the Pharisees for proposing a piece of casuistry that effectively permits children to neglect the proper care of their elderly parents;[12] and given that, notwithstanding his affirmation and commendation of Gentiles,[13] he apparently maintained his identity as a Jew;[14] there is good reason not to take these "hard sayings" at face-value, and to read them as hyperboles intending to relativize rather than repudiate natural loyalties. As for St. Paul, it is notable that, although he reckoned virginity and celibacy

9. 1 Cor 7.

10. Nygren, *Agape and Eros*, 75–81. Nygren uses the New Testament word *agape* to designate this radically altruistic kind of love, which he believes to be peculiarly Christian, and to differentiate it from the Greek concept of love as essentially self-serving *eros*. *Agape and Eros* was originally published in Swedish in 1930 (Part I) and 1938 (Part II).

11. Ibid., 733–37.

12. Mark 7:9–13.

13. Matt 8:5–13; 15:21–28.

14. Matt 15:24, 26; John 4:22.

superior, he persisted in regarding marriage as a good. In other words, in spite of his urgent sense of the imminent ending or transformation of the world by God, and of how this revolution of the current order of things would severely strain marital and family ties, St. Paul never went as far as to say that investment in society through marriage and children should cease. What he thereby implies is that, although the arrival of the world-to-come will involve the transformation of this world and its natural social bonds, it will not involve their simple abolition.

Upon closer inspection, then, the New Testament grounds for supposing Christian love to be properly unconditional and indiscriminate are not at all firm. That is even more so in the case of the theological ground. Certainly, if we take Jesus to be God incarnate, we can infer that the love of God for wayward human beings is gracious, or, to be more precise and specific, forgiving. As I have argued elsewhere, the word "forgiveness" commonly means two different things. It points to two distinct moments in the process of reconciliation: first, one of "compassion," and then one of "absolution."[15] Compassion is unilateral and unconditional and meets the wrongdoer before he has repented; absolution is reciprocal and conditional and meets him only afterwards. God's love is compassionate in that it sympathizes with wrongdoers in their weakness and confusion and ignorance; and it is absolving in that it is willing to set past injury aside and enter once again into a relationship of trust. But note how limited is the scope of this love: it operates only between an injured party and the one who has done the injury. It is a mode of love, but not the whole of it. Accordingly, it is unconditional and indiscriminate only in part. As compassion, its being proffered is not conditional upon the demonstration of repentance, and it is therefore made available indiscriminately to all sinners. As absolution, however, it is only offered in response to an expression of genuine repentance, and therefore only discriminately to penitent sinners.

Since this analysis, with its denial that *all* of forgiveness is unconditional, might sound counter-intuitive to Christians, especially Protestants, let me offer a brief defence. I have two points to make, one biblical and one empirical. First, in Jesus' paradigm of forgiveness, his parable of the Prodigal Son (Luke 15:11–32), the heartfelt repentance of the son is already fully established *before* we learn of his father's eager forgiveness: "When he came

15. I have explained my analysis of forgiveness into the two moments of compassion and absolution in several places. One of the most recent of these is "Melting the Icepacks of Enmity," 200–204.

to his senses, he said, '. . . I will set out and go back to my father and say to him, "Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son . . ."'" (vv. 17–19a). This he proceeds to do. While it is true that the father is filled with compassion and rushes to embrace him before he has so much as opened his mouth, the very next moment in the story has the son give explicit voice to his penitent intentions: "The son said to him, 'Father, I have sinned . . .'" (v. 21). What this implies, I suggest, is that the parable does *not* tell a story of simply unconditional forgiveness. Yes, the father's *compassion* is unconditional. Nevertheless, the son's repentance is a prominent part of the story, and not at all incidental, and that gives us reason to suppose that what follows depends on it.

My second line of defence is empirical and briefer, and invites the reader to reflect on her own experience. Such reflection will confirm, I suggest, that it is unloving and foolish to absolve someone who has shown insufficient awareness of what they have done wrong, both because it forecloses their moral education and growth and because it makes it likely that they will proceed to cause further injury.

Such is my defence of the assertion that God's love, as shown in Jesus and his teaching, is not simply indiscriminate. Let me return now to the larger point: that the kind of love that Jesus mainly models bears on how we should treat those who have wronged us. What it does not bear upon is how we should distribute our limited emotional, physical, temporal, and material resources in caring for the millions of fellow humans who can now claim to be—more or less closely—our neighbors. The argument from God's agape to Christian cosmopolitanism does not work.

So how *should* we relate to near and distant neighbors? My view is that Christians should begin their answer to this question with the concept of human being as creaturely. On the one hand, this implies basic human equality. If all human beings are creatures of the one God then they all share a common origin and destiny, and a common subordination. If human creaturehood is then specified in terms of being made "in God's image," then all human beings are thereby dignified with responsibility to manage the rest of the created world;[16] and each is the subject of a vocation to play

16. The seminal notion that humankind is made "in God's image" derives from one verse in the book of Genesis: "Then God said, 'Let us make man in our image, after our likeness; and let them have dominion . . . over all the earth'" (1:26). In the history of Christian tradition this phrase has been interpreted in many different ways. However, the interpretation that is closest to the text understands it in terms of the practice of kings in the ancient world of setting up statues of themselves in outlying provinces or having

a unique part in God's work of bringing the created world to fulfilment. If we add to the doctrine of creation that of universal sinfulness, then humans are also equal in the fact (if not the degree) of their sinful condition and so in their need of God's gift of forgiveness, and consequently none has the right to stand to another simply as righteous to the unrighteous.

Given these various kinds of basic equality, each human being owes any other a certain respect or esteem, such that, for example, he will not to take the other's life intentionally or wantonly, whatever his national affiliation may be. Persons from Britain or America cannot regard the life of a person from India or China as any less valuable than that of a compatriot, for they too are loved by, and answerable to, God, and they too might mediate God's prophetic word. But human beings might owe others more than mere respect and a commitment to refrain from intentional or wanton harm. They might also owe them aid. In addition to non-maleficence, that is, they might also owe beneficence. However, whereas we are always able to refrain from harming other people intentionally or wantonly, we are not always able to benefit them. We may be responsible, but ours is a responsibility of creatures, not of gods; and our creaturely resources of energy, time, and material goods are finite. Therefore we are able only to benefit some, not all; and there might be some to whom we are more strongly obliged by ties of gratitude, or whom we are better placed to serve on account of shared language and culture or common citizenship. In short, notwithstanding the fact that all human beings are equal in certain basic respects, no matter what their native land, we might still be obliged—depending on the circumstances—to benefit near neighbors before or instead of distant ones.

However, whether near or far, human neighbors are not the only proper objects of our respect and care. So are customs and institutions. Humans come into being and grow up in a particular time, and if not in one particular place and community, then in a finite number of them. A human individual is normally inducted into particular forms of social life by her family and by other institutions—schools, churches, clubs, workplaces, political parties, public assemblies. These institutions and their customs mediate and embody certain apprehensions of the forms of human flourishing—that is, basic human goods—that are given in and with the created

their image imprinted on coinage, in order to represent the presence of royal authority throughout their empire. To be made in God's image, then, is to be made a representative or vice-regent of God, charged with exercising dominion in God's name over the rest of creation. For a history of the exegesis of Gen 1:26–27, see Westermann, *Genesis 1–11*, 147–55.

nature of human being. It is natural, therefore, that an individual should feel special affection for, loyalty toward, and gratitude to those communities, customs, and institutions that have benefited her by inducting her into human goods; and, since beneficiaries ought to be grateful to benefactors, it is right that she should. We have yet to specify the forms that such affection should and should not take; but that they should take some form is clear.

II. Why Loyalty to the *Nation*?

It is proper for an individual to have affection for, feel loyalty to, and show gratitude toward those communities that have enabled her to flourish. But why must this stretch as far as a *national* community or *national* institutions? Why is it not sufficient to identify with local and regional and even supranational ones? Why is loyalty to family or church—to kin or cosmopolis—not enough? There is no reason in principle why it should not be enough. The nation is not a cultural unit or form of social or political organization that is inscribed in nature's D.N.A., and no particular nation is guaranteed eternal life. Historically it is surely true, as Benedict Anderson and Linda Colley have argued, that particular nations are human constructs, not natural facts.[17] As they have evolved, so they will change and perhaps pass away. The United Kingdom did not exist before 1707. The United States could have ceased to exist in the early 1860s. Czechoslovakia did cease to exist in 1993.

If historians have reasons to be sceptical of the claims of nations, so do theologians. According to many authoritative students of the phenomenon, the nation as we now know it is a specifically modern entity, appearing first in late eighteenth-century Europe and progressively capitalizing on the cultural decline of the Christian religion. As Europeans lost their faith in God, so the story goes, they transferred their faith to the nation; and as they ceased to hope for life in the world-to-come, they began to invest themselves in the nation's immortality.[18] This certainly seems true of Romantic nationalism, judging by the following statement by Johann Gottlieb Fichte:

> The noble-minded man's belief in the eternal continuance of his influence even on this earth is thus founded on the hope of the eternal continuance of the people from which he has developed,

17. Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities,* and Colley, *Britons: Forging the Nation, 1707–1837*.

18. See, for example, Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, 11–12.

> and on the characteristic of that people. . . . This characteristic is the eternal thing to which he entrusts the eternity of himself and of his continuing influence, the eternal order of things in which he places his portion of eternity. . . . In order to save his nation he must be ready even to die that it may live, and that he may live in it the only life for which he has ever wished.[19]

Given the patently idolatrous character of Romantic nationalism, Karl Barth, writing in the shadow of its infamous Nazi expression, refused to accord the nation any special status at all in the eyes of the one true God. As he presents it in Volume III/4 of his *Church Dogmatics*, first published in 1951, national communities—or "peoples"—dissolve into near and far neighbors.[20]

Barth is surely right to puncture the pretension of nations to the status of something absolute or essential. Nations are fundamentally constituted by national consciousness, by a sense of national identity, by the feeling of individuals that they belong to *this* people. And such a sense of community is usually born in reaction against another people, which is culturally different and whose difference grates or threatens: I belong to *this* people because I oppose *that* one. Thus, the various clans occupying the island of Ireland developed a sense of Irish identity partly in common opposition to English (and Scottish) intrusion. And the English and Scots together developed a sense of British identity partly in common opposition to French Catholic monarchical absolutism and then French revolutionary republicanism. And the various American colonists developed a common sense of American identity, first in reaction to the cultural difference of Britons and then in opposition to what they perceived as British tyranny. Since nations are constituted by national consciousness, and since this consciousness is reactive, it follows that nations are contingent in origin.

Notwithstanding this, the fading of the original irritant need not cause the dissolution of common national consciousness, insofar as that consciousness has found institutional expression. For through institutions a people's peculiar linguistic grip on the world, customary incarnation of social values, and political ideals achieve a relatively stable state, which can survive the cooling of the original crucible. These institutions can be cultural and civil social, rather than political; and if political, they can enjoy

19. Fichte, *Addresses to the German Nation*, 135–36.

20. Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, III/4, 285–323.

varying degrees of autonomy. Not every nation is a nation-state; and not every nation-state has maximal sovereignty.

Take Scotland as an example. For almost three hundred years from 1707–1999 the Scottish nation expressed its self-consciousness primarily through the Church of Scotland and the Scottish legal system, both of whose jurisdictions covered the same defined territory. While retaining a measure of autonomy over local government (much of which operated through the church or "Kirk" well into the nineteenth century), the Scots had no autonomous control over economic, welfare, or foreign policy. Insofar as they elected representatives to the British parliament at Westminster, and insofar as their representatives succeeded in wielding influence there, they were able to exercise some control—but it was not autonomous. However, since the devolution of power by the British government to Scotland in 1999, and the creation of a Scottish parliament, the Scots now exercise a much greater degree of autonomy over the shape of life in the territory of Scotland. Nevertheless, this autonomy is limited: while they can participate in shaping and pursuing a British foreign policy, the Scots still cannot shape and pursue a simply Scottish one. The Scottish nation, therefore, enjoys statehood, but not of a fully sovereign kind.

Nations are contingent, evolving, and transitory phenomena. In that sense, they are artificial, not natural. And they are certainly not divine. However, in another sense they are natural, insofar as their customs and institutions incarnate a particular, perhaps distinctive grasp of the universal forms of flourishing suitable to human nature. Like families and churches and schools and supranational bodies, nations too can embody forms of human good, thus wielding moral authority and obliging our love. Moreover, when nations acquire full statehood, they come to possess maximal power to shape life within their borders so as to defend and promote goods. They also become centres of international agency, which bear responsibility for goods between nation-states, not least that of international order. Insofar as a nation-state has a record of virtuous action internally and externally, shaping life well within and without its borders, it deserves a measure of affection, loyalty, and gratitude as much as any beneficent family or global charity.