Rescuing patriotism from nationalism

Constitutional patriotism, Steven Smith argues, is both ethical and necessary.

by Charles Scriven in the September 22, 2021 issue

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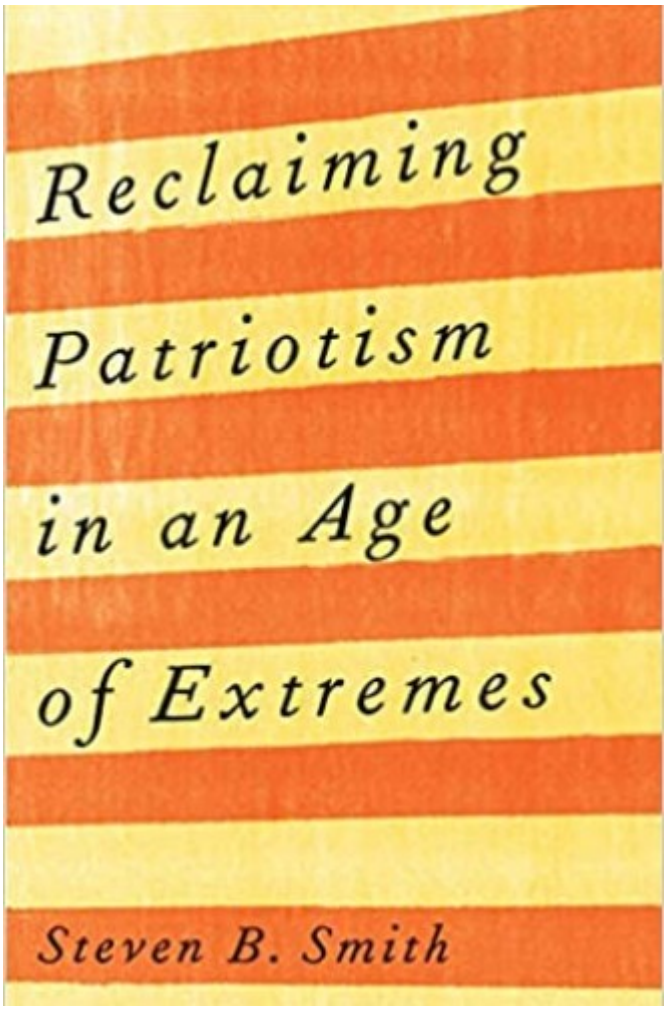

Reclaiming Patriotism in an Age of Extremes

By Steven B. Smith
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At this moment America is beset with political anxieties and divided over their resolution. These differences play out in contrasting attitudes concerning patriotism, and Christians reflect these contrasts. Many lean into a version of patriotism that borders on sheer nationalism. At the opposite pole, a few, sometimes calling themselves Christian anarchists, speak not only of church separation from state authority but even of outright hostility to that authority. It is hard to see how both of these perspectives can be sound; one way or another, blinkered awareness exists within the Christian fold.

Steven B. Smith, a political philosopher at Yale, addresses the current American moment in his new book. He alludes immediately to a classic 1984 lecture by Alasdair MacIntyre entitled, “Is Patriotism a Virtue?” MacIntyre is sympathetic to patriotism yet doubtful that it can be squared with true morality’s universalist commitments. Smith argues, however, that patriotism is necessary and morally justifiable. It is, indeed, “the most important political virtue.”

How does Smith’s argument unfold? Stressing that he is attending to “American patriotism,” Smith first of all explores the link between patriotism and loyalty. All human associations and institutions, he says, hang together on the basis of shared appreciation and gratitude for some “common enterprise,” like a home or a team or a way of life. Such loyalty involves consensus, or at least substantial agreement, concerning some preferred part of what exists. At the same time, it is one response to the human yearning to belong.

With respect to patriotism per se, critics deplore how this form of loyalty gives expression to bounded concern; our moral duty, after all, is a duty to all, not just those we favor or are familiar with. Some, therefore, embrace the Stoic ideal of world citizenship, or cosmopolitanism. But human finitude, Smith insists, entails the particularity of our relationships. Just as we cannot love all spouses, we cannot love all nations—not love them, that is, equally or in the same way.

After a historical chapter on patriotism ancient and modern, Smith describes and picks apart both nationalism and cosmopolitanism. He repudiates nationalism for being exclusionary and unprincipled and for too easily adding up to “ethnic and racial tribalism.” His further critique of cosmopolitanism again turns on the fact of human finitude. To be a citizen just is to exist under the particular laws of a particular political community. “A citizen of the world is a citizen of nowhere,” he

writes.

Smith then describes and defends what he calls enlightened or constitutional patriotism. Such patriotism, he believes, may be reclaimed from its enemies and overzealous friends. Invoking both the philosophical background of the American experiment and the further breakthroughs that appear in the Federalist Papers, Smith argues that American patriotism is an ethos, a “way of life.” Here, amid the inevitable competing loyalties such as to family, vocation, or religious community, citizenship presumes both the rule of law and substantial freedom and equality under the law.

But freedom is not just liberty to do and say as you like. Smith objects to political thought that overlooks or plays down the contention of philosophers who say a well-functioning democracy requires citizens with certain shared virtues. Enlightened patriotism does preserve a “zone of freedom” for individual expression and does grant the pluralism this involves. But virtues matter—including fair play, a self-questioning frame of mind, and, of course, patriotism itself.

Not, to be sure, uncritical patriotism. Patriotism can certainly pose a moral danger. But where realization of worthy political ends depends on citizen engagement, it is equally a moral danger to throw off patriotism altogether. What Smith calls “a sense of loyalty to a particular tradition and way of life” is the necessary fuel for political responsibility.

Smith proposes Abraham Lincoln and Martin Luther King Jr. as paragons of true patriotism. Both are reminders, of course, that America’s story, including its flawed but still revolutionary founding documents, evokes shame as well as pride. But a certain ambivalence about the object of patriotic loyalty is crucial in any case. True patriotism—here Smith’s point recalls Paul Tillich’s “Protestant principle”—is self-critical, aspirational. At the same time, there is much in America to be proud of: citizens may appeal to the nation’s worthy (if still flawed) ideals in giving voice to their desire for change, and they may participate in processes that enable change. Lincoln and King exemplify this possibility.

Smith’s patriotism need not be seen as merely safe or middle-of-the-road. Lincoln and King, it turns out, both afford opportunity for fresh articulation of a radical neo-Anabaptist conception of citizenship. Neo-Anabaptist writers regularly cite King, who was both Baptist and nonviolent, as one of their own. And Smith tells how a Quaker

woman once asked Lincoln for guidance concerning her community's support for emancipation and opposition to war. In a letter to her, he acknowledged that conflict between her community's loyalty to faith and loyalty to nation made for a "hard dilemma." He himself, Lincoln said, was following his conscience; he could not discourage her and other conscientious objectors from following theirs. By his lights, then, American citizenship allows for substantial (if not unlimited) differences in outlook. For Smith, certainly, even civil disobedience, if accompanied by respect for the authority of law (as it was by King), can evince "political responsibility."

Smith insists that loyalty to one's country by no means requires "indifference or hostility to others." He proposes, indeed, that "we look after others better when we first look after our own." Here, though, people rooted in the biblical vision might well invoke the call of Abraham that underlies the founding of the nation of Israel. God promised that Abraham's seed would become "a great nation"—and said, too, that "in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed." The nation of Israel would be a people for all peoples. Compared to this, Smith's allowance for patriotism's attention to others seems a tad limp.

Smith is persuasive: at least in a constitutional democracy, and with certain crucial qualifications, patriotism is indispensable to human flourishing. But should people faithful to the biblical heritage agree that it is the "most important" political virtue? Against self-satisfaction on the chosen people's part, the God of Amos asks pointedly, are you not "like the Ethiopians" to me? In Isaiah, God identifies both Egypt and Assyria as "my people" and the "work of my hands." Some may think such ego-busting idealism amounts to religious sentimentality, but it seems borne out in the New Testament's witness to boundary-breaking love.

Human finitude makes it impossible to fully embody, or even to approximate, the universalist or cosmopolitan ideal. But explicit deference to it—humble and virtuous acknowledgment of its authority—would surely entail national *obligation* to care about the well-being of the wider world. And that would be one more protection against patriotism's too easy lapse into just another kind of selfishness.

A version of this article appears in the print edition under the title "Is patriotism good?"