



MISSION

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CATALYST

Intelligent comment on faith and culture

THE COST OF CROSSING BORDERS



Nation, migration and patriotism explored

NOAM CHOMSKY

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LETTERS

NORMAN KEMBER TALKS END TIMES AND BAPTIST PEACE FELLOWSHIP ADVOCATES PACIFISM. RICHARD BAUCKHAM IS TAKEN TO TASK AND JESUS QUOTED ON THE RAPTURE. YOUR LETTERS...

IS THE END NIGH?

I received my latest copy of *Catalyst* the morning after Jim Al-Khalili gave his talk about the end of the universe on BBC4. A coincidence? Although I have a scientific background, I found Al-Khalili's arguments difficult, since it appears that the fate of the universe depends on relative amounts of dark matter which we cannot see and dark energy which we cannot detect. The book of Revelation is clarity itself by comparison.

The articles in *Catalyst* were interesting, although most assume a naïve belief in the integrity of the biblical text. I was pleased to discover Martin Luther had a low opinion of Revelation, although it seems to have been a major source of images for Victorian hymn writers. As a left-wing voter, I have no desire to wear a crown and wonder if the saints were similarly politically motivated to cast their crowns around the glassy sea. As for standing around for eternity in white...

Thank you for continuing to edit a thoughtful *Catalyst*.

Norman Kember

I quite enjoyed Issue 2, 2016 (on eschatology), and I agreed with most of it.

However, I was a bit disturbed at the almost total absence of the most important aspect of biblical eschatology: the Resurrection! Several articles mentioned 1 Thessalonians 4: 16-17 while (correctly) rebutting the popular notion of 'the Rapture', but nobody pointed out that its main point is the Resurrection.

The Thessalonians were concerned about fellow believers who had died; would they miss out on the kingdom? Paul reassures them that, on the contrary, when Jesus returns (as the New Testament makes abundantly clear that he will) all will be called to 'meet and greet' him: the dead will be resurrected and the living will be changed (1 Cor 15: 52), and together they (we) will be there to welcome the returning king.

So whatever we believe about the Millennium etc, let's not lose

sight of the most important aspect of the end: we will be raised to live forever with Jesus in the new/renewed universe, where we will no longer be afflicted by death and sin and suffering. That is indeed a glorious hope!

Blessings

Rev David Hellsten



DEAR PROFESSOR BAUCKHAM

You give the impression that teaching on the Rapture is based on one verse in 1 Thessalonians. Jesus himself spoke about those 'left behind' in Matthew 25: 36-41 (Luke 17: 30-36) How would you explain that?

Best wishes

Neil Porter

PACIFISM IGNORED

Thank you for *Catalyst*, which is proving to be a stimulating publication. We were pleased to see that you devoted the January edition to the subject of war and peace. The committee of Baptist Peace Fellowship was, however, strongly disappointed that in that issue in which considerable space

was given to various opinions there was none which advocated non-violence as a policy and no detailed analysis of the pacifist position. We were also disappointed that, though reference was made to the existence of denominational pacifist organisations, the two examples given were to Pax Christi and the Anglican Pacifist Fellowship. That, in a BMS publication, you should ignore the Baptist Peace Fellowship seemed to us bizarre. Perhaps your readers should know that there is an active Baptist Peace Fellowship: its website is at baptist-peace.org.uk and further information can be obtained from bobgardiner@yahoo.co.uk and/or tinajaneparsons@gmail.com

Yours truly

Bob Gardiner

All letters to Mission Catalyst at PO Box 49, 129 Broadway, Didcot, OX11 8XA and emails to catalyst@bmsworldmission.org will be considered for publication and may be edited for length and style if selected. Many letters are invited. Not all are chosen.

BORDERS – FOR GOOD OR ILL



TO WHOM DO WE SWEAR OUR HIGHEST ALLEGIANCE?

Flux in 'nation states' is a feature of our generation. Germany was unified but the Soviet Union broke up. Spain won't let the Basques separate whilst Sudan has divided to hopefully avoid continual war. India and Pakistan continue to fight over Kashmir. Israel and Palestine fight over issues of occupation, recognition and mutual security. And millions of people are fleeing to save their lives, and are hammering on the front door of other nation states and asking for shelter.

Closer to home, we have our versions of these tensions. Many Scots want to go their own way and leave the UK, though a majority don't. Most of Ireland years to be reunited again, but a minority doesn't. The Welsh have discovered a resurgent national identity and the English... well, the English struggle with patriotism, and why is that?

And in the coming weeks we will vote on whether to stay in the EU or leave, and the debate focuses primarily on national interest.

It would be naive to speak of a single Christian perspective on these matters. But maybe there are some principles

that can help us evaluate the issues that emerge around our understanding of nation states.

The first principle espoused in our essays seems to be that nation states are not bad, but are natural and capable of good. We are communal beings and our instincts find organised expression in family units, nuclear and extended, in villages, cities and those places where 'my people' belong and can be found. Language is one of the most powerful determinants here, for communication begets community. If I cannot understand the other, they are not 'us'. There are exceptions where different languages coexist, but often tensions reside there, even if those tensions are managed. Language facilitates shared experience and so culture emerges and with it a shared story – our history.

A second principle surrounds the 'dual nationality' we embrace when we become Christ-followers. As someone who is a dual national – Irish by birth and a British citizen by choice – I know the struggle to reconcile conflicting loyalties. But there should be no conflict in terms of our allegiance to the kingdom

of Heaven where we are challenged to constantly evaluate our allegiance to the country of our birth or adoption, and set it against the standards of our citizenship of heaven.

This is not woolly-minded idealism. It's discipleship, plain and simple. The price is often small, such as the inconvenience of taking time to vote, to protest, to challenge our MPs. Sometimes the cost is high, as when Dietrich Bonhoeffer gave his life to resist the rise of Nazism.

The question therefore is not 'where must I go to find a heavenly utopia on earth?' We will search in vain. Rather, "what must I do in order that the values of my nation most closely reflect the values of Christ's rule?" My concern about my personal interests, and the interests of my country, will be subordinated within the interests of God.

Perhaps after all, God doesn't have a view on whether we stay in the EU or not! But he does have a view about human rights, about the plight of the stranger, the widow and the orphan, the poor and the marginalised. So do vote on 23 June. And then continue to work and pray that "your will be done on earth as it is in heaven".

David Kerrigan
General Director

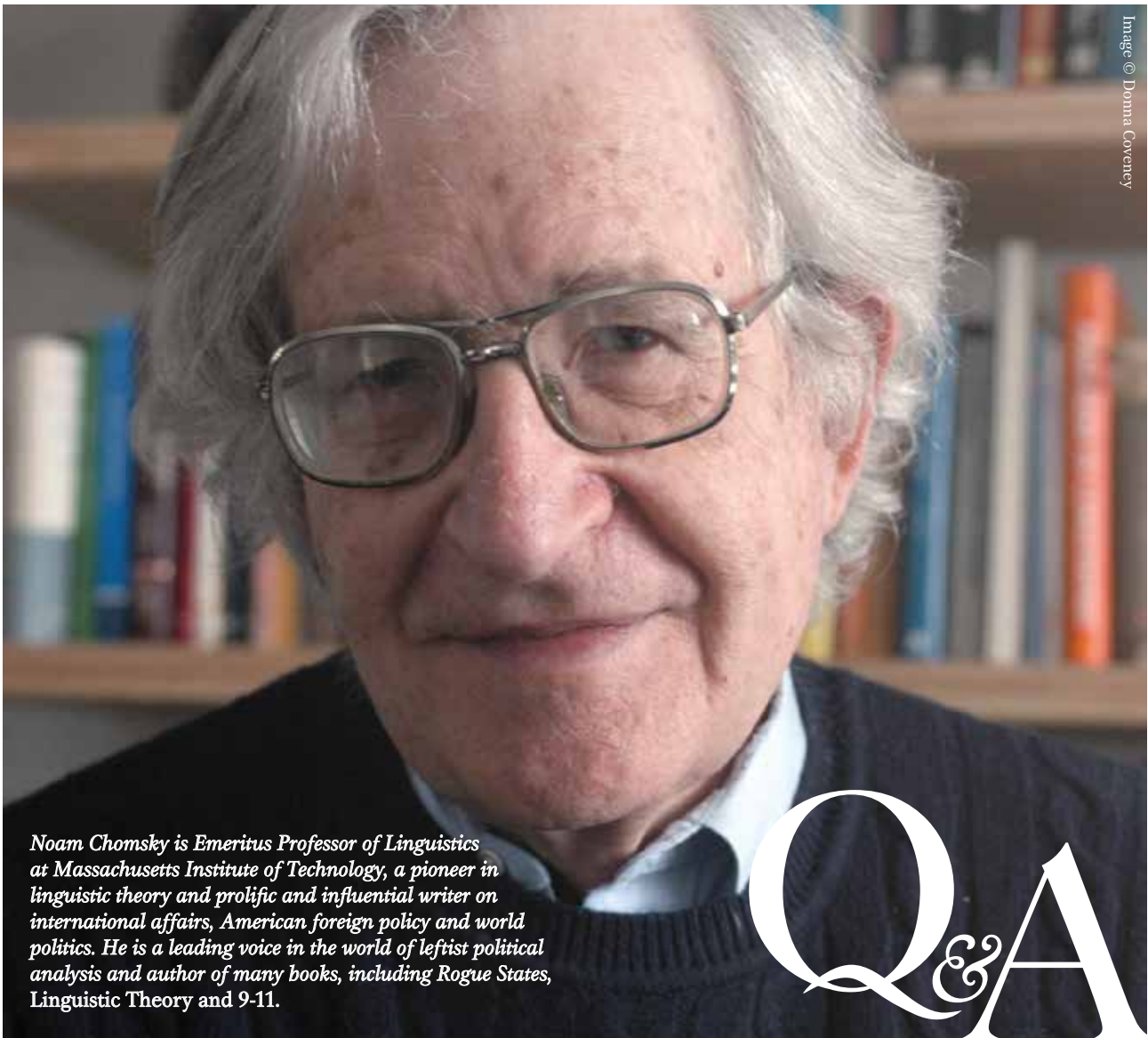
SYRIA'S FORGOTTEN FAMILIES

The life he treasured has been destroyed.

She's lived in a tent her entire life.

They deserve better. We want to give them and thousands like them hope.

bmsworldmission.org/syriasfamilies



*Noam Chomsky is Emeritus Professor of Linguistics at Massachusetts Institute of Technology, a pioneer in linguistic theory and prolific and influential writer on international affairs, American foreign policy and world politics. He is a leading voice in the world of leftist political analysis and author of many books, including *Rogue States*, *Linguistic Theory* and *9-11*.*

Q&A

NOAM CHOMSKY

EXCLUSIVE TO MISSION CATALYST, NOAM CHOMSKY TALKS CHRISTIANITY, MIGRATION, NATION AND LANGUAGE.

Is migration of the kind we're experiencing today unprecedented, or have nations always been in a state of flux?

There's always been flux. Take the place where I'm sitting in Boston: this is the result of migration, originally from England and later from other parts of the world, which caused quite an immigration crisis to the inhabitants. In fact they were exterminated. That is a pretty serious

crisis. We just call it some nice term about the advance of civilisation. Many nations were essentially exterminated. We don't call that a crisis, but they do.

I don't know if today's crisis is unprecedented, but it is certainly very high. And where is the crisis? Probably about 85 per cent of it or so is in very poor countries. Take Lebanon: four million people, probably a quarter of them are Syrian refugees. That's in addition to

waves of Iraqi refugees fleeing from the US-British attack on Iraq – still fleeing – and Palestinian refugees from back in 1948 and '67. They have a huge immigration crisis. Same with Jordan. Same with Kenya.

Kenya right now is planning to close the biggest refugee camp in the world, hundreds of thousands of people. Those are refugees mostly from Somalia and from other African wars. Many of these

are the residue of European atrocities. Just take Somalia – there are many factors in the Somalian tragedy. One of them is that Europe uses the waters off Somalia as a dump. That’s where Europe dumps trash and radioactive waste and so on, and it has an effect. It’s destroyed a lot of the Somali fishing industry, which is one of the reasons that Somalis turned to piracy. We called the piracy a crisis. What they call a crisis is destruction of the possibilities for them to survive because Europe is dumping waste there.

So, sure, there are plenty of crises around the world, but not the ones we call crises. What we call crises are minor, very minor disturbances. Take Austria, a very rich country, which has just voted in a right-wing, almost neo-Nazi party, largely because of the ‘refugee crisis’, which means that maybe one per cent or less of the population might be immigrants. Walk around New York City, stand on a street corner, you see every possible kind of person. It’s not considered a crisis, that’s just the way people live. But if in Austria one per cent of the population may be non (what they call) Aryan, we’ve got a crisis. Britain’s taking in almost nobody from Syria, the United States practically nobody at all.

So, what should governments be doing? Should they allow unlimited immigration? Is the answer to abolish all borders? Is that practical?

One of the great achievements of Europe in the post-Second World War period, which is unfortunately now under threat, is the Schengen agreement, which allows people to travel freely. So you could travel from Spain to Norway without having to bother with border crossings: I think that’s a wonderful thing.

I don’t want to oversimplify, but to a large extent borders are the results of violence. Take say the French-German border: for hundreds of years the French and Germans were slaughtering each other and the border kept moving. The current border happens to be the result of the end of the Second World War. For the people around the border area, the borders don’t mean anything.

Take a look at the rest of the world: the borders are almost entirely the results of European imperialist violence. Why does Iraq have the borders it does? Because the French and the British after the First World War drew those lines in their own interests. Take say Afghanistan and Pakistan, the source of what’s called

‘terrorism’, that the West is trembling under: they’re separated by a line that was drawn by British imperialists trying to protect the colony of India. It cuts right through Pashtun areas, breaks up people on both sides who are of the same tribe,

Church basically returned to the lessons of the gospels – a kind of radical pacifist Christianity – and that had, in my view, an extremely beneficial impact on large parts of Latin America. It frightened power: in fact, the United States officially takes

“ **BORDERS ARE ALMOST ENTIRELY THE RESULTS OF EUROPEAN IMPERIALIST VIOLENCE** ”

same families, same clans. No Afghan government has ever accepted it, the Pashtun certainly don’t accept it, but it’s a border. That’s where massive drone strikes are going on.

Take a look at Africa: the borders are drawn in the interests of the European conquerors. They cut related groups and separate them. They bring people together who have no connection. So of course it’s a source of endless conflict and often major atrocities. It would be a very good thing for the world, in my opinion, if these borders would slowly erode.

There are communities who have a wish and indeed a right to maintain the integrity of their communal and social life. But I think that can be done without borders where you have to pass through security. New York is a case in point: it’s not without conflict by any means, but it has become a kind of relatively successful multi-cultural community, where people live in their own cultures but interact with one another. I don’t want to say it’s ideal, very far from it – in fact it’s awful in many ways – but it’s kind of a picture of what should become a global ideal.

Does it seem to you that Christianity should promote internationalism? And what do you make of Christian nationalism?

There’s no kind of nationalism that I’m particularly sympathetic to. Although I think people have a right to maintain their own cultures and national identities without conflict and without violence – without infringing on others.

Christianity can be many different things, and in its two thousand year history in fact it *has* been many very different things. Even in recent years, Christianity has taken many different forms. Under Vatican II, the Catholic

credit for having helped destroy liberation theology. It was a very positive force, and is now being revived to a certain extent by Pope Francis.

On the other hand, George Bush and Tony Blair appealed to Christian values when they carried out the worst crime of this century: invading Iraq. In fact, George Bush declared that he was doing it at the command of his Lord. Well, that’s another form of Christianity.

As someone with a specialism in linguistics, what would you say to those who use the protection of a linguistic cultural heritage as a reason for promoting borders?

I think that makes perfect sense. In fact, I’ve personally been involved in attempts to maintain endangered languages – even on occasion to revive some that have been wiped out. Spanish is quite widely spoken in the United States for all kinds of historical reasons and I think it makes really good sense to have bilingual education, bilingual societies. My grandparents lived in a Yiddish speaking culture that happened to be in the United States. So I think the United States is a richer society because it has a large Spanish-speaking population, just as it’s a richer society because at one point it had a large Yiddish-speaking population. Whether borders with armed guards is the way to protect it is, I think, very doubtful. That’s not the best way to protect it by any means. European countries are mostly a welter of different languages – languages that happen to be disappearing under the pressure of nation state systems. It’s the borders that are killing the languages.

Noam Chomsky was speaking to Jonathan Langley

BIBLICAL PERSPECTIVES ON NATIONHOOD

NATIONS CAN BE FORCES FOR BOTH COMMUNAL GOOD AND SINFUL IDOLATRY, BUT THEY CANNOT BE IGNORED.

We are all hybrids whose identities are never straightforward. Speaking personally, I know myself to be strongly shaped by Christian faith in its Free Church mutation. At the same time, I am beyond question European, British, English and Northern, and none of these things do I regret. They are expressed in my upbringing, education, culture, language, politics and prejudices. Neither are they easily disentangled, such that what sometimes seems to me to be Christian might actually simply be a national preference. I am not alone. We are all much the same and it goes with being human.

We might look in vain in the scriptures for a straightforward theology of nationhood. Like much theology however, we are left to proceed by inference, and any reading of Scripture swiftly reveals that nations and nationhood are everywhere. This may be in the so-called 'table of nations' of Genesis 10, or in the divine choice of one particular nation, Israel, to be the vehicle of divine revelation and blessing to "all the families of the earth" (Genesis 12: 1-3). It may be in the hope that the nations will come to seek the Lord (Zechariah 8: 22), in Jesus' commission to make disciples of

all nations (Matthew 28: 19-20) or in the vision that "the glory and honour of the nations" will be gathered into the ultimate new creation (Revelation 21: 26). Nations are formed of complex blends of biology and genetics, geography, language, culture, power, religion and a wide constellation of political arrangements ranging from tribal elders to empires in which coercive power serves to hold things together. Nations are seemingly an indispensable aspect of being communally human.

THE BLESSING OF NATIONS

From a biblical perspective, this existing complexity becomes even more acute when we take into account that nations, which rank among the 'powers' within which human life is lived out, are simultaneously created, fallen, and to be redeemed. If there is a theology of nationhood, it is to be located within this narrative which is itself the shape of the biblical drama.

Of course, the powers among which the nations are ranked are created, since all things that exist have their being from their creator. This is not to say a nation is a discrete entity in itself, existing in some abstract form waiting to be possessed. Rather, God has created human beings who have the capacity communally to

form institutions and structures, to give rise to social realities that enable and enhance their life together. Nationhood arises out of social existence and is an extension of it, an enlarging of the corporate space essential to human well-being. Remove the community and the nation ceases to exist. From the perspective of creation, nationhood is to be enjoyed and celebrated as an opportunity for common endeavour, co-operative achievement and human flourishing.

Nationhood forms a boundary within which we may live in a contained fashion in an otherwise anonymous and shapeless world, sharing with others in a common history and in beneficial traditions and institutions. Nationhood is therefore a good thing, a benefit from which we gain and to which we may contribute. To affirm my own national identity is far from wrong, provided that I do not make it into a form of pride and self-exaltation. When God was incarnate in Christ this involved embracing a specific national identity as an Israelite; but the inference from this is not that this particular identity is superior to all others but rather that any national identity can be hallowed and sanctified and proclaimed to be good. It is possible to change nationalities, should we choose to do so, but not because it is shameful to be what we are.

FALLEN NATIONHOOD

Yet we have begun to point to the problem. What has been created by God for our benefit is now fallen, alienated from its primary vocation and role within the



Tower of Babel by Pieter Brueghel the Elder (1526/1530–1569)

divine intention. In fact there has never been an un-fallen nation that has not grown out of, reflected and complicated the human attempt to displace God from being God. It is significant that the Bible relates at an early stage the story of the tower of Babel that portrays the human attempt to build civilisation and national prowess as an exercise in human self-exaltation (Gen 11: 1-9). The exercise of nationhood as it is, is not the way things are supposed to be and the primary reason for this is that what is intended to be a beneficial framework within which we may flourish has become an attempt to exercise dominion over others, to assert the superiority of some nations over others, to engage in conquest, war and violent conflict. After all, the devil's heart has always been in international politics, in deceiving the nations (Rev 20: 3), in sowing hatred on the basis of fear of

“ Affirming my own national identity is not wrong as long as I don't make it into a form of pride and self-exaltation ”

difference and the will to power.

There is a difference between tribe and tribalism, between nation and nationalism and between boundaries and barriers. We are all tribal, in that we have networks of kinship and familiarity with which we identify. This should represent no problems until the point comes when we assert the superiority of our tribe over others and refuse them their own value. Likewise, valuing our own nation need not become a declaration of superiority over 'lesser breeds' (an important distinction

exists here between ethnic nationalism that breeds hatred and civic nationalism as a largely political arrangement). Boundaries are essential to life since they enable us to live within secure and identified contexts, but when they become intensified as barriers that may not be crossed then they fracture human communities. The evidence is all around as much as it is visible in Scripture.

In short, nations are prime candidates for becoming idols that demand uncritical and undeserved loyalty. Patriotism, love

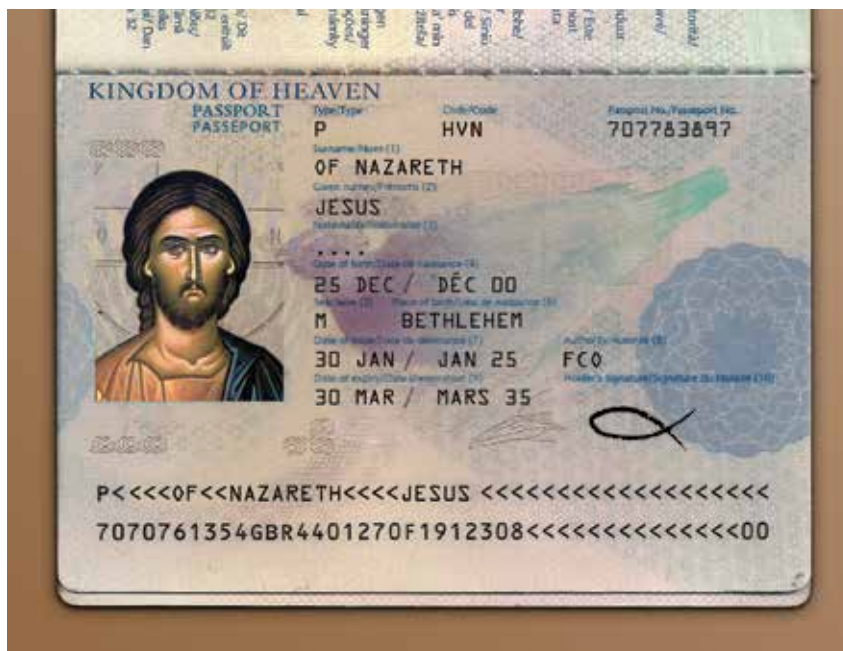
of country, is one thing; 'my country, right or wrong' is quite another. When a nation becomes an object of ultimate concern it shades into something demonic. We still live in the shadow of the Third Reich. More than that, we have the multiple warnings of the books of Daniel and Revelation that, rightly understood, underline the dangers of demonic and tyrannical nationalism and imperialism. We have been warned.

THE CHURCH AND THE NATION OF ISRAEL

The powers to which the nations belong are created, fallen and to be redeemed. By virtue of their created nature, nations may be celebrated. Because of their fallen nature they should be approached with discernment and wisdom. Yet because they are to be redeemed they may also be regarded with a degree of hope and anticipation. They do not count for nothing. In this regard, the Church of Jesus Christ, the community of the reconciled and those-who-are-being-redeemed, is the very sign of hope. In this community the barriers are broken down as prefigured by the reconciling of Jews and Gentiles in a new community of peace that has overcome ethnic and national hostilities in a new expression of what it means to be human (Ephesians 2: 11-22). It is of the very nature of the Christian faith that it embraces an international community and is not ethnically defined.

It is this crucial issue that was at the heart of the first and definitive debate within Christian ranks recorded in Acts 15. Here it was asserted that Gentile believers in Jesus did not need to adopt Jewish identities as a concomitant of becoming Christians. Instead they had full access to Christ and to the community of the people of God solely on the basis of their faith in Christ and union with him, irrespective of their nationality. Although within the economy of God there was indeed a chosen nation defined by ethnicity and by religious practice, this was never the fullness of God's purpose, but simply a stage in an historical process awaiting the fulfilment of a greater and global reality (Eph 1: 7-10). The international, inter-ethnic Christian community is the sign in the present of this past purpose and future reality.

It is this meaning that we may discern in Paul's famous words, "There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is no male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus" (Galatians 3: 28). I would suggest that this verse does



“ We look in vain in Scripture for a straightforward theology of nationhood ”

not mean that all human distinctions are abolished and no longer exist. For this to be the case would mean abstracting from us some of those characteristics that properly belong to our humanity (although this could not be said of slavery, of course). Rather, Paul is pointing to the fact that all distinctions that could possibly divide us and set us against each other, and habitually do, have now been transcended by a new reality into which have entered in Christ. God's fullness is found in him and everything else is made relative as a consequence. Other things matter, but something else matters more. In embracing this higher value other things do not lose their value but are restored to their proper place and are accorded the value that is their due.

CITIZENS OF HEAVEN

Another way of saying this is that, for those who believe, our 'citizenship is in heaven' (Philippians 3: 20, Eph 2: 19). This is where our primary loyalties lie and might mean that on occasion we must qualify our earthly citizenship for the sake of our citizenship in heaven: "We must obey God rather than men" (Acts 5: 29). In becoming friends of God we have at the same time become "sojourners and exiles" to the present form of this world

(1 Peter 2: 11). At the same time, even in this condition, there is an appropriate loyalty that we owe to the created social structures within which we live, even in spite of their fallen and suppressed nature. Jeremiah's words to the exiles in Babylon still have force for our discipleship in the present: "But seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the Lord on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare" (Jeremiah 29: 7). Ethnic nationalism has no place, but there is a proper love of country that any Christian might feel wherever they are located.

The nations do not count for nothing. They belong to the forces and influences that shape us for good and ill. We should not be naive about their capacity for idolatry, sinful self-interest and divisiveness. We are called to be wise and discerning and to resist their corruptions and deviations. But they are necessary. They are also productive of culture. The book of Revelation talks astonishingly of the city of God and proclaims, "By its light will the nations walk, and the kings of the earth will bring their glory into it" (21: 23-4). It continues with a vision of the tree of life and asserts that "the leaves of the tree were for the healing of the nations" (22: 2). In this is our hope.



IS GOD AN ENGLISHMAN?

WE KNOW HE IS. SORT OF.

There's one occasion, and only one, when Brits are allowed to be nakedly patriotic. The great sporting events are for people who like sport, and I lack that gene. Personal admiration for a great lady complicates royal occasions. But when the band strikes up *Jerusalem* on the Last Night of the Proms the throat tightens, the eye moistens and I am Proud To Be British.

It's extremely odd. Politicians trumpeting the 'British values' of tolerance and fair play nauseate me. We're not much different from anyone else, and historically we have been violent and duplicitous. But I'm with Scott, who wrote: "Breathes there the man, with soul so dead, / Who never to himself hath said, / This is my own, my native land!"

The feeling is universal. We are rooted in a place. Admittedly, we don't all feel it with the same intensity. But British, American or even French, unless our souls are completely dead, we'll say, "This place is *mine*."

And because some degree of patriotism is a universal emotion, we should dismiss the idea that as Christians we can simply rise above it. It's tempting to say that we are citizens of a different kingdom, a colony of heaven, and that we should deny any kind of nationalist feeling. But love of country (my goodness, it's embarrassing talking about this) is as instinctive as it is irrational. We aren't less British because our Government does something we're ashamed of, like refusing to admit child refugees, or more because we win a cricket match. It's just who we are, and we wouldn't want to be anyone else. The ever-so-refined theology that implies there's

something unspiritual about loyalty to a particular people cuts no ice with us. Don't tell us God isn't an Englishman: we know, in our bones, that he is.

Patriotism is one of the great drivers of human action. If we deny it, we will lose any purchase we have on people's opinions. And this really matters, especially at the moment. There's no point in telling people it makes no difference whether we're ruled from Brussels or

Look at how the US Republican Right appeals to Christianity as a bulwark against Muslims, gay people, immigrants and healthcare. "Are you for us or our enemies?" Joshua asked the angel. "Neither," was the response (Joshua 5: 13-14). God is not on any nation's side.

Second, we should be unashamedly committed to the nation. Jeremiah is told to "seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and

“ OBVIOUSLY, WE’RE THE BEST COUNTRY IN THE WORLD. BUT WE’RE NOWHERE NEAR WHAT WE OUGHT TO BE. ”

Westminster or that mass immigration is a jolly good thing because we have a proud tradition of hospitality. People may not be able to articulate their objections in a way that doesn't sound paranoid or xenophobic, but they know it matters.

But patriotism must also be redeemed. If the political right is blinkered about British failings and failures, the left wallows in them; its love of country is conditional, dependent on scrapping Trident or tuition fees or public schools. A redeemed, Christian patriotism is better than either. So what would it look like?

First, we should acknowledge patriotism's shadow side and the way religion can intensify it. Look at how the Russian Orthodox Church is validating Putin's programme, the Buddhist monks stoking hatred of Rohingyas in Myanmar, the Hindu nationalists forcing Muslims and Christians to "reconvert" in India.

pray to the Lord on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare" (29: 7, ESV). The appeal to self-interest here is better understood as an affirmation of community: solidarity with fellow-citizens is not just legitimate, it's a good thing.

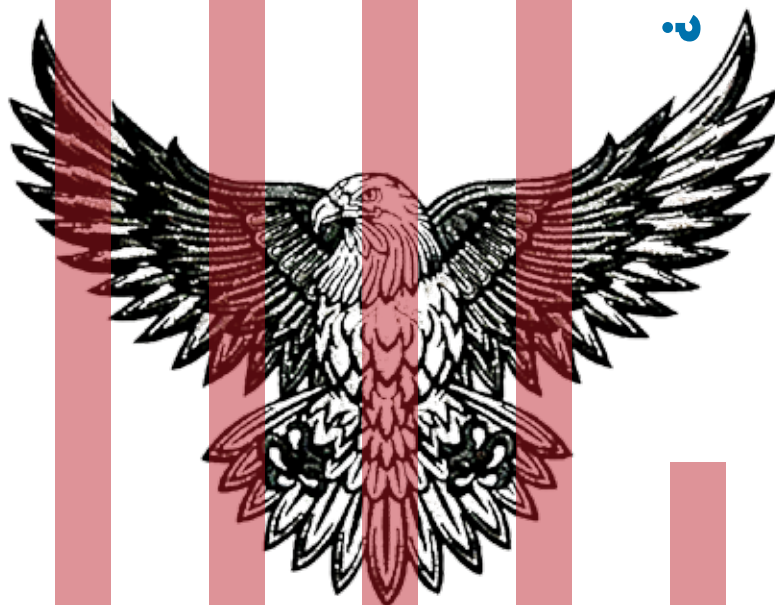
Third, we should be loyally aspirational. Christian politics is an attempt to map our national culture and institutions onto the kingdom of God. We critique our national life in the light of our understanding of the purposes of God for humanity. Obviously, we are the best country in the world. But we are nowhere near what we ought to be. And a passion for national righteousness, broadly defined, should be as much a part of our Christian discipleship as personal holiness.

And was Jerusalem builded here among those dark Satanic mills? No: but bring me my bow of burning gold and my chariot of fire, and we'll see what we can do.

Amy Boucher Pye

American writer and speaker living in the UK. Her book, *Finding Myself in Britain: Our Search for Faith, Home and True Identity*, is available on Authentic Media.

A M E R I C A : A N
E X C E P T I O N A L
N A T I O N ?



HOW LIVING IN BRITAIN HELPED ONE AMERICAN REALISE
THE UNITED STATES WAS NO MORE EXCEPTIONAL THAN
ANYWHERE ELSE.

For ten years I worked for an Englishman in America, never dreaming that one day I'd be an American living in Britain and married to an Englishman. The Englishman I worked for was the brilliant Christian thinker Os Guinness, and the first project I helped out with was part of the two hundred year celebrations of the US Constitution, specifically focusing on the religious liberty clauses of the First Amendment. Os wanted Americans to realise the genius behind these clauses, that through them no one religion could become a state-established Church. He knew that the freedom to practice one's beliefs – or not to believe – actually enables faith communities to flourish in the public square. A veneer of Christianity in public life, in contrast, can sap its vibrancy, potency and impact if it is relegated to a sort of milquetoast *churchianity*.

Working with Os opened my eyes to how Americans see themselves and what we take for granted. Not only in our religious liberty work, but every time he'd raise his eyebrows over some shocking statement I or someone else had made about an assumed American exceptionalism. And then my near twenty year immersion into a country outside of my own deepened my understanding not only of Britain but of America too.

AMERICAN-DO ATTITUDE

I love my home country, and I love my adopted one. Although there are people and things I miss desperately in the States, I'm called to the UK and it is here that we've made our home. I now know how to queue (even though at times I'm tempted to buck the system). I have learned, through gaffes, not to ask someone's name right away when meeting them. I can use a conversation about the weather as a way to get to know someone, and I know the healing power of tea. And over the years, I've come to see my beloved America in a new light.

Is America an exceptional nation? In one sense, yes: for it was founded as an experiment based on ideals – of freedom, respect and independence. The founders wanted the shackles of class and tradition no longer to hinder this new people. They wanted to create a place where people could live together in harmony, exercising their beliefs and agreeing to disagree when needed. On the whole, it's an experiment that has worked. For instance, class doesn't seep through society in the States like it

does in the UK, although of course a new sort of class system emerges, based on money and merit. And people can believe what they like.

LAND OF THE THREE TROUBLING ISSUES

But it's not a perfect country, and I see its failings more clearly as I'm removed from its daily culture. Race seems to be one of the biggest issues America needs to grapple with and sort out, for the sins of slavery from centuries back need to be accounted and repented for in order to foster healing. Guns are another obvious issue. Sitting on this side of the pond as one who had been nicknamed 'Little Amy Oakley' in the States (being a good shot), I still gasp at the continual shootings at

the American people, the emphasis on individuals and the difference we can make, the friendliness and welcome one receives even just going for a walk in a place like my hometown in the suburbs of Minneapolis or St Paul. But is it, as many Americans might claim, God's favoured nation?

Having worked with Os, I wouldn't have claimed God's divine hand in making the United States his special nation before moving over here, but my years in Britain have deepened my understanding of the folly of that sentiment even more. Before crossing the pond, I'm red-faced to admit that I held an opinion that assumed America was the greatest nation in the world, and that people born in other countries secretly yearned to be Americans too (yes, you can egg me!).

“I assumed America was the greatest nation on earth, and that people born in other countries secretly yearned to be Americans”

schools and other public places – and all of those accidental deaths of toddlers who find their parents' guns. Yes, the National Rifle Association has a huge voice, but why can't the lawmakers pass some sound gun-control laws?

A third big issue is healthcare, and here's where I'm happy for my American Republican friends to call me a socialist for supporting state-funded medical care. I've heard horror stories of an ambulance not being called when a friend was suffering a heart attack because of the cost, for instance, or families who struggle financially because the healthcare insurance and co-payments take such a big chunk of their monthly income. The NHS may have its failings, but I wholeheartedly support it.

USA-OKAY

I continue to love America, warts and all. I suffer in silence when I hear the jesting, biting humour intended to knock one down a peg or two, so often aimed at Americans by Britons. For I love the generally optimistic outlook of

Then I moved to the UK and saw that Britons and the many nations represented in multi-cultural London where I live were perfectly happy with their countries of birth, thank you very much. And I saw that God might delight in any or all of them – who was I to claim a special status for my nation of birth?

Now I have a more nuanced understanding, I hope. Americans and America can give the world many things, including military leadership, innovation and a glass-half-full outlook where hope springs eternal. But America can learn from other countries as well. For example, from Britain it can learn the value of honour and duty, of perseverance and self-deprecation. We need the strengths of all the nations to be respected in the world for a more robust way of interacting, that the common good would be promoted.

Does God care which country we come from? Yes, because he cares who we are and how we've been formed and influenced. But now I'm a lot less sure that he holds one particular nation as his new Israel.

SHOULD CHRISTIANS RECOGNIZE NATIONS?

REVALUING NATION AND IDENTITY IN THE LIGHT OF CHRIST.

What is the relationship between Christian identity on the one hand and national identity or affiliation on the other? Does God care which side of a border someone is born on? To

what extent might identification with a particular people group or country be a barrier, an aid or an irrelevance to us as aspiring followers of Jesus Christ?

Growing up in southern England, these questions rarely impinged upon me in my early years, other than in cases of obvious extremity. The type of aggressive, ethnically-based nationalism that helped give rise to everything from Nazi ideology to balkanisation seems obviously wrong to many Christians, and equally so to me.

Except, of course, that people bearing the Christian label have not infrequently been involved, tainted or implicated in such movements. The horrors colluded in by the Reich Church and the painful history of everything from falangism to intensely Constantinian or Erastian forms of Christianity cannot be dismissed as irrelevant in considering issues of nation and national identity theologically.

As I grew in my Christian understanding, formed within Anglicanism but shaped heavily by nonconformism and Anabaptism, I developed an instinctive aversion to flag-waving patriotism. It became clear to me that my primary identity is formed not by nation, race, gender, culture or any other temporal filter, but by baptism into the body of Christ. It is here that we learn what it means that God loves

us beyond the differences and divisions that life naturally imposes. We form a new solidarity transcending even blood ties, discovering in the crucified and risen Christ that the transforming presence of God applies equally to strangers and friends, allies and enemies.

Whereas the very identity of the nation as a protected boundary is based on exclusion and violence (defining who is allowed in, and policing that with armed force), the body of Christ is a zone of grace that fundamentally challenges the barriers and threats we are otherwise tempted to use in establishing our own supposed righteousness over others. Similarly, to be

without the sociality of the Church.

In some cases, this understanding of being part of 'a holy nation' – a community of anti-exclusion that shares but does not own the love of God – suggests a stance within the national and international order that will inherently challenge the predominance of tribe and nation in popular thinking. The refugee and asylum seeker crisis provides one clear example. The idea that our sympathy and hospitality should extend only to those of our own nation, race, belief system or 'kind' flies in the face of the biblical call to love our neighbours; the conviction that all bear God's likeness;

“ We in the West cannot turn aside from victims of the poverty, war and climate change that our own countries have played a part in creating ”

made in the image of God is to be freed from the potentially imprisoning images in which we might otherwise be trapped – including those of wealth, power, might, ethnicity and, yes, nationality.

I still believe passionately that this is how Christians should orient themselves in the world today. Not as a new tribe competing with others (that corrupts being chosen to serve into being specially privileged), but as people seeking to embody and commend the practices of justice, peace, sharing, repentance, forgiveness and equal worth within and

the orientation towards 'the other' in the parable of the Good Samaritan and much else in the gospels. Rather, it is through acts of justice, kindness and common humanity that we truly discover ourselves, others and God. We Christians in the West cannot look away or turn aside from those who are the victims of the very economic inequity, poverty, war, human rights abuses and climate change that our own countries have played a part in creating.

And yet, and yet... this refusal to allow humanly constructed identities and boundaries to define who and how



The Crucifixion of St. Andrew, Fran Francken II (Flanders, Antwerp, 1581-1642)

we are in relation to those different to us does not render the problems involved in seeking justice and peace for all instantly solvable. Far from it. What it does is require us to become part of the solution, to “be the change we wish to see in the world” (Gandhi), rather than to push the difficulty and challenge on to someone or something else in an often brutal, divided and wounded world.

But what of the more mundane issues of citizenship, organisation and governance? How does someone who is defined first and foremost as belonging to Christ, the marginal Jew executed outside the city gate, behave and belong in the country or region of their birth or settlement? If Romans 13 appears to commend pragmatic compliance with the powers that be and Revelation 13 seems to advocate rebellion when those powers become evil, where does that leave most of us most of the time – as ‘citizens of heaven’ with tents pitched on the earth, as sojourners with no abiding city, and as those who are enjoined to be unconditionally in the world and yet not conformed to it?

The answer that I find most helpful is to be found in Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s conviction that Christian ethics consists in living joyfully and purposefully in ‘the penultimate’, while acting in the light

“ *The idea that our hospitality should extend only to those of our own nation flies in the face of the biblical call to love our neighbours* ”

of ‘the ultimate’. In that way, we seek to be truly loyal to those we are bound or affiliated to, even as our final loyalty cannot be claimed by anyone or anything short of God in Christ (in whom we see a loyalty towards life and the good which constantly invites us to go beyond what seems possible in the midst of mess, wrongdoing and compromise).

That approach is not so much a formula or recipe for living as a set of ingredients and practices, learned communally and historically through the development of character and the application of shared wisdom. It may involve different responses in different situations.

I found that myself when I moved from England to Scotland six years ago, thrown into a debate about whether Scotland should become an independent country. The issues involved are complex. Self-government involves limits as well as opportunities in a globalised world where corporate economic power (something Christians should be far more critical of) sets the underlying agenda.

To my surprise, I found myself shifting towards passionate involvement in the ‘yes’ campaign for Scottish independence. I was motivated not by nationalism (though I have learned that inclusive and progressive civic nationalism is wholly different to the other-despising, ethnic-centred variety), but rather social justice, the benefits of confederalism and the principle of subsidiarity. That is, the belief that power should be made accountable at the most immediate level practically possible. This stems from Catholic social teaching, itself a process of reflection on biblical and ecclesial identity in relation to social solidarity.

In and of themselves, nation and national identity matter far less than many people instinctively feel. It is as repositories for hopeful action and the quest for faithfulness towards people and planet that they acquire a fresh significance and valuation in the light of Christ.

Q&A

VINOTH RAMACHANDRA

SRI LANKAN THEOLOGIAN AND
CATALYST LIVE SPEAKER VINOTH
RAMACHANDRA ON NATIONALISM AND
INTERNATIONALISM.

Vinoth Ramachandra returned to his native Sri Lanka after studying in the UK, to see the beginnings of the civil war which would tear the country apart. It was against the backdrop of an ethnically charged conflict – and as part of the Christian minority – that he developed his thinking about what it means to be a Christian in society.

His 2008 book *Subverting Global Myths* dealt with issues of multiculturalism, postcolonialism and terrorism (among other subjects) from a critical global Christian point of view. He talks to *Mission Catalyst* about nationalism, patriotism and language.

Is there a place for patriotism and nationalism in the life of a Christian?

Yes, but provided it's relative. Our primary identity is not given to us by our nation



state or our ethnic group. Our primary identity is given to us by Jesus, through whom we belong to the global body of Christ. And so we evaluate and judge everything that our nation states or ethnic groups do in the light of our primary identity as Christians. There are times that we have to oppose what our nation state does, in the name of Christ.

Is it possible to have pride in your country without denigrating those from other countries?

I'm not sure about pride, but certainly to appreciate what we have in terms of our culture – the environment in which we are born – to appreciate what is good. I don't think we need to be ashamed of it, I think that's good. But we also need to be critical and learn to look at our culture from the perspective of others and especially to take a historical perspective. How has the development of our culture or civilisation perhaps been at the cost of other cultures and civilisations? That's part of what it means to think Christianly: we learn to think globally. So it's both an appreciation of our own indigenous culture, but also a critical stance – that's why I think having cross-cultural relationships both within the nation



Vembakkottai camp in Virudhunagar district, Tamil Nadu, India, was set up in 1990 to accommodate Sri Lankan refugees in the wake of the civil war. © EC/ECHO Arjun Claire

state and beyond the nation state is very important.

So is the natural inclination of a Christian to be an internationalist?

One would think so, yes. But it's rarely the case. I think we are so often brainwashed from early childhood. Less so in Britain, actually. I think it's much more in the recently independent countries, which are trying to forge a national identity. So we have the national anthem being sung every day in some schools and all this language about the motherland and fatherland in some situations.

It's right that people of cultures that have been oppressed for a long time are aspiring to autonomy and self-determination.

How important do you think language has been to issues of nationalism in your home, Sri Lanka?

It's played a very strong role. If it arises naturally, if a nation is defined naturally in terms of language, like in Japan I

“ Part of what it means to think Christianly is to think globally ”

suppose, or Korea – largely monolingual nations – it doesn't lead to conflict. But when you assert one language in a multilingual society, it inevitably leads to conflict. In France, for example, or Spain, minority languages were brutally suppressed, which is why you have these separatist movements in places like the

Basque country in Spain. And in Sri Lanka after independence, when Sinhalese, the majority language, was made the national language, the reaction to that was a Tamil nationalist movement. It was there before independence, but it gained momentum after 1956 when the Sinhalese language bill was passed.



Vinoth Ramachandra will be speaking at **Catalyst Live 2016**.

Catalyst Live will take place on 16 November at St Martin's in the Bull Ring in Birmingham and on 17 November at the Concert Hall in Reading. It will feature speakers from Israel-Palestine, Peru, the Netherlands, Australia, Lebanon and the UK. You can find out more and book your tickets at bmscatalystlive.com

Nations, borders and migration

Elections, referendums, refugees, migration and apparent threats to our nation should push us to think more deeply about whether God cares where we come from or minds where and how we constitute borders.

BOOKS

HONEY FROM THE LION Christianity and the Ethics of Nationalism

Doug Gay

A Scottish-centred theological defence of nationalism with deep ecumenical roots, recommended by Simon Barrow.

THE EU REFERENDUM How Should We Decide?

Andrew Goddard

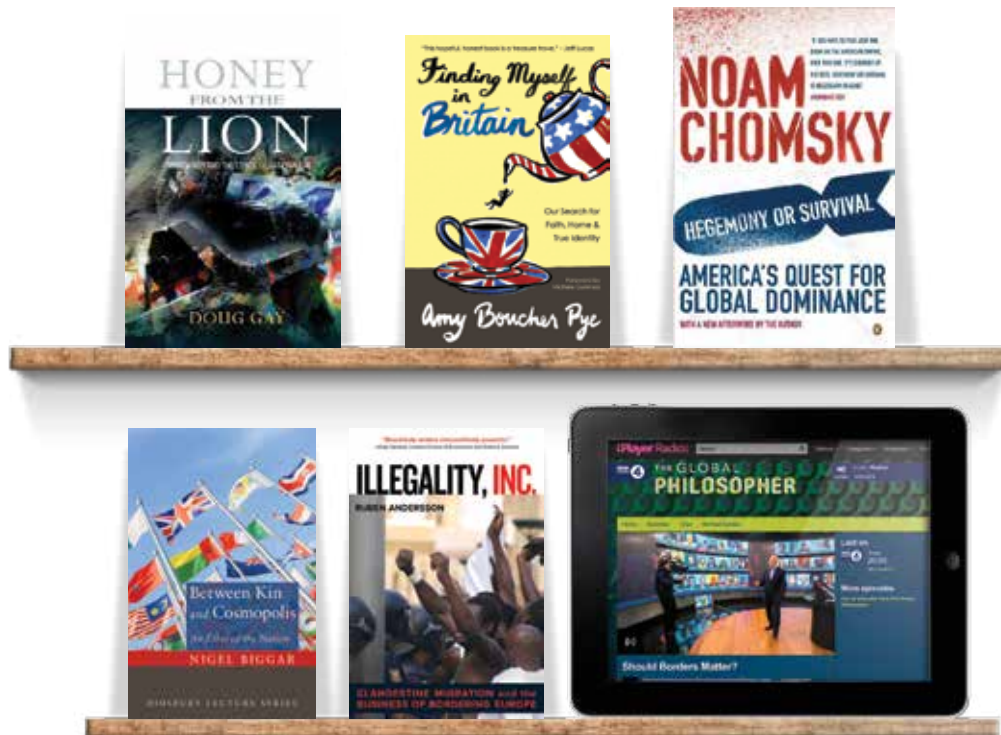
This Grove Booklet (E181) is a timely reflection of theological and economic issues surrounding the EU Referendum. At £3.95, it's also a bargain.

<http://bit.ly/1Xx9ykr>

FINDING MYSELF IN BRITAIN Our Search for Faith, Home and True Identity

Amy Boucher Pye

A through-the-year look at life in Britain from the viewpoint of an American *Mission Catalyst* contributor, which has been described as "Michele Guinness meets Bill Bryson".



HEGEMONY OR SURVIVAL America's Quest for Global Dominance

Noam Chomsky

Chomsky is not a Christian and launches his critiques of power from the position of the anarchist left, so his analysis might not be for everyone. He has, however, been one of America's foremost intellectuals since the mid-twentieth century and his public-record-based commentaries are well worth considering.

BETWEEN KIN AND COSMOPOLIS An Ethic of the Nation

Nigel Biggar

Regius Professor of Moral and Pastoral Theology at Oxford University, Biggar sets up a framework for thinking about issues such as nationalism and immigration.

ILLEGALITY, INC. Clandestine Migration and the Business of Bordering Europe

Ruben Andersson

Journalistic anthropology visits the migration trails from North Africa to Europe and examines the industry of people movement and the new border regimes meeting it.

WEB

SHOULD BORDERS MATTER?

Michael Sandel

The philosopher and former Reith Lecturer examines this question in a lecture for BBC Radio 4.

<http://bbc.in/1Zn6bvt>

CHRISTIAN PATRIOTISM Love for the 'Other'

Christian Piatt

The progressive Sojourners site ran this article in 2012, meditating on the notion of American and Christian exceptionalism.

<http://bit.ly/1sihXfh>

AMERICA IS NOT THE GREATEST COUNTRY

Aaron Sorkin/Jeff Daniels

[Warning: this video contains strong language]

In the first episode of Aaron Sorkin's TV show *The Newsroom*, a conservative news anchor played by Jeff Daniels is asked why America is the greatest country in the world. His answer has become a much-shared video online. Thought-provoking on the subject of American exceptionalism, but it can be applied to any country.

<http://bit.ly/1VYyyBH>

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