



ETHICS IN CONVERSATION

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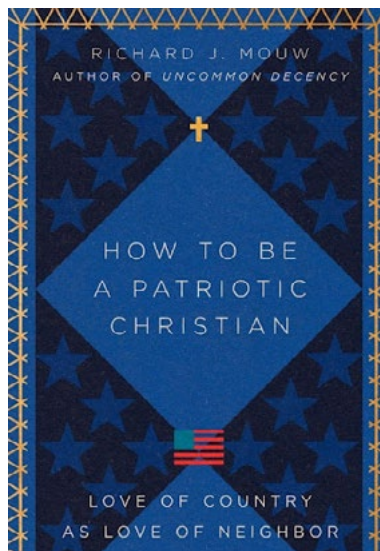
How to Be a Patriotic Christian: Love of Country as Love of Neighbor

Richard Mouw (Downers Grove, ILL: InterVarsity Press, 2022)

REVIEWED BY RICARDO CARDENAS

In recent years, especially within the United States, there are few topics that have been more divisive than the issue of “Christian nationalism.” The conversation has always had its sticking points, but in a “post-January-6th America,” the discussion has proven to be especially incendiary. And yet, it is into this discussion that Richard Mouw helpfully steps in to provide wisdom and encouragement in *How to Be a Patriotic Christian: Love of Country as Love of Neighbor*.

There are few who can offer the refreshing and balanced tone this conversation necessitates like Mouw does in this book. True to form, the ideas he presents are clear, concise and conversational all at once. From the start, Mouw makes it clear that his book is not meant to be merely pragmatic. This is no “how-to” book, but rather, it is an invitation to a wrestling match where Christians will be challenged to consider the issue of patriotism responsibly and biblically (1).



This wrestling is not meant to be combative in nature, but instead is meant to connote a willingness to do the hard work of “testing the strength and productivity of our understandings of the obligations of citizenship” (3). Are American Christians willing to wrestle with this matter while avoiding the common pitfall of blind nationalism that too easily equates “God and country,” while also avoiding the pitfall of jaded cynicism that immediately rejects any type of faith mixed with love for country? (2). In chapter 1, Mouw argues that striking this balance is possible for Christians, but that in order to do

so we must have an identity that is first and foremost grounded in Christ himself (7). That being said, this does not mean that our national citizenship is irrelevant to our faith, or even to our future citizenship in God’s eternal kingdom (8). God has placed us in our respective nations for a reason, and the Christian should be able to celebrate the good we find here, while also being willing to critique our nation when necessary.

With this foundation in place, Mouw moves forward in chapters 2 and 3 to consider the concept of “peoplehood,” human bonds, and a healthy sense of affection for one’s nation. In order to make his point, Mouw provides a helpful distinction between “state” and “nation” as it relates to patriotism. The state primarily has to do with “practical governing: laws, policies, practices, regulations. All of [these are] essential to structuring the life of a large and complex community of human beings” (29). Rarely, however, do citizens express affection for *these aspects* of their country. Instead, our affection primarily lies in those things that make us a *nation*. For Mouw, “A nation ... is a community of people who experience some kind of unity, based on shared memories of our collective past and some cultural practices and loyalties that we have in common” (30).

It is these things that make us a people, and in order to cultivate this “peoplehood,” Christians must recognize and resist the aspects in our culture that can harm these affections (i.e., social media, isolated faith communities, resentment towards those different from us), and instead we must be a people who “find ways to demonstrate to others that we take our shared peoplehood with them seriously” (36). This can only happen when we take the time to contemplate our neighbours in God. Here, Mouw is channelling Calvin’s call for Christians to love “even the most remote person ... with no distinction between barbarian and Greek, worthy and unworthy, friend and



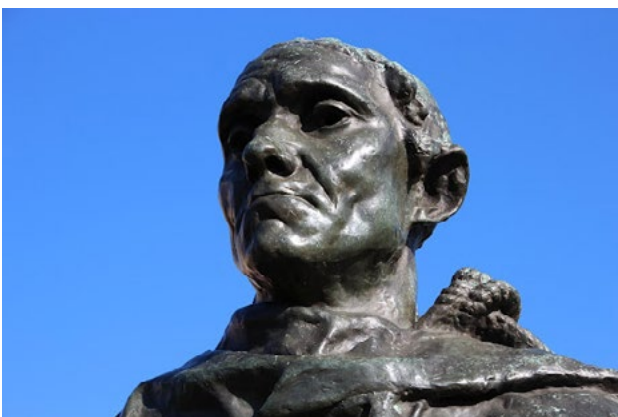
Andrew Stevovich, *Bus Stop*

enemy, since all should be contemplated in God, not in themselves” (49). Being a patriotic Christian requires growing in our love for those with whom we share a deep humanness, even if we do not share the same faith.

In chapters 4 and 5, Mouw moves to encourage Christians to wrestle with the role of government and what it means to submit to our authorities. That Christians are called to honour and submit to those who are in power

over us is a clear command from Scripture (Mark 12:17; Romans 13:1–7), but again, the “how” is not always clear, especially in nations that have governments that are a mix of good and bad, or that are downright evil. Along with this, however, this is not a one-way relationship. Governments are also called to execute justice on behalf of their people, and when they fail to do so they are operating outside of their God-ordained roles. Mouw reminds us that the Christian tradition is not without resources for navigating this tension, as he points us to the Catholic tradition’s principle of subsidiarity, the Kuyperian concept of sphere sovereignty, and the power of “patriotic prayer” on behalf of our government (77–83). No government, this side of heaven, will rule with perfect justice, but God has not left us without various resources to faithfully navigate this reality.

In chapter 6, Mouw briefly delves into the topic of theocracy, explaining that while he is not a proponent of a theocratically arranged system of government in the



Auguste Rodin, *The Burghers of Calais* (details)

United States, there is still an important sense in which Christians can and should acknowledge the reality that all that exists is under God's rule, and therefore, in some sense we do live within a theocracy (84–85). Nonetheless, this does not mean that Christians ought to support a removal of democracy and an imposition of a theocratic system of government. Currently, God is patient with unbelief, and Christians should be as well (86). While this might be discouraging to some, Mouw argues that instead of viewing this negatively, Christians can take our pluralistic society's ideological diversity as a learning opportunity. Again, alluding to Calvin, Mouw argues that because of the reality of remaining sin in our own hearts, Christians do not always live perfectly righteously, and because of God's common grace, there are times where Christians can learn from secular critics and

long as we are still willing to face the realities of our national shortcomings and pray for national humility and repentance (110). As someone who has personally wrestled with the biblical basis for reciting the Pledge of Allegiance and national anthem in recent years, this chapter provided helpful considerations.

Chapter 8 is the final substantive chapter of the book and deals with the issue of civil religion. How should Christians view a generic faith language used in presidential inaugurations and political contexts? Again, Mouw's ability to avoid total cynicism and blind acceptance are helpful here. Civil religion, at its worst, can be a utilitarian distortion of faith, used primarily for forced submission of common citizens, or for creating an artificial unity amongst peoples—here he uses Plato and Rousseau

as examples of this usage of civil religion (113). At its best, however, civil religion can be a helpful way to remind citizens of transcendence, "serving the purpose of keeping us aware that there is more to our civic engagement than the ebb and flow of popular opinion and practical political strategizing (127). National leaders are right to remind citizens that there is a God to whom we are accountable in how we live as a society, and activists like Martin Luther King Jr. were right to share where we have fallen short of true justice by allowing oppression to continue in society. Civil religion certainly



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other faiths—"all truth is God's truth" (87–91). Therefore, patriotic Christians ought to hold a level of conviction that recognizes God's rule over all of our lives, while also being willing to engage in charitable dialogue, and learn from those who disagree with us.

Chapter 7 tackles the topic of patriotism within the four walls of the church, and at other Christian gatherings. How should Christians think about displaying the American flag within the sanctuary or on church property? How might Christians think about the pledge of allegiance or patriotic singing at church? As it relates to patriotic songs, Mouw is keen to remind Christians that "we have to be careful about using biblical references to portray the United States as uniquely blessed by God" (105). Nonetheless, there should still be room for Christians to sing songs of patriotic love for nation, as

falls short of a robust biblical faith, but that does not mean that it has no meaningful purpose in our communities today.

Mouw closes his book with a call to compassionate patriotism that is rooted in *place*. If our patriotism is one that only celebrates what is good about where we are rooted, then it is an incomplete patriotism. But if, instead, we cultivate compassion for where God has placed us—similar to the compassion we have for our families—then we ought to be able to celebrate goodness while also mourning over the imperfections and shortcomings we find in our nation's past and present (135–136). Mouw concludes with a final reminder for his readers to wrestle with the content of his book, and to do so with a sense of contemplation, compassion, rootedness in place, and finally, trust in Jesus (140–142).



Claude Monet, *Rue Montorgueil with Flags*

How to Be a Patriotic Christian is an excellent resource for any Christian trying to navigate the dangerous waters of “Christian nationalism.” Mouw is writing to a specifically American audience, and he is clear to point this out from the beginning (3). Some may find this perspective to be too limited, but there are plenty of principles for Christians to adapt to their own national contexts beyond the United States. Along with this, Mouw draws on personal experiences and insights from Christians in South Africa, China, and Latin America. In this way, he makes this a book that is accessible for Christian from various cultural contexts.

To be sure, at 148 pages, this is not an exhaustive treatment of this topic and it does not seek to be. From a theological perspective, more could always be said about the fine nuances of debates related to theocracy, civil religion, and the role and scope of government. But the foundation that Mouw provides in these pages is an excellent starting place for each of these topics, as he gives a helpful framework and the ability to see and sidestep various landmines. At times within these pages, it appears that Mouw is not so much making an argument as much as he is pondering

and articulating, out loud, a model for the type of wrestling he is challenging his readers to. Because of this, there are moments where the reader may find it difficult to discern where, precisely, Mouw is leading us, but I think this style is intentional.

Mouw is a seasoned public theologian who has wrestled with these topics for a long time, and like a good coach, he is giving fellow Christians techniques for stepping on to the mat to do our own wrestling. Christians who, like myself over the last few years, have grown to be a bit more cynical towards ideas of a patriotic Christianity will be encouraged to see the value of lovingly celebrating the national identity that God has given us, even as we critique said identity. And Christians who are a bit too comfortable with their national identity and sense of “American exceptionalism,” will be challenged to ground their identity in Christ, while considering the possibility of a compassionate patriotism that is happy to celebrate the blessings of our national heritage, while also prophetically calling out the ways in which our nation has not always lived up to our collective calling.

Some Christians may walk away from this book with more questions than answers, and I think this is what Mouw would want for his readers—to ask hard questions and to wrestle with biblical texts as we seek to apply them to our current national context. If this is our strategy for navigating this timely topic, then I think we are in good territory as we seek to faithfully follow Christ the King in nations that are already, but not yet fully, under his kingdom’s reign.

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Willam Bauly, *Our Heaven Born Banner*