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ANABAPTIST PATRIOTS?

God and Country

BY KRISTA ZIMMERMAN

When I was studying at the University of Notre Dame, my fellow students sometimes displayed posters and t-shirts that read “God, Country and Notre Dame.” Coming from the Mennonite tradition, the slogan made me slightly uncomfortable—God and country were in such close proximity.

Anabaptists generally stress the need for Christian allegiance to God over and above the state. In the *Confession of Faith in a Mennonite Perspective* it states that the church’s allegiance should be to “God alone” (Article 23, emphasis added). In Acts 5:29, the apostles tell us to “obey God rather than any human authority.”

Still, I hope there is some room in the equation for Christians (of any nation) to love a country and to honor the aspirations of nations that are consistent with the directives of Christian faith.

In Christian families, love should always play both supportive and challenging roles—no matter what the context. When I was growing up, I attended Sunday school and experienced warmth and care directed at me by my teachers. They wanted the best for me and were committed to my spiritual growth and education. One of the ways they did that, however, was to challenge behavior inconsistent with the values they hoped to pass on. I still remember the firm teacher-student discussion that resulted from my attempt to decorate a Jesus puppet with a toupee and a cigar.

Last year, representatives from Church Communities International (formerly known as the Bruderhof Communities) offered an invocation in the U.S. House of Representatives. The prayer gave thanks, among other things, for the opportunity to serve the nation. Although Church Communities International members are opposed to serving in the armed forces, they have found other ways to serve—including taking in refugees and counseling prisoners. They have also challenged the United States to abolish the death penalty, increase funding for education and end the war in Iraq.

In honor of Independence Day this issue of the *Memo* explores the intersections and oppositions of Anabaptism and patriotism. It celebrates the achievements of the United States, while challenging its leaders to more consistently love neighbors (Matthew 22:34–40) and seek justice for all (Micah 6:8).

Inside, Rachele Lyndaker Schlabach reflects on the phrase “God bless America” and Gabe Schlabach explores U.S. accomplishments in the area of civil rights. Theo Sittler examines U.S. influence in Haiti and Tammy Alexander writes about patriotism in the nation of Sudan. Finally, Nancy Rivera delves into the contradictions of national identity inherent in immigration. ■

Love should always play both supportive and challenging roles—no matter what the context.

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BY RACHELLE LYNDAKER
SCHLABACH

**God's blessing is
not exclusive, nor
is it unconditional.**

God Bless America?

*God bless America,
Land that I love,
Stand beside her and guide her
Through the night with a light
from above . . .*

This well-known song appears in many Christian hymnals, and functions as a popular and unofficial anthem of the United States.

Particularly after the terrorist attacks on Sept. 11, 2001, a host of “God bless America” bumper stickers cropped up on cars all over the country. It seemed to be a way to proclaim support for this country when our national identity was under attack.

As an alternative to this trend, many Mennonites and others that I know posted a different sticker on their cars: “God bless the whole world—no exceptions.”

Theologically, this makes good sense. As Christians, our primary allegiance is not to any particular nation. Rather, we pledge allegiance to the one who is Lord over all nations.

So what does it mean when we ask God to bless someone, a nation or even the whole world?

The Greek word for “bless” literally means “to speak well of.” In Scripture, there is much talk of God blessing the people of Israel and later the church—“speaking well” of them, in a sense, and showing them favor.

But this blessing is not exclusive, nor is it unconditional. God blessed Abram *so that* he could bless other nations. And God instructed the people of Israel that divine blessings are a response to their faithfulness and right intentions.

When we pray for God’s blessing upon any people or nation—or even the whole globe—do we mean for God to bless the good parts and the bad, those in keeping with God’s will and those that aren’t?

There are lots of good parts to the United States—for starters, we enjoy freedom of speech and the freedom to worship how we please. We have a diverse society with laws to protect individual rights. And although there have been some obvious glitches, we have a largely well-functioning democracy.

Of course an honest look also reveals parts that are shameful. Our history has included pushing Native Americans off of their land, enslaving Africans, forcibly relocating Japanese Americans to internment camps during World War II, and covertly supporting the overthrow of democratically-elected governments.

Anabaptists have often remained silent in the face of these injustices. Grateful to have religious freedom, and uncomfortable with getting involved in politics, those of us with German heritage often focused more on establishing our U.S. allegiance.

But being sympathetic to one’s country and appreciating its good points does not mean that we cannot also call our nation to accountability.

I would hope that this is true no matter what country we live in. If we want what is best for our nation and the world, then we will offer critique together with affirmation, praise with accountability.

As we seek to be faithful in this country we call home, may God guide her (and all nations of the world) “through the night with a light from above.” ■

WASHINGTON MEMO is written by Mennonite Central Committee U.S. Washington Office staff. It interprets national legislation and policy, seeking to reflect biblical concerns for justice and peace as represented in the work and statements of MCC U.S. and Mennonite and Brethren in Christ churches. All biblical quotes are from the New Revised Standard Version, unless otherwise noted.

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Anabaptist Reflections on Patriotism

“The only Christian nation is the church of Jesus Christ, made up of people from every tribe and nation, called to witness to God’s glory. . . . [As Christians] we witness to the nations by being that ‘city on a hill’ which demonstrates the way of Christ. We also witness by being ambassadors for Christ, calling the nations to move toward justice, peace and compassion for all people.”

—*Confession of Faith in a Mennonite Perspective*

“What we will need is a persistent, sustained, but careful and factually grounded critique of America’s unilateralism and selfishness. Exaggerated, sweeping criticism that fails to acknowledge what is good and noble in this country will be both wrong and unconvincing. We can appeal both to biblical norms and America’s own best ideals of freedom and justice for all, as we urge our fellow citizens to use America’s great power to reduce global poverty, care for those suffering from AIDS, promote freedom and justice for everyone, and work cooperatively with other nations in a way that respects the basic equality and dignity of all God’s children.”

—Ron Sider, *Evangelicals for Social Action*

“The risk of conditions being imposed and of being co-opted and seduced by the state or other visions is real. . . . It has been important to come with proposals of our own and to encourage each party, including the state and ourselves, to acknowledge its vantage point and perspective and not gloss over differences for fear of rejection. For us, this has included being clear that we are a church and that we seek to work with and from the community—the grassroots—and that the community should be very much a part of the process.”

—Ricardo Esquivia, “Building Peace from Below and Inside: The Mennonite Experience in Colombia,” *From the Ground Up: Mennonite Contributions to International Peacebuilding*, eds. Cynthia Sampson and John Paul Lederach

“To speak of Christian citizenship is potentially risky, especially given the long tradition in North American culture that has fused citizenship with patriotism. Christian citizens should never lose sight of the fact that their primary citizenship is in the body of Christ—the church—and that God’s will for the world is expressed most fully there, among the gathered body of believers. And yet the church does not exist for itself. Its whole reason for being is to seek the redemption of the world around it.”

—John D. Roth, *Choosing Against War: A Christian View*

“What [Lewy] refers to as ‘anti-Americanism’ could be better described as ‘more-than-Americanism.’ Pacifists identify with the entire human community and the long sweep of history. For the pacifist, citizenship in a particular nation-state is just not that important. He [or she] cares less about national interests than about the well-being of the people of all nations.”

—J.R. Burkholder, “Pacifist Ethics and Pacifist Politics,” *Peace Betrayed*, ed. Michael Cromartie

“As a recently-created national body of Mennonites, we call upon the Executive Board to formulate a process that helps us explore our identity as Mennonites living in what many consider to be the wealthiest and most powerful nation on earth. We ask for resources that help us live faithfully in Christ-like ways, sometimes at odds with our national culture, acknowledging that no culture is either completely redeemed or completely fallen.”

—resolution adopted by the delegate body of Mennonite Church USA in San José, 2007

QUOTES COMPILED BY
ZACH KAUFMAN.

The only Christian
nation is the church
of Jesus Christ.

One Nation, In Progress

BY GABE SCHLABACH

“Too often we have been silent in the face of [racial] injustices. . . . We encourage our congregations to identify and speak out against all forms of racism in our communities, [including] subtle forms of racism in the media, in social practices, housing and employment patterns, and even within the church.”

—“A Church of Many Peoples Confronts Racism,” statement passed at 1989 joint gathering of Mennonite Church and General Conference Mennonite Church

I have a dream that one day this nation will rise up and live out the true meaning of its creed: “We hold these truths to be self-evident: that all men are created equal.” —Martin Luther King, Jr., 1963

The United States’ journey towards racial equality has been both extraordinary and frustratingly slow. Considering the long history of slavery, legal segregation and discrimination in this country, it is impressive that U.S. society has improved to the point it has. But there is still a long road ahead.

The United States was founded under the assertion that all “all men are created equal.” While it is right to note that “all men” leaves out half the human population and was not originally applied to people of color, the importance of this statement should not be discounted. In an age of monarchies, the United States’ founding documents were revolutionary, and the country truly was a cutting-edge, “democratic experiment.”

Nevertheless, it was an experiment rooted in a society in which slavery was a driving economic force.

The abolition of this evil system was slow, contentious and ultimately bloody. The politics surrounding slavery make today’s hyper-partisan political discourse look like a huffest. For example: in 1856, Senator Preston Smith Brooks (a champion of slavery) beat down a fellow senator, Charles Sumner, with a cane until it snapped. Sumner’s recovery took three years, but he could count himself fortunate: a civil war soon broke out that took the lives of more than 600,000 soldiers and injured at least 400,000 more.

Eventually, however, thanks to the efforts of countless abolitionists, slavery was ended.

Then came Jim Crow. “Separate but equal” laws were enacted in many states to divide people of color from whites. Militant racist groups, most notably the Ku Klux Klan, formed to intimidate people of color, murdering those who stood up to them.

But some continued to resist racial injustice, and change did come. It took another century, more lost lives, and more sacrifices. It took a Supreme Court willing to uphold the nation’s founding principles. It took strong leadership rooted in a deep faith in God. It took a mass movement of activists and regular folks working together. And it took the ability of millions of people across the country to recognize and reject injustices they had long ignored.

The most visible change came in the form of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965, statements from the highest levels of government that the country’s founding principles apply to people of all races and ethnicities.

The result: race relations have undeniably improved. People of color are no longer barred from entering schools, professions, or voting booths on account of their skin color. And come January, the United States might well have its first African-American president. All these advances are praiseworthy.

Yet despite the progress that has occurred, whites are still far wealthier (on average) than people of color and hold far more institutional power. Gentrification is tearing apart many urban communities of color. *De facto* segregation remains. And overtly racist attitudes and actions still present themselves all too often.

The “democratic experiment” continues. The United States—a human institution—will never be perfect, but can be improved. We should celebrate how far the country has come, but we must continue working together to make it a more just place for all. ■

International Meddling

In Haiti we have a joke,” Djakoli told me while I was in the country as part of an MCC-organized learning tour.

The story goes like this: a woman is sitting on the side of the road, selling vegetables. A slick new shiny car pulls up, driven by a Haitian. A white man gets out, who also looks slick in his new suit and tie.

The man asks the woman, “If I tell you exactly how many onions are in each box, will you give me one box for free?”

The woman is intrigued and agrees. The man then pulls out his computer. The screen shows a satellite image of the woman and her vegetables. Then it zeroes in on one box and computes a calculation. A few minutes later the man looks at the woman and says, “There are exactly 250 onions in each box.”

The woman is thoroughly surprised. “That’s exactly right!”

So she gives the man a free box, then she looks at him and offers a counter bet, “If I tell you who you are, you will give me back the box and pay me the cost of one box.”

The man, who is also intrigued and with little to lose, agrees. The woman exclaims, “You are an *International Expert!*”

“That’s exactly right! How did you know?”

“There are three things that gave it away. First, you came to me; I did not invite you here. Second, you told me something that I already knew. Third, these are not onions, they are turnips.”

The story of Haiti began when African slaves overthrew the French, abolished

slavery and established the first free black nation and the second independent state in the Western Hemisphere in 1804.

By all accounts, Haiti should be a wealthy nation. However, France forced Haiti to pay \$21 billion in today’s dollars for loss of property, including slaves. The United States, France and other European nations refused to recognize Haiti and since then Haiti has been embroiled in a state of poverty and political instability, which has included several U.S. military interventions, United Nations peacekeeping forces, dictatorships and economic intrusion.

Today, Haiti stands as the poorest country in the Western Hemisphere. Over 80 percent of the population lives on less than \$2 a day. The country pays international creditors debt payments totaling \$56 million each year, while much of the population lacks access to food, healthcare and education.

Haiti also stands as the most open country in the Caribbean in terms of trade. Until the 1980s Haiti was a self-sufficient rice producer. However, due to intervention and structural adjustment by the IMF, Haiti opened up its markets to foreign imports. This has resulted in a flood of subsidized rice from the United States causing the loss of jobs and livelihoods.

U.S. policies today continue the legacy of slavery. During my visit to Haiti, the people that I met were clear in calling for an equal relationship with the United States and not one of intervention.

The Bible calls us to love our neighbors. As U.S. citizens we must call for policies that respect and love our neighbors in Haiti. ■

BY THEO SITTHER

U.S. policies today continue the legacy of slavery in Haiti.

Find more on Haiti at the new Washington Memo blog: washingtonmemo.org.

Pontius' Puddle



Patriotism in Sudan

BY TAMMY ALEXANDER

Most of us in the U.S. describe ourselves as *Americans* more often than we describe ourselves as *Virginians* or *Hoosiers* or *Buckeyes*. Whatever our views on patriotism, we don't have too much trouble identifying ourselves as members of this collective that we call the United States.

But how does patriotism look in a country like Sudan—a country constructed by a colonial power out of several different and disparate regions and given its independence just 52 years ago?

When we hear Sudan described in the news, it is often in terms of the conflicts between the different regions—Darfur, the North, the South. Many outside of Sudan see the best hope of peace as a unified, albeit reformed, Sudan with a more democratic, representative government, a more equitable sharing of wealth, and a certain degree of autonomy for each region.

The 2005 Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA) between the North and the South contains provisions for just these types of reforms. The CPA laid out a time table for a census in 2008, elections in 2009, and a vote on southern secession in 2011.

The vote on secession will give southern Sudanese the option of forming a wholly independent nation. This provision, it was hoped, would not only provide southern Sudanese with a measure of self-determination, but also motivate government officials in the North to live up to their side of the bargain and make a unified Sudan more attractive to those in the South.

How will southern Sudanese define their allegiances in 2011? Will they see themselves as part of a larger Sudan, or will their patriotic energies be focused on building a new, independent nation in the South? At the moment, the prospects for a unified Sudan do not look good.

In May, violence broke out in Abyei, a contested town along the north-south border. Both sides blamed the other in what has been called the worst escalation of violence since the peace agreement was signed.

Most of the town's 100,000 residents—many of whom had only recently returned—fled and left Abyei largely deserted. Nyajith Mading, a southern Sudanese woman living in the North, had returned to Abyei only a month before. "I heard bombing and the sound of guns and saw people killed," she said. "I took my child and I ran."

How we define our patriotism is shaped by a variety of allegiances—to family, tribe, nation, religion, even money and power. It is also shaped by our values and our determination of what best helps us to keep our families safe and meet our basic needs.

In the case of Sudan, we should be careful that our Western notions of patriotism do not cloud our judgment. From our position of relative security and stability, we may assume that keeping a country together is better than letting it split apart. Ultimately, it is not our decision to make.

We can certainly counsel both sides that splitting may only lead to more bloodshed. We can and should do all we can to encourage officials in both the North and the South to live up to the promises they made in the CPA. And we can continue to support our Sudanese partners' projects to bring reconstruction, peace and healing in the South, as MCC is doing through its work to rebuild schools and wells.

But, in the end, U.S. citizens and U.S. policy must respect that the Sudanese will decide their allegiances and their future. ■

We should be careful that our Western notions of patriotism do not cloud our judgment.

WAGING PEACE IN SUDAN

Visit mcc.org/sudanaction to learn more about the root causes of the conflicts in both southern Sudan and Darfur and find out how you can advocate for peace. The first 100 congregations to sign up at the web site will receive four free campaign posters and five free copies of the six-week small group study guide.



The Migrant Trail

I decided to walk the Migrant Trail (a 75-mile walk through the desert in solidarity with migrants) last year because I believe forgetting is too easy—even for those of us with recent immigration stories. We find ourselves in a comfortable place and we forget where we came from. Memories become fuzzy, native tongues start to sound foreign and traditions begin to fade. And so, little by little, immigration becomes more of a political issue that affects others instead of something that affects us, our family, and our friends.

In the weeks leading up to the event, I became a complete mess—my anxiety levels were at their maximum. Fortunately, I was offered comfort and guidance by my friends.

My friend Marina challenged me to think of immigrants who are just like me—people who like to plan ahead. What do they do when they face uncertain prospects and futures at home? How do they cope with their stress? They probably set out towards *El Norte!*

[MCC staffperson] Harley Eagle reminded me to reconnect with my ancestors, the people who came before me and laid the path for me. He also encouraged me to remember my immediate family, whether they approved of what I was doing or not.

And finally, I was reminded by my *prima* (cousin) that we come from people who walk. Our grandmother walked everywhere in México. We walked too—we just never measured distance.

During the Migrant Trail I carried a cross. It contained the name of a young woman, Maria Lucia Martinez Nava, who died trying to cross the border on February 23, 2004. I wondered what she went through when she decided to leave home. What did her family think of her decision? Did she make the journey alone? Did she ever stop to think of the risks that came with the trip?

I still can't forget that she was my age, 26 years old, when she embarked on her journey towards *El Norte* and that her decision to go was perhaps the last big decision she made in her life.

I'm a U.S. citizen but also a Chicana. These people who would risk their lives in hope of a better tomorrow are my people. Yet I will never completely understand how it feels to be them. I will probably never know the fear that a man faces as he leaves his family and a country that he loves. I will never know the dread a woman feels as she asks for contraceptive injection before she makes her journey across the border. ■

This year several MCC workers again walked the Migrant Trail in an effort to better understand and imagine the human face of migration. Read more and follow this year's journey at mcc.org/us/washington/walk.

IN OTHER'S WORDS

BY NANCY RIVERA

Nancy Rivera is the Service Program Co-Administrator/Regional Associate for MCC Central States in Texas. She participated in the 2007 MCC Migrant Trail delegation and helped plan this year's delegation.

CAPITAL QUOTES

"The America I love is not the child that pouts when international laws are applied to us."

—Former Secretary of State Madeleine Albright, speaking at a conference on human rights in Washington, DC.

"I find it incredible that in the year 2008—the 200th anniversary of the abolition of the slave trade—there is still slavery in the United States."

—Author and journalist Eric Schlosser, testifying about the plight of migrant farm workers before the U.S. Senate Committee on Health, Education, Labor and Pensions.

"This global food crisis now risks creating a series of failed states. . . . Not only do we need to increase U.S. funding in the short-term, we also need to look at more long-term solutions to help nations respond to skyrocketing prices."

—Senator Bob Casey (D-Pa.) speaking at a press conference on Capitol Hill.

"We call for an expansion of our concern beyond single-issue politics, such as abortion and marriage, and a fuller recognition of the comprehensive causes and concerns of the Gospel, and of all the human issues that must be engaged in public life."

—from "An Evangelical Manifesto," released May 2008 and signed by a number of prominent Evangelical leaders, including Dallas Willard, Max Lucado and Joel Hunter.



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ANNOUNCEMENTS

New Blog Launched: washingtonmemo.org

The *Washington Memo* now has a companion resource, the MCC Washington Office blog online at washingtonmemo.org. On the blog we post up-to-date reports on legislation, additional Capital Quotes and links to relevant news stories. Bookmark the site and visit it frequently as your resource for advocacy from an Anabaptist perspective.

In particular, see the blog's feature section on the Migrant Trail (p. 7) which puts a human face on migration with daily journal entries, photos and resources.

Women and Migration: Hope in the Midst of Violence, October 12–22, 2008

This learning tour for women will focus especially on the social realities experienced by women in Central America and Mexico, why some decide to migrate and what they experience during their journeys and in the US. Participants will travel to Tucson and the U.S.-Mexico border area, as well as Chiapas, Mexico and the Guatemala-Mexico border. The tentative cost is \$1500 plus travel to Tucson and from Chiapas. For more information, contact Linda Gehman Peachey, MCC U.S. Women's Advocacy Program, lgp@mcc.org or (717) 859-1151, (888) 563-4676.