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**Christianity, Cosmopolitanism, and the
Crisis of National Identity**

R. R. Reno

We live in a dissolving age, or, as Daniel Rogers has called it, an age of fracture. Institutions, social forms, and traditional authorities recede. To the extent that they endure, they do so under the sign of choice, often reconfigured as economic or therapeutic projects. Man the entrepreneur or consumer is ascendant—or man the wounded, vulnerable victim. The old idea that we're most fully realized in sacrifices for the common good exercises less influence over the public imagination. Solidarity is out. For good and for ill, individual achievement, success, and choice are in.

As a consequence, the nation is less morally credible, less self-confident, and less sovereign. The market provides us with our dominant metaphors of social organization, not the polling booth. The “creative class” fires our imaginations, not the ruling class. Politicians recast their projects in economic terms. They promise “efficiency” and “innovation.” Social problems are addressed by “social entrepreneurs.”

While global capitalism colonizes our political cultures, a moral consensus has formed that regards the nation as an impediment to a more universal and more just world. Universal human rights provide the paradigm of justice, not rich traditions of common law or national constitutions that express hard won political wisdom. Our progressive visionaries propose post-national regimes, some organized around an all-encompassing market, others overseen by benevolent technocrats—or a combination of both. In “The Fusion of Civilizations: A Case for Global Optimism” (*Foreign Affairs*, May/June 2016), Kishore Mahbubani and Lawrence Summers champion “pragmatic problem-solving” in a “stable and sustainable rule-based order,” undergirded by a scientific, technological, and economic consensus that encourages a “fusion of civilizations.” The globalized international

community will lay to rest belligerent implications of notions such as national interest and bring us to an era of perpetual peace.

Ever richer and ever at peace: The cosmopolitan dream of a global market overseen by global regulators, mediators, and bureaucrats is alluring. But it's also dangerous. In our dissolving age, the capacity for free and effective political action depends upon having firm, stable places to stand. Bonds of loyalty allow us to resist tyranny, whether the utilitarian despotism of global capitalism or a universal moralism that regard our traditions of self-government as impediments to the realization of true justice. Mahubani and Summers are hopeful about a post-national future, and they are not alone in their cheerful optimism. It's a prospect that fills me with dread.

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Derived from *natus*, the nation denotes a realm of givenness, not choice. We are born into a nation, which is why we speak of fatherlands and motherlands. The notion of "a people," can often be substituted for that of a nation. The immigrant is the exception, not the rule. Although Americans call themselves a nation of immigrants, that's not true. We use the term "naturalization" to describe the process by which newcomers become citizens. They choose, in a certain way, to be "born again." Peoples can be overrun by invaders, as were so many in Europe during the first millennium, and thus remade. But there have never been nations composed of different peoples. Those that try invariably end up as failed states, torn apart by tribal, ethnic, or religious strife. This was a common fate in many places after decolonization. Only empires are able to rule over a diversity of peoples.

Many are enamored of the cosmopolitan vision of folks like Mahubani and Summers, in part because of America's global influence. As a nation, we're often blind to the intimate link between nationhood and peoplehood. To an unprecedented extent, we're a people under the sign of choice. Our Ellis Island myth is just that, a myth, but it reflects our national culture, which is one of almost infinite self-invention, even re-invention. It's not coincidental that transgenderism has become prominent in America, not just in our political battles, but also in the media. Someone like Bruce Jenner fulfills the American dream. He's a Jay Gatsby figure, refusing to allow even DNA to stand in the way of his

aspirations to be whatever he wants to be. For this reason, a distinct and widespread American mentality can imagine that are no longer “peoples,” but only individuals, and when the rest of the world wakes up to this deep truth, everyone will be Americans. The post-national age will be the American age. This explains why a progressive American internationalist such as Lawrence Summers finds no contradiction between encouraging global structures that limit American sovereignty and promoting American interests.

Closely related is the conceit that America is an “idea” rather than a particular people with a particular history. Our founding documents call us to live in accord with the laws of nature and nature’s God. By this way of thinking, our nationality is “humanity,” which means that to be human is to be an American. This mentality explains, in part, our recent foreign misadventures. George W. Bush’s administration imagined itself bringing “freedom” to Iraq (and by extension to the rest of the Middle East), confident that any expansion of individual choice would, perforce, make a people American, or at least friendly to America. The same holds true for our leadership role in global capitalism. We’re confident that the free flow of capital, goods, and labor will Americanize the globe. Again, there’s something true about this conceit, as French (and other) critics of the “Anglo-Saxon” political economy recognize, but only half-true, as China is showing the rest of the world. And as is often the case, half-truths are more dangerous than patent falsehoods.

My American blindness to the dangers of an eroded national identity is compounded by the reality of our global power. Americans designed, ran, and dominated the international institutions launched after World War II: the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund, and the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade that became the World Trade Organization. The global institutions we could not control or turn to our interests, we neutered. The United Nations provides the most obvious example. After the fall of the Soviet Union, our supereminence has become even more extreme. Today, the world’s central banks may diverge in particular policies, but their outlook is unified by economic theories and monetary practices developed in the United States. The global economic system may not be an American one, but it is an Ameri-centric one. Rupert Murdoch got his start in Australia, but he recognized that one most easily controls global commercial empires from the American center. We’re in the midst of a “harmonization” of university

education around the globe, one keyed to the American system. Harvard, Yale, and Stanford are global brands.

For these and many other reasons, an American easily takes an optimistic view. He allows that a globalized future may entail the weakening of the nation state, but this does not trouble him. In all likelihood, the post-national future will revolve around the United States. We're the global archetype, the indispensable center, and should things misalign with American interests, we have a surpassingly powerful military with which to threaten, cajole, and, if necessary, destroy the recalcitrant and uncooperative.

I've come to recognize that a post-national but nevertheless Ameri-centric, globalization represents a realistic vision of the future, one endorsed, to one degree or another, by many, perhaps most, who are in positions of power in the United States, and by people elsewhere who see it as the best way forward. This should make my patriotic heart swell with pride, but it doesn't. The problem with this vision of the future is that it will revolve around a certain class of Americans, a technocratic elite, rather than America as a people.

And it will be an empire.

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We're already well along in this transition to empire. A series of political decisions (again, almost always American-led) has made possible an economic globalization that now allows for the relatively free flow of capital, goods, and labor. A great deal has been written about the consequences. We read of tax "inversions" and other ways in which global companies shop for the most advantageous places to locate their nominal headquarters. The outsourcing of production to countries with lower costs is part of a long-term trend made possible by the free flow of goods and capital. In the United States, proponents of ever-freer markets draw a direct link between prosperity and greater freedom to immigrate. Like capital and goods, labor must be able to circulate globally, otherwise we will suffer economic stagnation and will not be able to fund our systems of social security. The more rapidly everything circulates—including people—the more quickly economic systems find their way toward efficiencies.

It may be that some of these claims are true, and if we want to become ever-richer, we must embrace global capitalism, paring away the remaining constraints on its governance of all aspects of collective life so that we can further unleash its wealth-producing power. It is important, however, not to be constrained by an economic analysis of our situation. We can be misled by the presumption that globalization (however that fraught term is to be understood) is solely or even primarily market-driven phenomenon. Of equal importance have been cultural and political changes that now tilt in favor of globalization. The political significance of the nation has changed, especially in the imaginations of Western elites.

The most obvious instance can be found in elite education. As I mentioned, America's most well known universities (as well as Oxford and Cambridge) are now global brands. Over the last two decades, university leaders have redefined the mission of these schools. They are no longer oriented toward forming a national elite, but instead a global one. Woodrow Wilson formulated Princeton's informal motto: Princeton in the nation's service. It was recently revised: Princeton in the nation's service and in the service of all nations. Almost all major American universities now tout their globalized student body. Gigantic donations flow from global sources. (I gather this is especially true for Oxford and Cambridge.)

Stanford University recently raised \$750 million to fund graduate scholarships for students from around the world. Toward what end? Stanford President John Hennessy: "We wanted to create something enduring, that would be unlike anything else currently available to the world's brightest minds, and that would make the biggest impact possible toward solving global challenges affecting the environment, health, education and human rights." Problem solvers and human rights activists supersede political leaders who remain tied to the age-old project of sustaining peoplehood. This post-political, management approach presumes that a global system supersedes the nation as the organizing power for societies.

Nations are able to sustain internal debate, endure civil wars, and even survive revolutions. This is because a super-majority shares the same culture. The American Civil War provides a bloody example. The enduring consensus that was able to reunite the country came from within, out of the particular resource of American's cultural inheritance,

not from above, not by appeal to the market, human rights, or some other abstraction. Abraham Lincoln drew upon the “mystic chords of memory” to preserve, renew, and change the American inheritance. This kind of project is rhetorical, not technocratic. It was an appeal to the political imagination of people with whom one shares bonds of national loyalty.

We’re leaving this rhetorical, imaginative project behind, at least to some degree. Politicians compete for mastery of wonkish details, evidence that they view the nation, to a certain degree, in terms of a commercial enterprise, not a cultural inheritance. And when the political imagination is engaged, it’s in a post-national way. Until fairly recently, wealth and power were legitimated by patriotic loyalty. Now it’s legitimated by “diversity.” I’ve come to realize that the ideologies of multiculturalism are almost entirely instrumental. They serve to reassure: “You can trust us to manage the global future in which no particular nation, people, or culture is ascendant. See, we’re already doing so in our own country!” Moral relativism has something of the same purpose. It neuters strong claims, making them more pliant for their judicious application by the global manager of “difference.”

In this context, only “facts” are authoritative, which means science, and the only social facts that can take theoretical, scientific form are economic ones. Not surprisingly, therefore, in the minds of many, economic principles reign supreme. Wonkery takes the place of political rhetoric as the language of public life. We’re enclosed in the economic modes of analysis because we’ve deflated the rest of our public vocabulary.

An ongoing conflict between technology companies and the United States government suggests that many even believe global capitalism provides a more reliable guarantee of personal security than the sovereign nation. Apple has litigated to prevent American security agencies from compelling company engineers to unlock secure iPhones. In the court of public opinion, Apple argues that it is more committed to customer security than government agencies. Technology columnists have been nearly universal in their endorsement of this claim. The marketplace pressures Apple to “protect its brand,” which includes keeping all customer data private. This market pressure, columnists argue, is more reliable than whatever motivates government officials. If this is the case—if we can trust Apple’s profit motive operating in the global marketplace more than our own governments’

commitment to protect our core interests—then of course we should do everything we can to reconstruct social life on market principles rather than political ones.

This imperative—economize all social relations!—is rarely expressed in pure form, but to one degree or another it operates widely in our time. Uber and other “sharing economy” companies have made clear their ambition to overleap all government-enforced cartels and entrenched interests, putting customers directly in touch with providers in a self-organizing system of exchange. Taken alone, it’s good business model (perhaps). As an ideology, however, it represents a very modern dream, one in which the burdens of responsibility for common life are transcended. The state withers away as the ever-trustworthy Invisible Hand organizes individual interests in socially productive ways.

Contemporary emphasis on human rights sounds more idealistic, but it too reflects a globalized, post-political ambition. Justice is to be promoted by human rights activists who advance their cause through lawsuits. There are to be no collective decisions to make, not even according to actual laws made by lawmakers, but in accord with basic rights. This mentality operates powerfully when questions of immigration arise in Europe. The nation-defining question of who is and can be a citizen gets transformed into a question of human rights, which means that nations, peoples, are not allowed to ask, much less answer, essentially political questions about their futures.

Technology represents yet another post-political force. Borderless cyberspace transcends national boundaries. It wasn’t too long ago that futurists were predicting millennial transformations of social life made possible by social media. Events have proven such optimism misplaced. Borderless cyberspace seems more effective for the recruitment of terrorists than the triumph of democracy. Yet this has not diminished the confidence of technologists. Just as they firmly believe technology will destroy the “old economy,” they’re confident that the technological imperative is more powerful than any political institution, party, or movement. Reproductive technology? Regulation is futile. We’re told that what can be done, will be done.

Multi-cultural management techniques, market-based thinking, human rights, and the technological imperative: these and other ways of thinking contribute to a post-political, post-national mindset that many call “technocratic.” It’s a mindset common among our borderless elite today. In fact, it’s mandatory, at least in public settings. This

borderless elite does not administer a consolidated system, but instead functions within an informal, loosely woven web. Most of its members are employed by multi-national companies, banks, and consultancies. Others work for global philanthropies and NGOs, as well as for the formal elements of the international system such as the IMF, World Bank, and United Nations. In my experience, these people do not lack a patriotic spirit. Their vision of the future, however, is dominated by visions of social organization—multicultural therapeutics, markets, human rights, or technology—that do not require the existence of a political life organized around the nation. These modes of social organization and mechanisms for economic development and promotion of public health, and systems of resolving conflicts run on expertise, moral universalism, and a managerial ethos.

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What does Christianity have to say about the borderless, post-political future that is aborning? On the one hand, Jesus commissioned the disciplines to go forth and make disciples of all nations. St. Paul envisions a new humanity in Christ, one that will break down the wall of hostility between Jew and Gentile. There can be no doubt that Christianity promotes a global order that transcends worldly politics and unites all peoples. It's called the church. The nation, especially in its consolidated, modern form, has often been the church's rival, in some cases dominating the church even to the point of near absorption; in other cases persecuting the church. Furthermore, nationalism fueled the long, harrowing crisis of European modernity, 1914-1945. It's not surprising that almost all churches in the last century advocated for global government to supersede or at least tame the nation state.

One finds this in *Gaudium et Spes*, the Vatican II Pastoral Constitution that expressed the social ambitions of mid-century Catholicism. As Nicholas Boyle has observed, the bishops who gathered in Rome in the early 1960s were forward looking. They recognized a growing global interdependence tending toward a "single world community," something they wished to encourage. "A more universal form of human culture is developing," *Gaudium et Spes* reports. "We are witnessing the birth of a new humanism." The authors of *Gaudium et Spes* recognized that this new humanism goes astray when it loses sight of God.

Nevertheless, the spirit of Teilhard de Chardin presides: We're evolving toward a unified

omega point. In this spirit, *Gaudium et Spes* calls for “a universal public authority,” a call repeated by John Paul II, Benedict XVI, and Francis. We need a global political form appropriate to the emerging global consciousness.

It’s easy to make fun of Vatican idealism. But the Council Fathers were not altogether mistaken. The architects of post-war Western Europe were able to use human rights to tame the nation state. In 1975, the Helsinki Accords provided a vocabulary of human rights that dissident groups on the Eastern block used effectively. Beginning with George H. W. Bush, American administrations have been eager to justify American use of force by way of United Nations resolutions. The Obama administration consistently clothes American foreign policy in the drapery of multilateralism, human rights, and international law.

So, it seems the Catholic Church, and Christianity more broadly, is on the side of history, baptizing the post-national future. Yet, when the Holy Spirit comes upon those gathered at Pentecost, he does not teach them Esperanto, but instead they hear the gospel in their own native tongues. This is a revelation *within* the nations rather than above or beyond them. It echoes Isaiah’s prophecy that the nations will come to Jerusalem, beating their swords into ploughshares and ushering in an eschatological peace—not as a new, universal people, but as nations living together, directly under God’s justice.

Given this element in scripture, it’s not surprising that we find an enduring loyalty to nation and peoplehood in *Gaudium et Spes*. By the second half of the twentieth century, the church’s hierarchy included a rising generation of bishops from the non-Western world and Catholicism endorsed the anti-colonial sentiments of the post-war period. The section of *Gaudium et Spes* that addresses principles of “proper cultural development” speaks of our “obligation to work with all man in constructing a more human world.” This includes bringing more people into the global conversation, but also empowering as many as possible “to attain the full development of their culture.” Pius XII put it even more sharply when he spoke of “the right to one’s own culture and national character.” This affirmation fits with the subsequent Catholic emphasis on enculturation. Whatever future we’re to have in Christ, it must have a place for peoplehood. The Vatican II decision to use shift from a singular Latin to the plural vernacular language underlines this commitment.

It does not require much imagination to see that the logic of the anti-colonialism expressed in *Gaudium et Spes* and elsewhere in the post-Vatican II church has

contemporary relevance in the West. Mass migration is akin to colonization. It threatens the capacity of a people to sustain its distinctive form of life and pass it down to their children. This aspect of Catholic social teaching would seem to side with Geert Wilders. The same might be said about other forces now dissolving national cultures and compromising national sovereignty. Economic nationalism may be imprudent, but there's a colonizing dynamic at work in global capitalism. Pope Francis sees this imperialism in the developing world. What's striking is the degree to which rich countries are also subject to colonization, as France's battle with Uber indicates. Again, the affirmation of peoplehood in *Gaudium et Spes* would seem to side with the nation against post-national trends in today's globalization. The universal Gospel message purifies rather than erodes national loyalties.

I cannot pretend to provide a synthesis of modern Catholic or Christian teaching on the nation. (We need a good monograph on this topic.) Instead, I can only assert my overall impression. Christianity is at once a critic and defender of national projects, an enemy of nationalism and proponent of patriotism. As Thomas Aquinas said of grace, it perfects rather than destroys nature. Applying this principle to our natural tendency toward solidarity and peoplehood, the global missionary enterprise of Christianity does not supersede nations, but instead seeks to bring out the best in them.

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Had I come of age during the great crisis of 1914-1945, or even during the tense, early decades of the Cold War, it's likely I too would have sought to defuse the dangerous, consolidated energies of sovereign peoples, which would have meant taming the nation state and moving beyond the Westphalian system in the West. But I did not. Instead, I came of age during our time of dispersed and weakened energies. Having been drawn taut by the challenges of the first half of the twentieth century, even to the point of breaking, in the second half men and women have wanted to unwind and relax. From marriage to the nation, the things that bind us together have been neglected, even dismantled. We are at once far freer to do as we please, and more impotent and alone. In our dissolving age we feel more at peace, perhaps, but less at home. We are cosmopolitan by default.

In this context, the dangers in the West are not those of the first half of the twentieth century. As Alexis de Toqueville warned, weakened forms of natural solidarity and the resulting individualism encourage a greater and greater centralization of power in a perhaps benevolent, but nevertheless remote administrative authority. A paradoxical dynamic of atomization and centralization ensues. The remote administration of society discourages collective political action and encourages a still-greater individualism, which in turn requires further consolidation and expansion of administrative authority. Scale this up to a global dynamic and I find myself horrified by the prospects. Deprived of strong loyalties (for this is what “the fusion of civilizations” requires), unconsolidated masses will be both more vulnerable to market manipulation and more docile to the benevolent administration of technocratic elites. Is this the dynamic already at work in the European Union?

Efforts to minimize the role of natural solidarities in public life, especially the nation, will lead to a dehumanizing empire dedicated to maximizing utility, and this empire will not be kind to Christianity. The Church is already being flayed by one of the central instruments of post-national rule, human rights. It’s naïve to imagine that the Church won’t be subordinated to the empire of utility, along with every other once-sovereign institution.

Pope Francis has identified global capitalism (an ambiguous but unavoidable term) as a threatening power. He’s surely right. But post-national modes of administration and “problem-solving” are almost certain to serve rather than resist global capitalism. The post-national governing class draws from exactly the same pool of well-trained technocrats as do post-national corporations. The global system—economic, regulatory, and philanthropic—operates at a great distance from any form of natural solidarity capable of challenging its power. Those who run this system are and will remain insulated from accountability.

The social ontology behind all the trends pressing toward global uniformity is rigorously individualistic. This is as true for the high-minded project of human rights as for the expansion of consumer culture. Given the universal ambitions of the global system, participating in this social ontology becomes obligatory. This poses a great threat to Christianity, for modernity’s soft, inviting individualism has damaged the church more than its hard and tyrannical collectivism. This damage will worsen as Christianity is required to

submit itself to the “fusion of civilizations,” something that will have only if individualism becomes obligatory, thus becoming the basis of the global consensus. A merely theoretical resistance to individualism remains ineffective. People need to experience natural forms solidarity in order to recognize the empire of utility’s hearth gods of health, wealth, and hedonism as false idols. Surely a renewed sense of nation is among the more powerful ways to inculcate that experience.

It is heretical to say, as did Nazi theologians, that national solidarity is more sacred than our unity in Christ. To imagine ourselves more at home in our nation than in the Church remains a perennial temptation. But in our dissolving era, aware of our dual tradition of criticism of the modern nation state and support for peoplehood, a Christian in the West ought to lean in the direction of renewing national sovereignty rather than encouraging a globalized, post-national future.

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The hour is late. Perhaps the time has passed for the nation state, and our natural desire to be part of a people will take a different form. Perhaps our future will be both larger and smaller, at once international and regional, and there will be little left of the “nation” to support. In “The Tale of the Anti-Christ,” Vladimir Soloviev identifies faith in Christ as the sure guard against an atomizing universal administration of human affairs. To my mind, this suggests a useful working principle for engaging globalization, one available to unbelievers as well as believers: Our loyalties to particularity save us from a false, dehumanizing unity.

In his story, a progressive intellectual writes an immensely popular book of modern biblical criticism, showing that scripture, properly understood, calls for world peace and the unity of religion. He then becomes a world leader and eventually head of a “world governing authority” that destroys all claims to national sovereignty and brings an end to war. The new world emperor then solves all economic problems. Societies are no longer roiled by political disagreements. It is as if the Vatican’s Pontifical Council of Justice and Peace had attained its most ambitious goals.

But one impediment remains: religious pluralism. To overcome this division—and surely we must if we're to achieve a truly lasting “fusion of civilizations”—the world's supreme leader calls a universal congress of religions. He presides and he proposes himself as “your true leader in every enterprise undertaken for the well-being of humanity,” which of course includes spiritual ones. The world will finally be united, body and soul.

In Soloviev's tale, most Christians accept the world leader's role as supreme spiritual guide. World peace and harmony, even a religious “fusion of civilizations”—who wouldn't want that? Only a recusant remnant remains. They will not budge in their loyalty to the particular man, Jesus of Nazareth, the true Lord of all and prince of peace. Their resistance and refusal of the world's promise of unity, Soloviev implies in his inconclusive conclusion to the tale, precipitates the end of times and the return of Christ.

One need not adopt Soloviev's apocalyptic imagination (or his Christian faith) to recognize a truth his fantasy brings forward. The spirit of true unity flourishes in a shared love, which is necessarily particular: *this* family, *this* town, *this* school, *this* nation, and, as Soloviev dramatizes, *this* savior. The affirmation of these loves need not set us against the current international system, or even its expansion. Our loves can become disordered and perverted, often with dire consequences, as is often the case with patriotism, the natural love of one's country. Correcting that disorder and perversion requires many different kinds of legal, institutional, and market-oriented tools. Nevertheless, these loves are the sources of enduring forms of solidarity, both natural and supernatural. The highest love, the love of Christ, is especially important. Its promise of a shoulder-to-shoulder unity in worship protects us against the false promises of markets, regulatory regimes, legal principles, or other abstract schemes of constructed unity. But the lower loves are important as well, for a common life organized around them prepares our hearts for higher loves.

The forces driving us toward a post-national future are powerful. Resisting them will be difficult, all the more so because there are elements to be encouraged rather than discouraged. Like so much in human affairs, globalizing trends are a mixture of good and ill. But the truth Soloviev brings forward remains constant. Love unites us to something particular—and to others in that shared love. This is the only lasting, trustworthy, and ennobling way toward unity. When engaging in today's debates about global capitalism,

mass migration, human rights, and national sovereignty, we must seek to protect the things men cherish. Love's loyalties may need to be purified and reformed, and that may entail endorsing, even expanding elements of our global system. But in each instance our goal should be love's loyalties renewed rather than suppressed, natural modes of human solidarity encouraged, not denied. We must challenge globalizing abstractions and assert a more particular, more Christian cosmopolitanism.