

The Evangelical Mind

Patriotism as Idolatry

By Richard Mouw

I have experienced an extended streak of patriotic feelings in recent months. Seeing flags all over the place was reassuring for quite a while after Sept. 11. For a spell it felt good to get choked up during the singing of the National Anthem. And all of this was enhanced by expressions of good will that came from people around the world in the days following the attacks on New York and Washington. At Fuller Theological Seminary, for example, we received dozens of communication from folks in other countries, telling us of prayer meetings that had been held on our behalf. The experience of national--and international--solidarity has been a good one.

But now I am starting to get over it. The patriotic displays at the Olympic ceremonies are--well, as a friend put it, they are simply "over the top." I was sorry that President Bush stretched the Olympic rules by talking about how "proud" and "determined" we are as he opened the Salt Lake City ceremonies. And I wish that the NBC commentators had not repeated the President's "axis of evil" line as the Iranian athletes marched by in the parade of nations. The Olympics are an important event for the global community. I have had a hard time feeling patriotic when my country uses its hosting role to call special attention to itself in these ways.

Note that I am talking about feelings here. I have always had a basic loyalty to my country. I have never had much patience with cynical America-bashing. At the same time, I have not typically been able to get very emotional about the issues of citizenship. Much of this is due to the fact, that, although I am a committed evangelical Christian, I am also a product of the 1960s. I had serious doubts about the war in Vietnam in my youth, even though this was not a very popular stance to take in the evangelical world in those days. Evangelical Christians were often super-patriotic. "My country, right or wrong!" was one of their favorite rallying cries. They believed that the Bible calls us to be respectful, law-abiding citizens, and they thought this meant that we must always rally behind our government when we were in conflict with some other nation.

I had real theological problems with that sort of attitude. The kind of patriotism that was being espoused struck me as bordering on idolatry. The worship--or near-worship--of the nation is serious problem from a biblical perspective. We live in a fallen world, and governments and governmental leaders are not exempted from the patterns of our sinfulness. This is why democracy is such a healthy way of structuring our collective lives. It allows for a continuing debate about our policies--and even for legitimate protest.

According to the New Testament teachings, governments are an important part of the divine plan, "for there is no authority except from God, and those authorities that exist have been instituted by God" (Romans 13: 1). But the apostle who says this also makes it clear that this does not give a government license to do whatever it wants: political leaders should not be "a terror to good conduct, but to bad" (Romans 13: 3). If a government encourages bad polices and practices, it is misusing its God-given authority. So we must never offer our uncritical obedience to a human government. Absolute loyalty is something that only God deserves from us.

There is nothing wrong with patriotism. It can be a very healthy thing. The Bible often uses the word "honor" in describing what Christians should cultivate in their dealings with the nations in which they live. That's the same word that is applied to our parental relations in the Ten Commandments: "Honor your father and your mother" (Exodus 20: 12). The link between parents and nation is a good one to think about. There is a natural connection. "Patriotism" comes from the word for "father." We often speak of our "fatherland" or our "motherland."

There certainly is nothing wrong with feeling sentimental about our parents. It can even be a nice thing on occasion to get carried away with those emotions. When a mother gets a card from a son that says, "You are the Greatest Mom in the World," she has every right simply to enjoy the compliment. Strictly speaking, of course, what the son is saying is a gross exaggeration. Not every woman who gets a Mother's Day greeting featuring that sentiment can possibly be the Greatest Mom in the World. But the hyperbole is OK. We all understand what is going on. And we all know that any woman who actually took the claim literally could be quite dangerous!

For similar reasons, there is nothing inappropriate about thinking of my country is the Greatest Nation in the World. Sentimental hyperbole is one of the ways we express important affections. But there is a special danger when we say such things about our country. Nations have a tendency to believe that they really *are* the greatest. And nations, especially powerful nations like the United States, have a lot of guns and bombs in their possession. When they start backing up their belief in their own greatness by using these bombs and guns against other nations, they can become serious threats.

As a Christian, I am grateful to God for the privilege of being an American. There is much about my country that makes me proud. But we, too, fall short of God's standards of righteousness. There is also much in our past--and in our present--for which repentance is the appropriate response. This is why I wish we had shown a little less national bravado during the Olympics. President Bush had made it quite clear in his State of the Union Address, for example, what he thinks of Iran's role in international affairs. There was no need for the television commentators to remind us of that assessment during the parade of athletes. It would have been a class act simply to welcome the Iranians as young people who had earned the right to visit a free nation to test their skill against other competitors.

I am no pacifist. I support our campaign against international terrorism. But I reserve the right also to criticize my government if I think it is misusing power or misrepresenting the values that bind us together. And while I will continue to express affection for my country, I will always warn my fellow citizens not to take that kind of thing too literally.

I will do this because I believe strongly in democracy. But even more important, I will do it because I worry about the ever-present threat of spiritual pridefulness--and even worse, of idolatry.