

Patriotism, Race, and the Credit of Love

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These are not easy times for Christian patriots—or perhaps for Christians who would like to be patriots, or who simply wonder about patriotism’s moral credentials. The increasing polarization of American politics, which has been growing for some time but became particularly vitriolic following the election of President Donald Trump in 2016, has replaced many of our familiar political debates with a new, central fault line: the significance of the nation and of national culture. Debates over trade, immigration, foreign policy, and values increasingly turn on this issue.

A similar trend is visible in almost all Western liberal democracies. The ongoing wave of “national populism” that has been reshaping political parties across the West not infrequently shades off into forms of political sentiment and rhetoric that leave many Christians, even those who are proud of their country and who feel patriotism’s pull, uneasy.¹ Legitimate concern over mass immigration and a desire to secure the nation’s borders sometimes take on a tone of nativist hostility toward foreigners or callousness toward the plight of those fleeing dreadful circumstances. Appropriate worry about globalization’s impact on the American working and middle classes veers into protectionism or attacks on free trade and the market economy. A proper insistence that the American government should prioritize American interests flirts with isolationism and an unwillingness to engage with our allies abroad on national security, climate change, and other issues.

And then, of course, there is race. Since the murder of George Floyd, race has dominated American public discourse as no other issue has. In discussions of policing, voting rights, education, free speech, and even pandemic response, race has become an inescapable pivot on which political debate turns. And for Christians pondering their relationship to their country, race—in particular, full inclusion of Black Americans—has become a special problem. From slavery, to the unfulfilled promise of Reconstruction, to decades of segregation and Jim Crow, Black Americans have suffered severe oppression that is blatantly incompatible with the country’s stated ideals. Only Native Americans have suffered comparably at the hands of American citizens. One need not unqualifiedly endorse contemporary accusations of systemic racial injustice in American society or its political institutions in order to concede that our long legacy of racial division is not yet fully overcome and to recognize that our Black fellow citizens continue to feel the sting of less than full equality even today.

How should this ongoing debate over racial justice shape contemporary Christians’ attitude toward or affection for their country? Put differently, should Christian Americans, in the wake of Floyd’s death and the controversies it sparked, still be patriots? It will not suffice simply to brush aside responsibility for the sins of our ancestors on the grounds that we may not be held responsible for wrongs committed by others in the past. That is a truth, but only a half-truth. Edmund Burke famously described society as a compact extending across “many generations . . . a partnership not only between those who are living, but between those who are living, those who are dead, and those who are to be born.”² Americans typically take pride in the great achievements of their country’s founders. Like Abraham Lincoln, they look back to the Declaration of Independence and, reading its ringing proclamation of human equality,

they feel that that moral sentiment taught in that day evidences their relation to those men, that it is the father of all moral principle in them, and that they have a right to claim it as though they were blood of the blood, and flesh of the flesh, of the men who wrote that Declaration, and so they are.³

But clearly we cannot claim a connection to the founders and to generations of American ancestors only when it is convenient or reassures us of our moral rectitude. If we claim a share in their accomplishments, so too must we feel the shame of their failures. We inherit their full legacy, both the battle cry of freedom and the stain of slavery.

We need, therefore, to think again about whether or how we can remain patriots of a flawed and imperfect nation. In one sense, this should not be difficult, since no temporal citizen has ever been a patriot of anything else. But that truth is still too abstract; it hovers too high above the heated disputes of the present. Its eternal reassurance does not suffice to help us balance love and justice in the moment. How may we, today, continue to love our country?

Historical Selves and Connected Critics

Before tackling the difficult question of how patriotism responds to injustice, let me first offer a brief, *prima facie* defense of its moral legitimacy.⁴ Patriotism has not, in fact, received a great deal of philosophical reflection. And its moral appropriateness may not be immediately obvious. Whether we are secular philosophers committed to a norm of universal human equality or Christian believers attempting to imitate Christ's universal love for all humanity, patriotism as a form of local preference—its insistence that we owe special duties to our own compatriots that we do not owe universally—may seem suspect.

But in fact we almost all recognize the existence of special obligations toward particular groups of people. I owe my parents, wife, and children forms of assistance and support that I do not owe to others. We expect our friends to defend us and come to our aid, and we feel betrayed when they do not. Members of clubs or private associations, colleagues at work, fellow parishioners at church—all expect, and expect rightly, that their fellow members will “stick to” them, will “be there” for them in times of need, will share in their joys and sorrows, will not “sell them out.” Our countries are another such association. Like family members, friends, or teammates, fellow citizens owe things to each other that they do not owe to humanity at large.

George Fletcher has offered a helpful explanation for the existence of these special duties with his account of the “historical self.”⁵ Fletcher argues that patriotism, like other forms of loyalty, properly arises in the context of particular relationships and that “these ties generate *partialities* in loyalties, loves and hates, dispositions to trust and distrust.”⁶ These relationships shape us and constitute our sense of who we are, locating us within a network of bonds and ties both affective and moral. “We can understand the individual,” writes Fletcher, “only by locating him or her in a matrix of relationships and crystallized commitments.”⁷ In this sense, we might say that patriotism is biographical, arising from the particular circumstances of our history and the commitments to which it gives rise. “Loyalties circumscribe communitarian circles,”⁸ within which we might think of our mutual duties to fellow members as expressing a kind of gratitude for their role in enabling us to become the persons we are.

Recognizing these communal obligations of loyalty by no means requires us to overlook or deny our country's shortcomings. If Fletcher's historical self nicely explains the origins of our loyalties, Michael Walzer has captured the spirit of patriotic dissent in his description of the "connected critic."⁹ Arguing for the importance of social criticism in democratic societies, Walzer nevertheless rejects a common modern image of the critic as someone who must "leave the city," acquiring a "new objectivity" and discovering a "newfound Truth" only via "detachment and departure."¹⁰ Only by breaking free of the polity and its bonds, in this view, by remaining outside, above, or apart from one's fellow citizens does one acquire the critical distance necessary to stand in judgement upon society's failings. Such criticism requires "a willful break with the fellowship of the city."¹¹

Drawing (among other examples) on the Hebrew prophets, Walzer contrasts this model with a different image of the social critic. He argues, instead, for the critic who "agitates, teaches, counsels, challenges, protests *from within*."¹² Mere detachment, after all, does not explain why I should care about improving my particular community; it need not motivate me "to tell the truth to *these* men and women."¹³ Walzer argues that "some further motivation" is necessary to sustain the critical enterprise.

Disappointment isn't enough. Nor does a disinterested desire for the well-being of humanity seem a sufficient motive. A moral tie to the agents or the victims of brutality and indifference is more likely to serve. We feel responsible for, we identify with particular men and women. Injustice is done in my name, or it is done to my people, and I must speak out against it. Now criticism follows from connection.¹⁴

Walzer's image of the connected critic complements Fletcher's account of the historical self, showing how a deep commitment to one's own community can nevertheless be accompanied by sharp criticism of it. Yet it may not fully suffice to reconcile these two competing emphases.¹⁵ In particular, if the injustice calling for criticism seems serious enough, one may wonder what—other than mere willfulness—would lead the "connected critic" to remain connected rather than breaking his or her tie to the community.

I doubt that it reflects his own deepest conviction, but Walzer's language sometimes seems to offer a utilitarian account for retaining the connection—because the criticism is more likely to be effective and win a hearing if the critic does not break ties. "Criticism is most powerful," he writes, "when it gives voice to the common complaints of the people or elucidates the values that underlie those complaints."¹⁶ This seems correct, but it gets the emphasis backward. We do not want the critic to maintain connection simply as a means to the end of effective criticism; rather, we want the criticism to issue from a true and deep connection, from an understanding of who we are as a community and what we value. Like the child being scolded by a parent, we want to know that our critics also love us.

The Credit of Love

The idea of love opens the door for a Christian account of patriotic criticism that is ultimately more compelling and satisfactory than Walzer's view. In order to lay out this Christian vision, I want to borrow an idea from the 20th-century Catholic philosopher Dietrich von Hildebrand. Von Hildebrand was a phenomenologist who studied under Edmund Husserl and was further

influenced by Max Scheler. In 1919 he became a philosophy professor at the University of Munich, where he witnessed firsthand the rise of Adolf Hitler and the Nazi party. Von Hildebrand was an early and consistent critic of Nazism, which made him a marked man. In 1933 he fled to Vienna, Austria, where for the next five years he edited an important anti-Nazi (and anti-Communist) weekly paper, *Der christliche Ständestaat*, or *The Christian Corporative State*. The Nazis came to regard him as one of their most important enemies and ordered his execution, should he be caught. When Hitler annexed Austria in 1938, therefore, von Hildebrand was forced to flee once again, and after brief stops elsewhere in Europe, he ultimately settled in the United States, where he taught philosophy at Fordham University and continued to write in German and English.¹⁷

Among his late writings was an important study of love, *Das Wesen der Liebe (The Nature of Love)*.¹⁸ The book does not specifically discuss patriotism and has little to say about love of country, but in it von Hildebrand introduces an idea he calls “the credit of love” that is extremely fruitful for considering the relationship between love of one’s country and criticism of its flaws. Von Hildebrand argues that when we respond to another person in love, this response always involves a certain kind of abundance or (in a positive sense) excess; we estimate that person’s value in a way that goes beyond what might be required from a so-called objective point of view. This is not a defect; rather, it is part of the very nature of love that it embodies this kind of “gift” from the lover.

An essential part of love’s gift, and especially relevant for our purposes, is the “credit” that it gives to the beloved. This credit of love includes three essential elements. First, in love we look upon the good and beautiful qualities of the beloved and, as it were, extrapolate from them, extending them through an act of faith into a fuller picture of the beloved. “Love believes the best about the beloved person,” writes von Hildebrand. “Even when I hear something negative told about him, I will not at first believe that it is true or at least not believe that it has been adequately interpreted.”¹⁹ Second, love is always ready “to interpret everything in the beloved from above.”²⁰ In other words, when we love people, we offer a positive interpretation of their actions unless that becomes no longer possible. This is different from how hatred looks upon other persons. Von Hildebrand writes,

Whereas it is typical for suspicion and hatred to be always on the alert for the weaknesses of another and to interpret all aspects of the other in a negative light and from below, it is a basic element of love to hope that the other is treading the path of what is just, good and beautiful and to have the readiness to interpret in the best possible light everything that admits of various interpretations.²¹

Von Hildebrand is careful to distinguish this attitude from an “unjustified idealization” of the beloved, which he suggests is often indulged in more for the lover’s sake and reflects a need for emotional self-gratification rather than a genuine response to the beloved.²² The lover is indeed prepared to recognize the weaknesses and failings of the beloved; nevertheless, “this does not change the love, which always interprets weaknesses and faults as something inauthentic and transitory.”²³

Third, love has its own characteristic way of regarding the beloved’s faults. “It is an essential mark of all love,” writes von Hildebrand, “that all the worthy traits of the other are seen as the authentic other, as that which makes up the real self of the other, whereas his faults are

interpreted as a *lack of faithfulness* to his true being.”²⁴ When I discern vices or faults in someone I love, I say of him, “That is not his true being.”²⁵ In this sense, “The one who loves takes the good qualities as authentic, as that which belongs in truth to the beloved person, and takes the bad qualities as infidelity, falling away, betrayal, and denial of his true being.”²⁶

This, again, is not at all the same as overlooking those faults or denying their existence; to the contrary, my love “makes me more sensitive to the faults of a beloved person.”²⁷ Far from whitewashing the beloved’s faults, excusing them, or downplaying them, love enables me to see them more clearly. But I do not therefore interpret them as the true core or essence of the beloved. Von Hildebrand even points out, contrary to what one might initially suppose, that love thus enables us to be “much more objective” than does hatred, because “I do more justice to reality by seeing the faults in the light of the person as a whole, by understanding them from within, and by being sad about them for the sake of the beloved person.”²⁸

This, then, is what von Hildebrand summarizes as the “three-fold credit” of love: It believes the best about the beloved; by interpreting the beloved “from above,” love regards his or her faults as a “betrayal of or infidelity committed against [his or her] true being”²⁹; and it regards the beloved’s best qualities, not the worst, as most truly characteristic. One might question whether it is appropriate to apply the credit of love to a group such as one’s country, as opposed to individual men and women whom we love. Any such hesitation, however, rests upon a misunderstanding both of the credit of love and of what we mean when we speak of loving our country. The credit of love does not depend upon the object of love but arises, rather, from the act of loving itself. Love always extends this gift to the beloved. The credit flows from love’s abundant, excessive charity.

If we can love a group such as our country—as we surely think we can, since “love of country” is a common way of describing patriotism—then we can and should extend to it the credit of love. Moreover, when we say that we love our country, what we really mean is not that we love an impersonal abstraction, but rather that we love the actual people who make up that country, our fellow countrymen and countrywomen. To be sure, we love them (as it were) under a certain aspect, insofar as they share with us the experience of having our historical selves shaped by a particular collective association, the compact among generations that characterizes our own nation. We thus love them somewhat differently than we would love our family members, say, or our friends, coworkers, or fellow parishioners. But it is still particular men and women whom we love and to whom we extend love’s credit.³⁰

The Country’s True Being: The Credit of Love and 1619

We can see the usefulness of von Hildebrand’s credit of love for enriching our understanding of patriotism and contemporary debates if we consider its application to two recent controversies involving race: the *New York Times*’ 1619 Project and arguments over the appropriate treatment of Confederate war monuments.

The 1619 Project comprises a series of essays published by the *Times* as part of an “ongoing initiative” to mark the 400th anniversary of the arrival of the first African slaves in the American colonies. According to the *Times*, “It aims to reframe the country’s history by placing the consequences of slavery and the contributions of black Americans at the very center of our national narrative.”³¹ The 1619 Project almost immediately sparked a firestorm of controversy,

including criticism from notable historians; some of the most sustained critical reaction has come from the National Association of Scholars, which launched its own 1620 Project in response (1620 being the date of the Mayflower Compact).³² Even President Trump created a countervailing 1776 Commission. Much of the controversy has centered on the project's lead essay, by Nikole Hannah-Jones, which boldly announces, "Our democracy's founding ideals were false when they were written."³³

Hannah-Jones' essay offers a fascinating case study in the relationship between loyalty and dissent, and reading it through the lens of von Hildebrand's credit of love can help us understand when its criticisms are appropriate and when it adopts formulations that we should hesitate to endorse.³⁴ In some respects, Hannah-Jones appears to offer a model of critical patriotism. This is especially evident in her framing of the essay, which begins and ends with appeals to the American flag. "My dad always flew an American flag in our front yard," she begins.³⁵ He had been born into a Black sharecropping family, experienced the horrors of Jim Crow, and never, despite serving in his country's armed forces, achieved full inclusion or success in American society. Nevertheless, he proudly and devotedly flew the flag, replacing it "as soon as it showed the slightest tatter."³⁶ In her youth, writes Hannah-Jones, "I didn't understand his patriotism." Later, however, she has come to recognize her father's wisdom.

My father knew exactly what he was doing when he raised that flag. He knew that our people's contributions to building the richest and most powerful nation in the world were indelible, that the United States simply would not exist without us.³⁷

Hannah-Jones returns to the flag at the end of her essay, this time reclaiming it for herself. Recalling a school assignment that asked her to draw the flag of her family's ancestral land, she movingly says, "I wish, now, that I could go back to the younger me and tell her that her people's ancestry started here, on these lands, and to boldly, proudly, draw the stars and those stripes of the American flag."³⁸ And she concludes by asserting her commitment to the United States: "We were told once, by virtue of our bondage, that we could never be American. But it was by virtue of our bondage that we became the most American of all."³⁹

These passages offer a resonant and even inspiring declaration of faith in America and its continued promise of freedom. Other passages, however, strike a different note. One of the most controversial sentences in the essay, for example, is this: "Conveniently left out of our founding mythology is the fact that one of the primary reasons some of the colonists decided to declare their independence from Britain was because they wanted to protect the institution of slavery."⁴⁰ This is one of several passages where Hannah-Jones attributes motives of racism or White supremacy to the founders and their achievements. Later she writes, "This nation's white founders set up a decidedly undemocratic Constitution that excluded women, Native Americans and black people, and did not provide the vote or equality for most Americans."⁴¹

Both of these statements seem to assume the worst rather than the best about the founders and to insist that actions open, at a minimum, to different interpretations be read from below rather than above, to borrow von Hildebrand's formulation. As others have pointed out, there is little evidence—I believe I am being charitable here—to suggest that preserving slavery was an important motivation for the Declaration of Independence. And while the founders' Constitution may have been "decidedly undemocratic" by the standards of the early 21st century, it was remarkably democratic by the standards of previous human history. One is reminded of von

Hildebrand's comment that a "basic element of love [is] to hope that the other is treading the path of what is just, good and beautiful and to have the readiness to interpret in the best possible light everything that admits of various interpretations."⁴²

Other passages seem similarly intent on interpreting the founders' failings (and those of their descendants) as the essence of their efforts, rather than as a "betrayal of or infidelity committed against [their] true being."⁴³ Hannah-Jones writes, for instance—and indeed, this is in some sense the central claim of the entire 1619 Project—that "the year 1619 is as important to the American story as 1776." Similarly, she claims, "The United States is a nation founded on both an ideal and a lie."⁴⁴ Like the comment about our "decidedly undemocratic" Constitution, both of these remarks rest upon a partial truth. Undoubtedly, slavery influenced this country's institutions even before the founding; undoubtedly, the founders could not fully live up to their own ideals. But rather than understanding these shortcomings "from above"—rather than saying of these faults, "That is not the country's true being"—Hannah-Jones wants to insist that the lie and the ideal have equal standing and are equally characteristic of the country's nature. Comments such as these fail to extend to the United States the credit of love.

Finally, I note two passages that seem most problematic, lacking the "particular generosity of love"⁴⁵ that enables one, while acutely aware of the beloved's faults, nevertheless to regard those faults "as not belonging to him and as not characteristic for him in the way in which his good qualities belong to him and are characteristic for him."⁴⁶ Hannah-Jones writes, "It is not incidental"—one might contrast those four opening words with the attitude taken by the credit of love—"that 10 of this nation's first 12 presidents were enslavers, and some might argue that this nation was founded not as a democracy but as a slavocracy."⁴⁷ It is true, of course, that "some might argue" that, but one would like to hear the patriot reply, "That is not its true being." Finally, Hannah-Jones also writes, "Anti-black racism runs in the very DNA of this country."⁴⁸ This reference to DNA in particular is especially unfortunate, because the genetic metaphor implies not only that this is the country's true essence but also that, far from being a falling away from or an infidelity committed against our real self, racism represents a fact of the country that can never be changed.

In light of these passages, Christians should hesitate to endorse the more extreme rhetoric of the 1619 Project. This does not mean ignoring the questions of racial justice to which the project aims to draw attention. Extending the credit of love to our country does not mean that we are "inclined to overlook [its] faults or to explain them away, nor that [we] see them less clearly and distinctly."⁴⁹ It does, however, require that we interpret them from above, regarding those faults not as our country's authentic nature but rather as infidelity toward or betrayal of its true being. Von Hildebrand's credit of love thus helps us see more clearly what is problematic in the 1619 Project's portrayal of America.

Whom Do We Honor? Monuments, Memory, and the Credit of Love

I shall ask what a more satisfactory critique might look like later. First, though, let us consider a second contemporary dispute, one perhaps more complicated than the 1619 Project: arguments over the fate of monuments to figures implicated in historical injustice. The most heated such arguments have dealt with the monuments to Confederate politicians and generals such as Jefferson Davis, Stonewall Jackson, and Robert E. Lee. In one conspicuous example, the city of

Richmond, Virginia, removed multiple such statues from its historic Monument Avenue, often under intense pressure from protestors, including vandalism and the destruction of property.⁵⁰

While it may be fairly clear that some of the 1619 Project's formulations conflict with an appropriate love of country, it is less obvious why we would seek to defend the continued presence of Confederate memorials. Public monuments, because they tell a story about who we are and what we collectively value, are inevitably sites of political contestation. It could hardly be otherwise. As political norms change, statues that once seemed uncontroversial may over time come to seem inappropriate. And the Confederacy, after all, was a treasonous movement. Why should American patriots cherish monuments to men who waged war against the United States? And even though different actors may have felt various motives for defending the Confederacy, preserving slavery was unquestionably the central purpose of secession and civil war. Even from the standpoint of von Hildebrand's credit of love, there comes a point at which the interpretation from above ceases to be possible. The lover seeks to interpret everything about the beloved positively, he writes, "as long as it has not unmistakably shown itself to be negative."⁵¹ The defense of slavery has surely shown itself unmistakably to be negative. It is past time for the myth of the "Lost Cause" to be consigned to the ash heap of history.

But perhaps we might preserve Confederate monuments for other reasons, apart from their inevitable connection to slavery? The two most obvious such grounds would be the monuments' historical significance or their reinterpretation as memorials, not to the Confederate cause, but rather to the courage and sacrifice of individual Confederate soldiers. I will return to the first of these. As for the second, I admit that it holds a certain appeal, but I doubt whether it is finally compelling. It may work if we imagine something like a monument in the square of a small town, honoring the fallen dead of, say, a particular Confederate regiment to which that town had sent a number of its young men. In their case, it might seem reasonable to separate the larger cause for which they fought from the personal virtues they displayed or sacrifices they made on behalf of their families and communities.

But the argument works less well in the case of monuments to political and military leaders. Separating them from their cause is not so easy. This becomes clear, I think, if we imagine an analogous situation in a different conflict, such as World War II or the Cold War. We would probably not object to a memorial honoring fallen German or Soviet soldiers. We might feel differently about monuments to Adolf Hitler, Hermann Göring, Vladimir Lenin, or Joseph Stalin.

An analogous line of reasoning indicates why we need not extend the plausible critique of monuments to Confederate war heroes to include monuments to other historical figures who are sometimes held up for similar criticism. We occasionally hear calls to take down memorials even to people such as George Washington and Thomas Jefferson because they were slaveholders or Christopher Columbus and Saint Junípero Serra due to their relations with indigenous peoples. Even if we accept that there is some truth in the critiques of these figures, von Hildebrand's credit of love nicely shows why we need not tear down their statues. There is no necessity to interpret these men primarily through the lens of their shortcomings or imperfections; rather, they are reasonably regarded as part of the larger American story, so that we can interpret their faults from above, as not reflective of their true selves, viewing their virtues and accomplishments as more authentic. Unlike Confederate leaders, these figures need not be understood as committed to the defense of slavery or racial injustice; that would be to interpret them, unnecessarily, from below.

I suspect, in fact, that if we set aside the question of historical value—and if we look beyond vandalism and the destruction of property—the hesitation that some of us may feel about removing Confederate monuments actually derives from an unconscious perversion of von Hildebrand’s credit of love. Looking back with the benefit of hindsight, we obviously know that the Confederacy was going to lose. We permit ourselves to indulge its memory, knowing that its cause truly was lost, destined to be subsumed within the broader story of American freedom. The Confederacy is thus permitted to adopt a kind of borrowed glory from its participation in the American story.

But of course the Confederates did not intend to lose. The credit of love instructs us not to view the beloved primarily in terms of his or her faults. It insists, we might say, that the shadow of injustice not be permitted to extinguish the radiance of the beloved’s light. That is not the same, however, as allowing the beloved to claim the light emanating from an altogether different source. That would indeed be to overlook, justify, or paper over the beloved’s faults.

It seems, therefore, that neither patriotism nor its credit of love necessarily stand in the way of removing Confederate monuments. Patriotic Americans, including Christian patriots, need not object to those who protest the continued presence of such monuments or request their removal. Indeed, there may be good reasons for acceding to those requests. We might nevertheless wonder—and here I return briefly to the historical significance of such monuments—whether simple removal is the best course of action, or indeed whether it might even indirectly enable a certain forgetting or overlooking of past faults. If the Confederacy cannot borrow legitimacy from the ideals of American liberty, it is nevertheless part—a tragic part—of the American story. And I cannot help thinking that there are better ways of dealing with Confederate monuments than simply removing them.

The obvious alternative would be to seek appropriate forms of contextualization. Nothing, after all, prevents our erecting new monuments with new messages, confronting memorials that have become problematic with countervailing images. An even simpler approach would be to accompany such monuments with appropriate signage, explaining to the viewer exactly what makes them problematic despite their historical (and in some cases perhaps artistic) value. Such an approach, in fact, makes possible what is otherwise difficult: separating the cause being memorialized, which can be explicitly rejected, from other qualities such as bravery and sacrifice that we might wish to acknowledge even in a wrongful cause. It may therefore be worth some effort to ask whether we cannot find approaches to our own past and its failings that are more loving than simply tearing such monuments down. At the same time, I do not think we can rightly insist that they remain standing. That would push the credit of love too far.

Modeling the Credit of Love: MLK’s American Dream

In conclusion, I want to offer one last model of how the credit of love might be extended to our country despite severe racial injustice. It is perhaps the finest example of the patriotic credit of love in the American canon, and, while sharing certain things with the 1619 Project, it nevertheless embodies a different and more morally satisfactory vision of the combination of patriotism with critical dissent. I am thinking—some readers may have already guessed—of the rhetoric of Martin Luther King Jr. As a typical example, consider his famous “Letter from Birmingham Jail.” There he describes the terrible injustices to which Black Americans were subject, including “vicious mobs [that] lynch your mothers and fathers at will and drown your

sisters and brothers at whim”; “hate filled policemen [who] curse, kick and even kill your black brothers and sisters”; and taking “a cross country drive” and needing “to sleep night after night in the uncomfortable corners of your automobile because no motel will accept you.”⁵² Yet King refused to believe that these and similar injustices represented America’s true self. To the contrary, he insisted on the very opposite: that this racial injustice was a betrayal of America’s real self. Thus he wrote near the end of the letter:

We will reach the goal of freedom in Birmingham and all over the nation, because the goal of America is freedom. Abused and scorned though we may be, our destiny is tied up with America’s destiny. Before the pilgrims landed at Plymouth, we were here. Before the pen of Jefferson etched the majestic words of the Declaration of Independence across the pages of history, we were here. For more than two centuries our forebears labored in this country without wages; they made cotton king; they built the homes of their masters while suffering gross injustice and shameful humiliation—and yet out of a bottomless vitality they continued to thrive and develop. If the inexpressible cruelties of slavery could not stop us, the opposition we now face will surely fail. We will win our freedom because the sacred heritage of our nation and the eternal will of God are embodied in our echoing demands.⁵³

In some respects, King’s words are similar to those of Hannah-Jones in the 1619 Project. Both emphasize Black Americans’ essential role and their great contributions, even while enslaved, to building the nation. Both remind us that Black Americans were here even before the Declaration of Independence was signed. Both emphasize the resilience of Black Americans in the face of terrible hardship. Indeed, when Hannah-Jones concludes her essay by laying claim to the flag, it might even remind us of King’s insistence that the sacred heritage of our nation is also a heritage for its Black citizens. But King never allows himself to wonder whether the founders might have created a slavocracy; instead, he speaks of “those great wells of democracy which were dug deep by the founding fathers in their formulation of the Constitution and the Declaration of Independence.” King never for a moment suggests that anti-Black racism “runs in the very DNA of this country.” Instead, he proclaims, “The goal of America is freedom.”⁵⁴

King’s extraordinary “I Have a Dream” speech offers perhaps an even more remarkable illustration of the credit of love. Standing in front of the Lincoln Memorial, he reminds his listeners that the Emancipation Proclamation “came as a great beacon light of hope to millions of Negro slaves who had been seared in the flames of withering injustice.”⁵⁵ But a century later, its promise still remained unfulfilled. And so King explains to his fellow members of the civil rights movement why they are gathered in Washington, DC.

In a sense we’ve come to our nation’s capital to cash a check. When the architects of our republic wrote the magnificent words of the Constitution and the Declaration of Independence, they were signing a promissory note to which every American was to fall heir. This note was a promise that all men—yes, black men as well as white men—would be guaranteed the unalienable rights of life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness.

It is obvious today that America has defaulted on this promissory note insofar as her citizens of color are concerned. Instead of honoring this sacred obligation,

America has given the Negro people a bad check, a check which has come back marked insufficient funds.

But we refuse to believe that the bank of justice is bankrupt.

We refuse to believe that there are insufficient funds in the great vaults of opportunity of this nation.⁵⁶

We might say that King here—to borrow from von Hildebrand—“draw[s] out the line of the beauty of this [country] into all particular traits and situations. It is a credit which [he] gives the beloved [country], going far beyond what one can observe in [it].”⁵⁷ And King moves his peroration to its close with a powerful appeal to American patriotism, looking forward to

the day when all of God’s children will be able to sing with new meaning: My country, ’tis of thee, sweet land of liberty, of thee I sing. Land where my fathers died, land of the pilgrims’ pride, from every mountainside, let freedom ring.⁵⁸

It would be difficult to imagine a better example of the credit of love. King sees his country’s faults clearly, in all their ugliness, yet still insists: “That is not its true being.” He interprets those faults from above, as “an infidelity committed against the authentic being” of the country that he loves.⁵⁹ He insists, rather, that America’s finest qualities are more authentic, the true reflection of its real being. He attains a higher level of objectivity through his love, doing “more justice to reality by seeing the faults in the light of the [country] as a whole, by understanding them from within, and by being sad about them for the sake of the beloved [country].”⁶⁰ We can fully appreciate the greatness of King’s moral example when we read his words in light of von Hildebrand, who reminds us,

Whereas it is typical for suspicion and hatred to be always on the alert for the weakness of another and to interpret all aspects of the other in a negative light and from below, it is a basic element of love to hope that the other is treading the path of what is just, good and beautiful and to have the readiness to interpret in the best possible light everything that admits of various interpretations.⁶¹

Far better than many of his latter-day followers, King understood what it looks like for Christians to love their country.

Americans today are deeply divided—divided along lines of class, race, and gender identity; divided about America’s role in the world; and divided between pro-immigration and anti-immigration, mask and anti-mask, Republican and Democrat. We are engaged, not for the first time, in a great debate about the nation—about justice, freedom, equality, and race. Christians, in the face of that debate, may wonder whether they may still love their country. They may, and indeed they should. They should do so, however, not by overlooking its faults, but by extending to it the credit of love.

About the Author

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Notes

¹ I borrow the label “national populism” from Roger Eatwell and Matthew Goodwin, *National Populism: The Revolt Against Liberal Democracy* (London: Pelican, 2018).

² Edmund Burke, *Select Works of Edmund Burke: Reflections on the Revolution in France*, ed. Francis Canavan, vol. 2 (Indianapolis, IN: Liberty Fund, 1999), 193.

³ Abraham Lincoln, “Speech in Reply to Douglas at Chicago, Illinois, July 10, 1858,” in *Abraham Lincoln: His Speeches and Writings*, ed. Roy P. Basler (Boston, MA: Da Capo Press, 2001), 401–2.

⁴ I have offered a more extended defense, from a Christian perspective, in Peter C. Meilaender, “Christians as Patriots,” *First Things* (February 2003): 31–35, <https://www.firstthings.com/article/2003/02/christians-as-patriots>.

⁵ George P. Fletcher, *Loyalty: An Essay on the Morality of Relationships* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995). Fletcher’s full account of loyalty is not entirely philosophically satisfactory; in particular, his attempt to balance a communitarian view of the self with universalist demands of liberal morality ends up undermining the former in problematic ways. Nevertheless, his conception of the “historical self” provides a helpful description of how various communities generate obligations of loyalty.

⁶ Fletcher, *Loyalty*, 7.

⁷ Fletcher, *Loyalty*, 24.

⁸ Fletcher, *Loyalty*, 20.

⁹ Michael Walzer, *The Company of Critics: Social Criticism and Political Commitment in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Basic Books, 1988).

¹⁰ Walzer, *The Company of Critics*, 13.

¹¹ Walzer, *The Company of Critics*, 14.

¹² Walzer, *The Company of Critics*, 26.

¹³ Walzer, *The Company of Critics*, 20.

¹⁴ Walzer, *The Company of Critics*, 23.

¹⁵ Arguably, Walzer’s own treatment of Albert Camus—who, he says, can ultimately only fall silent in the face of his criticism’s failure to win adherents or influence events—shows the potential inability of Walzer’s account to achieve this reconciliation. See Walzer, *The Company of Critics*, 136–52.

¹⁶ Walzer, *The Company of Critics*, 16.

¹⁷ For a brief description of Dietrich von Hildebrand’s opposition to Nazism, see Dietrich von Hildebrand, *My Battle Against Hitler: Defiance in the Shadow of the Third Reich*, tr. and ed. John Henry Crosby and John F. Crosby (New York: Image, 2014), 1–17.

¹⁸ Dietrich von Hildebrand, *The Nature of Love*, tr. John F. Crosby and John Henry Crosby (South Bend, IN: St. Augustine’s Press, 2009).

¹⁹ Von Hildebrand, *The Nature of Love*, 67.

²⁰ Von Hildebrand, *The Nature of Love*, 68.

²¹ Von Hildebrand, *The Nature of Love*, 68.

²² Von Hildebrand, *The Nature of Love*, 68.

²³ Von Hildebrand, *The Nature of Love*, 69.

²⁴ Von Hildebrand, *The Nature of Love*, 69.

²⁵ Von Hildebrand, *The Nature of Love*, 70.

²⁶ Von Hildebrand, *The Nature of Love*, 70.

²⁷ Von Hildebrand, *The Nature of Love*, 71.

²⁸ Von Hildebrand, *The Nature of Love*, 71.

²⁹ Von Hildebrand, *The Nature of Love*, 72.

³⁰ I am grateful to Josef Seifert and Tyler Castle for pushing me to consider the objection raised in this paragraph. As it happens, *The Nature of Love* does contain a brief discussion of patriotic loyalty, in which von Hildebrand distinguishes between what he calls the “we-solidarity” of the nation and genuine love. See von Hildebrand, *The Nature of Love*, 128–29. I may well be applying von Hildebrand’s “credit of love” outside the immediate context within which he develops the idea, though I believe a broader consideration of his writings would lend support to my general argument. (It received a friendly reception, in draft form, at the 2021 Hildebrand Residency, held by the

Hildebrand Project at the Franciscan University of Steubenville. I am also grateful to the participants for their comments.) A fuller discussion of this issue would require an analysis of the nature of collective identity.

³¹ See *New York Times Magazine*, 1619 Project, website,

<https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2019/08/14/magazine/1619-america-slavery.html>.

³² See National Association of Scholars, 1620 Project, website, <https://www.nas.org/topics/1620-project>.

³³ See Nikole Hannah-Jones, “Our Democracy’s Founding Ideals Were False When They Were Written. Black Americans Have Fought to Make Them True.,” *New York Times Magazine*, August 14, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2019/08/14/magazine/black-history-american-democracy.html>.

³⁴ To be clear, I do not intend to take up the specific claims that Hannah-Jones makes, nor will I attempt, for example, to ascertain exactly to what extent racism continues to permeate American society. Rather, I hope to disentangle—beginning from the premise that we should love our country—appropriate from inappropriate forms of political rhetoric or critique.

³⁵ Hannah-Jones, “Our Democracy’s Founding Ideals Were False When They Were Written.”

³⁶ Hannah-Jones, “Our Democracy’s Founding Ideals Were False When They Were Written.”

³⁷ Hannah-Jones, “Our Democracy’s Founding Ideals Were False When They Were Written.”

³⁸ Hannah-Jones, “Our Democracy’s Founding Ideals Were False When They Were Written.”

³⁹ It has been suggested to me that I am misreading this comment and that it might be interpreted instead as a critique of America—a claim that what is “most American of all” is being in “bondage.” If that is the intent, then my response to the sentence is rather different. Perhaps we could simply say, however, that I am extending it the credit of love and interpreting from above. See Hannah-Jones, “Our Democracy’s Founding Ideals Were False When They Were Written.”

⁴⁰ Hannah-Jones, “Our Democracy’s Founding Ideals Were False When They Were Written.” This sentence reflects a very minor change made by Hannah-Jones and the *Times* in light of the sharp criticism they received from many historians. The initial sentence did not include the two words “some of,” thus implying that all the colonists wanted to declare independence for the purpose of protecting slavery. One might reasonably wonder how significant a revision this is, and the revised version has continued to draw criticism. See Peter Wood, “The New York Times Revises the 1619 Project, Barely,” National Association of Scholars, March 16, 2020, <https://www.nas.org/blogs/article/the-new-york-times-revises-the-1619-project-barely>.

⁴¹ Hannah-Jones, “Our Democracy’s Founding Ideals Were False When They Were Written.”

⁴² Von Hildebrand, *The Nature of Love*, 68.

⁴³ Von Hildebrand, *The Nature of Love*, 72.

⁴⁴ Hannah-Jones, “Our Democracy’s Founding Ideals Were False When They Were Written.”

⁴⁵ Von Hildebrand, *The Nature of Love*, 71.

⁴⁶ Von Hildebrand, *The Nature of Love*, 70–71.

⁴⁷ Hannah-Jones, “Our Democracy’s Founding Ideals Were False When They Were Written.”

⁴⁸ Hannah-Jones, “Our Democracy’s Founding Ideals Were False When They Were Written.”

⁴⁹ Von Hildebrand, *The Nature of Love*, 71.

⁵⁰ For a (critical) description of events in Richmond, Virginia, see Catesby Leigh, “Richmond’s Rage of the Woke,” *City Journal*, April 11, 2021, <https://www.city-journal.org/confederate-monuments-richmond-virginia>. Richmond has just removed the last such statue—of Robert E. Lee himself.

⁵¹ Von Hildebrand, *The Nature of Love*, 68.

⁵² See Martin Luther King Jr., “Letter from a Birmingham Jail,” April 16, 1963,

https://www.africa.upenn.edu/Articles_Gen/Letter_Birmingham.html.

⁵³ King, “Letter from a Birmingham Jail.”

⁵⁴ King, “Letter from a Birmingham Jail.”

⁵⁵ See National Public Radio, *Talk of the Nation*, “‘I Have a Dream’ Speech, in Its Entirety,” January 18, 2010,

<https://www.npr.org/2010/01/18/122701268/i-have-a-dream-speech-in-its-entirety>.

⁵⁶ National Public Radio, *Talk of the Nation*, “‘I Have a Dream’ Speech, in Its Entirety.”

⁵⁷ Von Hildebrand, *The Nature of Love*, 67–68.

⁵⁸ National Public Radio, *Talk of the Nation*, “‘I Have a Dream’ Speech, in Its Entirety.”

⁵⁹ Von Hildebrand, *The Nature of Love*, 70.

⁶⁰ Von Hildebrand, *The Nature of Love*, 72.

⁶¹ Von Hildebrand, *The Nature of Love*, 68.