NATIONALISM  
IMASIC Virtual Symposium 2021  
Lt Colonel Bob Lee, Officer Commanding, Hong and Macau Command

Introduction  
I am deeply honored to be invited by Colonel Richard Munn, the Director of the ISJC to be a presenter in this virtual Symposium. I am also deeply honored to be surrounded by other esteemed presenters and experts and practitioners. I am going to deliberate about NATIONALISM. When I set about preparing for this delivery, I began to realize that it is such a large topic and was wondering what I did I get myself into!

In an effort to be as understandable as possible, I want to make some preliminary comments:

I am glad we are broaching this subject as this is a rather sensitive subject and emotionally explosive and not commonly open for discussion. So, I salute our organizers for their courage to approach and address this subject.

I am no political expert and did not graduate in political science. While I have a great interest in politics and systems, my understanding is still basic. However, as a follower and practitioner in moral social justice issues, I will address relevant issues as the need arises.

My intention is not to subscribe or endorse to any political system or ideology. Rather I want us to be open to what the Bible has to say in this subject. Political convictions do not lead to lasting change; only personal conversion in Christ leads to lasting transformation.

As believers we all have dual citizenship. As citizens of a nation, we have rights and privileges accorded to us as a citizen. As believers we are first and foremost citizens of heaven. As Paul says in Philippians 3:20 says: ‘But our citizenship is in heaven. And we eagerly await a Savior from there, the Lord Jesus Christ.’

Also, we need to keep our politics in its perspective. Even when we do not understand some of the things that our governing authorities are doing, or even if we do not agree with the people who are in office, we need to remember the prophecy from Isaiah 9:6-7: ‘For to us a child is born, to us a son is given, and the government will be on his shoulders. And he will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. Of the increase of his government and peace there will be no end.’ The fundamental proposition is this: Jesus Christ must be Lord over all our political views and attitudes.

In my sharing, I will describe the meaning of nationalism and why it is a concern; I will talk about nationalism in Biblical history; Christian nationalism; and conclude with a pastoral word.

Definition of Nationalism:  
From Miriam Webster Dictionary, Nationalism is defined as:
Loyalty and devotion to a nation especially, a sense of national consciousness exalting one nation above all others and placing primary emphasis on promotion of its culture and interests as opposed to those of other nations or supranational\(^1\) groups.

Many use the terms ‘nationalism’, ‘nation’ or ‘patriotism’ similarly. They are quite different. Nationalism refers to a set of beliefs about the nation. Every country will have differing views about its national character. And because of these diverse and competing views and beliefs it then often manifests themselves as political differences.\(^2\) Some may view their nation as champions for democracy, while others champion for individual liberty, still others may view the need to sacrifice liberty for the sake of security. Some countries warmly welcome immigrants and support policies that promote their eventual citizenship while others reject such a view. Some nations maintain a one religion system, while others promote the freedom of religion.

Nationalism is also an ideology by people who believe their nation is superior to all others.\(^3\) This is the belief of superiority or being first among all others. We have heard so much of such rhetoric from certain countries in recent days. This sense of superiority often has its roots of common ethnicity or supremacy. Nationalism can also feel that other nations or people are foreign to one’s own nation – someone from another nation, speaking another language or practicing another religion.

Because they believe in the superiority of their shared attributes, nationalists often stereotype different ethnic, religious, or cultural groups. What keep nationalists unified is their common biasness and prejudice.

A distinctive of nationalism is the belief that the nation is the only goal worthy of pursuit – that the nation demands unquestioned and uncompromising loyalty. When such a belief of the nation becomes predominant, it can threaten individual liberty.\(^4\)

Intolerance can lead to a desire to rid the country of those deemed as ‘different.’ In an extreme form, it can lead to ethnic cleansing and genocide. ‘Ethnic cleansing’ is the systematic forced removal or extermination or to get rid of (through deportation, displacement or even mass killing) members of an unwanted ethnic group in order to establish an ethnically homogenous geographic area. It also includes methods aimed to prevent such groups from ever returning through murder and property destruction.

Though ‘cleansing’ campaigns for ethnic or religious reasons have existed throughout history, the rise of extreme nationalist movements during the 20th century led to an unprecedented level of ethnically motivated brutality, including the Turkish massacre of Armenians during World War I; the Nazis’ annihilation of some 6 million European Jews in the Holocaust; and the forced displacement and mass killings carried out in the former Yugoslavia and the African country of Rwanda during the 1990s.\(^5\)

\(^1\) That is above national authority, boundaries  
\(^2\) Nationalism, Steven Grosby, OUP, 2005, p 34  
\(^3\) Nationalism, Definition, Examples and History, Kimberly Amadeo  
\(^4\) Ibid, pg 35  
\(^5\) https://www.history.com/topics/holocaust/ethnic-cleansing
How does nationalism work? Nationalists demand to be independent of other countries. They oppose global organizations or collaboration with other countries on trade. They pull out of partnerships and trade agreements. It is a question of staying local instead of going global.

Nationalist trade policy is based on protectionism. It will subsidize domestic industries that are deemed of national interest. It also includes tariffs and quotas on foreign imports and escalates to a trade war.

In other situations, nationalism is built around a shared language, religion, culture, or set of social values emphasizing shared symbols, folklore, and mythology, music, literature, and sports. These strengthen nationalism.

Nationalists believe their shared interests supersede all other individual or group interests. They also rally against any philosophy, such as religion, that may supersede national loyalties. They are not necessarily militaristic, but they may quickly become so if threatened.

Nationalists' feeling of superiority differentiates from patriotism. Patriotism equates to pride in one’s country and a willingness to defend it. Patriotism is the love of country. As Christians, we can and should love our country, which also means working to improve our country, praying for its leaders and for the peace and prosperity and progress for our nation.

Nationalism, on the other hand, extends to arrogance and potential military aggression. Nationalists believe they have a right to dominate another nation because of their superiority. They feel they are doing the conquered a favor.

Is that really a problem, or just an abstract worry?

It is a serious problem. When nationalists go about constructing their nation, they have to define who is, and who is not, part of the nation. This will give rise to racism, xenophobia, discrimination, exclusivity, segregation, and aggression.

In our world today, there are some countries where racism and discrimination of a particular people’s group exists or is dominated by a racial group. There are also situations where a particular people group insists in the prominence of identity and rights. While certain privileges are accorded to them and it can be a positive affirmation of their being, it can easily degenerate into tribalism as the privilege class or race, with maximum rights and entitlements above all other people groups.

In recent days, we all have sat up and taken notice of the call to ‘End Racism’. Racism is such a global issue that it cannot be ignored. Racism separates and divides. Race and religious issues can be the dividing factors in any society if not managed well. The issue of race can also be easily politicized. Even recently, with the current pandemic, some ethnic minorities were labeled as the source of spreading the corona virus!
I come from Singapore, a developed metropolis, multi-racial and multi religious society. In fact, the most densely populated country in the world. We have 4 major races – Chinese, Malays, Indians, Eurasians, and some minority races. We have 4 major religions – Christianity, Buddhism, Islam, Hinduism, and other religions. Over the years the government has worked hard to strengthen and preserve the delicate fabric of harmony between the races and religions.

It will be naïve to say that Singapore does not struggle with the challenges of social and racial cohesion. It is important that the people of Singapore be sensitive to, listen to, mutually respect and be conscious of one another and work through difficult issues. We cannot afford to have one racial community group demanding their rights louder than others insisting on maximum rights and entitlements. We will end up with nativism and hostility and play into the hands of the nationalists. Singapore has been on a dynamic and delicate journey over the years to maintain that balance.

Singapore encourages globalization and has established 28 Free Trade Agreements with other nations. Singapore has developed many internal policies that promote positive racial and ethnic integration. Some have questioned that it is rather artificial and asked that these be scrapped. But Singapore is adjusting policies to protect and strengthen this multi-racial balance. No racial group can claim absolute advantage or privilege over the other. But we are aware that it does not take much to break the balance.

Thus, racism and xenophobia are to be rejected and have no place in a society. Nationalists will want to promote their preferred cultural template. But there are always minorities who do not or cannot conform to the nationalists' preferred template. In the absence of moral authority, nationalists can be a law to themselves and establish themselves by force. The conclusion is that some nationalist governments tend to become authoritarian and oppressive in practice.

**Nationalism and the Bible**

Positively speaking, nationalism is expressed in the Bible itself. God’s intention when He called Israel into being was to develop a nationalistic culture (Psalm 137:4–6).

God laid the foundation of a theocratic nation when he called Abram to leave his home country of Ur and to go to a land that God will show him (Genesis 12:1–4). Success depended on whether they can develop a distinct and different nationalistic mindset. Actually, they need not develop it per se, as God has already laid the foundations in His law and decrees. The people are to submit and follow God’s laws and decrees in obedience. They are not to mix with the pagan nations around them and would be distinct in their laws and culture. Any person wishing to join Israel will likewise need submit to God’s law and become like the Hebrews (Is 56:6).

Nationalism for the Hebrew people was necessary that they may be a holy people, and a light to the nations, and through whom God would send the Saviour of the world.

However, Jewish nationalism took a wrong turn through their faithlessness in God and in their continued disobedience and in the worship of other pagan idols. Eventually Israel went into exile in Babylon because of their utter disobedience to God. Whatever nationalistic fervor they had before, it has now evaporated as they spent their time in exile in Babylon, far away from their homeland.
By the time Jesus came to earth the religious leaders had so perverted and adulterated God’s laws. They became a law to themselves! Jewish nationalism looked down on the Gentile nations and peoples that they assumed that being born Jewish was all one needed to be right with God.

John the Baptist rebuked such thinking: ‘And do not think you can say to yourselves, ‘We have Abraham as our father.’ I tell you that out of these stones God can raise up children for Abraham’ (Matthew 3:9). The Jews assumed that their tradition, heritage, nationality, or religion was a sufficient passport to guarantee their righteousness (Galatians 5:4).

Nationalism had become like a religion to them and kept them from humbling their hearts to receive God’s Savior (John 8:33). This is the same mistake we can make today!

**What about Christian nationalism?**

Christian nationalism might be defined as the belief that Christians have been called by God to create a Christian nation.⁶ It is seeing the Bible through the lens of the nation!

Christian nationalism has an obligation, a mandate, a commission, a holy responsibility to reclaim the land for Jesus Christ. It is to have dominion in civil structures including political dominion. Not just an influence.⁷

Christian nationalism is a type of nationalism that tries to exclude others. Some Christian nationalism tries to define a country as a white protestant nation and exclude all others including Catholics, immigrants, indigenous people, Jews and Moslems. Christian nationalism limits who we are in our spiritual identity. It also runs a dangerous belief that the nation is infallible. It also makes the nation an idol where the country becomes an interchangeable object of worship. Serve the country to serve God.

Christian nationalism wants the government to promote a specific cultural Christian template as the official culture of the country and the government should take steps to sustain and maintain the Christian heritage. They want to promote, sustain and continue their identity as a Christian nation. They believe that their country has a special relationship with God and has been chosen by Him to carry out a special mission on earth and must be defended as such.

The danger is that Christian nationalism tends to treat others as second-class citizens. Beyond that it does not respect religious freedom and the free practice of one’s faith. It can also exacerbate racial and ethnic tension.

Those who hold to a Christian nationalist view assume a religious duty in defending their beliefs in regard to the nation. They believe that their actions, including the need for uprising and rioting, are a defense of the nation and therefore sanctioned by God. They believe they are defending democracy.

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⁶ Dennis Edwards, Christian Nationalism, Mission Alliance 2018
⁷ Ibid
Obviously, traditional Christians ought to limit that kind of nationalistic fervor. As ‘strangers and exiles on the earth,’ our ultimate allegiance is to Christ’s kingdom. Measured patriotism still seems appropriate for most Christians. Even Romans 13 injunction to be ‘subject to the governing authorities’ suggests a default support for your nation. If nothing else, we pray for our leaders and communities so that, as 1 Timothy 2 puts it, believers ‘may lead a peaceful and quiet life, godly and dignified in every way.’ When believers can live that kind of life in a nation, we should be grateful.

The New Testament regularly and forthrightly describes God’s love for all humanity as well as God’s desire for all different kinds of people to be united (Matt 28:19-20; John 3:16; Acts 10:34-35; Ephesians 2:11-22). The apostle Peter’s words in that Acts passage are especially noteworthy in their direct challenge to Christian nationalism: I now realize how true it is that God does not show favoritism but accepts from every nation the one who fears him and does what is right.

The welcoming church does not and will not distinguish between ‘natives and foreigners, residents and aliens.’ We are all one in Christ’s Kingdom.

Before Jesus ascended to glory, he commissioned the disciples to ‘go and make disciples’ of all different kinds of people (Matt 28:19-20). Jesus sent his followers on a mission to recruit more heavenly citizens, not to promote or expand the borders of any particular nation. In fact, national boundaries disappear when it comes to being part of the people of God.

Of course, our commitment to the Gospel of Jesus Christ will impact how we view public policy. Yet, our goal isn’t to try and create a Christian nation; our goal is far grander and more noble: Our goal is to help people learn to follow Jesus wherever they live, and for us to learn to love each other no matter what soil we were born on.

Christianity also has a lot of theological resources for thinking of ourselves as citizens of heaven and siblings to all other humans, not partisans of a particular national group. Joining in the process of extending God’s grace across cultural borders is a meaningful way of witnessing to the extended family of faith.8

Statement of Army’s Position
I am so glad to read of the Salvation Army’s position on the State. It says: The Salvation Army is politically nonpartisan. Although it seeks to influence governmental and public affairs, it will not promote or endorse specific candidates or political parties. In working with any State and its agencies, The Salvation Army seeks to promote Biblical values, including justice, truth, mercy, equity, human rights and peace, as part of its religious convictions and practice.

It continues: The Salvation Army’s unchanging mission is to proclaim the gospel of Jesus Christ and serve suffering humanity in his name. It is therefore appropriate to consider The Salvation Army’s view of its relationship with ‘the State,’ which is

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8 United Methodist Church, UMGlobal.org, Christian Nationalism, Ryan Dunn,
defined for these purposes as the institutions that maintain political sovereignty over a defined territory and population.

Pastoral Considerations
In recent days we have seen the surge of civil unrest developing in many nations. These dramatic rise in protests have caught many governments unaware resulting in paralyzing the economy and livelihoods of the people. Many are calling for political reforms, greater freedom, transparency, and governance. Unfortunately, in some places, unnecessary deaths have occurred resulting from the clashes between the people and the authorities wanting to clamp down on the protestors to maintain law and order. In many countries such turmoil has no end in sight.

The question is how far can we go? Can we be involved in such open confrontation against the government? How do we address these issues? Do we have a right to open rebellion?

Can we be politically engaged without going down the direction of being Christian nationalists?

While many say that God and government don’t mix very well, we see from Romans 13:1 that government can only be understood to the degree to which we understand God. We looked at two primary principles from this verse:

* Everyone must submit himself to the governing authorities.

* All authority is established by God.

Romans 13:2 helps us see who is behind the authorities: ‘Consequently, he who rebels against the authority is rebelling against what God has instituted, and those who do so will bring judgment on themselves.’ Very strong words indeed! Paul is addressing people who have a tendency to get carried away with their opinions and demonstrations.

The key in all this is our attitude toward authority. Many of us have an emotional allergy against submission. The point is everyone must submit to the governing authorities out of humility because we are conscious of God’s appointing and working through them.

Titus 3:1-2 reminds us ‘to be subject to rulers and authorities, to be obedient, to be ready to do whatever is good, … and to show true humility toward all men.’

1 Peter 2:13 says: ‘Submit yourselves for the Lord’s sake to every authority instituted among men.’

Point number one is the ‘what’: everyone must submit himself to the governing authorities. And the best way to do the ‘what’ is to focus on the ‘who’ because it’s not about ‘what,’ it’s all about ‘who.’ That leads us to the second half of verse one: ‘…For there is no authority except that which God has established. The authorities that exist have been established by God.’
Many of us don’t like this verse. That’s why it’s so important to focus on the who. God Himself establishes governing authorities. People in government and in all authority serve by God’s ordained permission.

My attitude and response to human authorities is a reflection of my attitude and response to my Father in heaven because God has established those authorities. That means that my response and attitude is a spiritual issue. Without a big view of God, it will be impossible to submit to the authorities.

Let me point out, submitting to authorities applies to democracies, aristocracies, autocracies, dictatorships, despotism, oligarchies, communism. This is exactly what Romans 13:1 says twice ‘For there is no authority except that which God has established. The authorities that exist have been established by God.’

Questions to Ponder:

1. How do we positively engage with government in a country?
2. Is there ever a time when a Christian should disobey a law?
3. Submission does not equal silence. There are times when believers must speak up about social justice and moral matters, but we must do so respectfully. How can we engage positively in such conversations?