

"The False God of Nationalism"

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Last Sunday I spoke on the false god of science. This morning I would like to speak of another false god which seems to be receiving even greater devotion than the god of science—namely the god of nationalism. If time permitted, I would trace the history of this new religion, unravel the strands that, woven together, have produced it. In its present form it is a modern phenomenon developing from the eighteenth century on, but that it is now dominant in the world is clear.⁷ Our age is one in which men have turned away from the eternal God of the universe, and decided to worship at the shrine of the god of nationalism.

We are all familiar with the creed of this new religion. It affirms that each nation is an absolute sovereign unit acknowledging no control save its own independent will.⁸ The watchword of this new religion is "My country right or wrong." This new religion has its familiar prophets and preachers. In Germany it was preached by Hitler. In Italy it was preached by Mussolini. And in America it is being preached by the McCarthy's and the Jenners, the advocates of white supremacy, and the America first movements.⁹ Strangely enough all of these nationalistic preachers have an amazing amount of homilectical skill, so much so that the number of their converts has risen to astronomical proportions.

The preachers of this new religion are so convinced of its supremacy that they are determined to persecute anyone who does not accept its tenets. And so today many sincere lovers of democracy and believers of the christian principle are being scorned and persecuted because they will not worship the god of nationalism. We live in an age when it is almost heresy to affirm the brotherhood of man. And so the new god marches on.

6 Acts 17:28. King quotes from Isaac Watts's hymn "O God, Our Help in Ages Past" (1719).

7 Fosdick, "Christianity's Supreme Rival," in *The Hope of the World* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1933), p. 159. "Were there time, one might trace the history of this dogma, unravel the strands that, woven together, have produced it. In its present form it is a modern phenomenon developing from the eighteenth century on, but that it is now dominant in the world is clear." King annotated a copy of *The Hope of the World* and kept it in his personal library.

8 Fosdick, *The Hope of the World*, p. 158. "First, that each nation is a sovereign unit acknowledging no control save its own independent will."

9 Republican U.S. senator Joseph R. McCarthy (1908–1957), a noted exponent of Cold War anti-communism, accused the Truman administration and the military of harboring communists. His Republican Senate colleague William Ezra Jenner (1908–1985) supported McCarthy's early efforts. The America First Committee, founded in 1940, was an influential isolationist group that disbanded four days after the 7 December 1941 bombing of Pearl Harbor.

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Yet, we all know of the great tragedies that have resulted from the worship of this false god of nationalism. More than anything else nationalism makes for war. And so long as this dogma obtains, men and nations will be plunged into the meshes of war. War, that dread force that leaves men physically handicapped and psychologically upset. War, that leaves our nations with orphans and widows. War, that piles our national debts higher than mountains of gold. War, that causes our moral standards to disintegrate. Such is the tragic consequence of nationalism.

If we are to avoid the drudgery of war, if we are to avoid being plunged across the abyss of atomic destruction, we must transcend the narrow confines of nationalism. Nationalism must give way to internationalism. This does not mean that we must not love our native lands. No other nation can mean to us what our nation means. Here are the roots of our heritage.¹⁰ So it is not the total concept of nationalism that I am condemning, it is nationalism perverted into chauvinism and isolationism that I am condemning. One cannot worship this false god of nationalism and the God of christianity at the same time. The two are incompatible and all the dialectics of the logicians cannot make them exist together. We must choose whom we will serve.¹¹ Will we continue to serve the false god that places absolute national sovereignty first or will we serve the God in whom there is no east nor west?¹² Will we continue to serve the false god of imperialistic greed or will we serve the God who makes love the key which unlocks the door of peace and security. Will we continue to serve the false god of racial prejudice or will we serve the God who made of one blood all men to dwell upon the face of the earth.¹³

Today we need prophetic voices willing to cry out against the false god of nationalism. I realize that such a venture might bring about the possibility of being called many undesirable names. But speak we must if we are to acknowledge the sovereignty {of God.} Against the claims of the false god nationalism we must affirm the supremacy of the eternal God of the universe, the Father of all mankind. This is the God we must worship if we are to sail through the tempestuous seas of confusion to the harbor of peace.

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