

# What a Nation Isn't

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Samuel Goldman, *After Nationalism: Being American in an Age of Division*. University of Pennsylvania Press, 148pp., \$25 cloth.

**A** SURPRISING FACT, WORTH thinking about when considering what a nation and nationalism are, is that after more than forty years of Islamic rule, it is still not unusual for an educated Iranian to be familiar with the *Shahnameh*, the *Book of Kings*, written around 1000 CE by Abolqasem Ferdowsi. The continuing allure of the epic poem is surprising, because the *Shahnameh* presents an image of Iran that glorifies its pre-Islamic traditions including the Zoroastrian religion, even though it was composed more than three hundred and fifty years after the Muslim conquest of Iran.

It is impossible to read the *Shahnameh* and not conclude that Ferdowsi lamented the Arab conquest. The epic poem begins with a description of the evil monster Zahhak, in league with demonic Iblis, as an Arab, and concludes with the Iranian military hero Rostam's evaluation of the Islamic conquest as having ushered in a time when "strangers ruled Iranians," resulting in "justice and charity having disappeared." Thus, the work, with its

championing of native Iranian tradition, stood at the time of its composition and continues to stand today in tension with the vision of the Islamic *ummah*, the universal community of all believers. What is not surprising is that, shortly after its appearance and subsequently, the *Shahnameh* was, as Michael Cook noted in *Ancient Religions, Modern Politics*, denounced by Islamic scholars and poets as being pernicious, a book of lies, and a book of sins.

What might the continuing appreciation of the *Shahnameh* among some Iranians tell us about what a nation is? Clearly, there have been tensions or a co-mingling of divergent traditions within how "being Iranian" is understood. That there has been and continues to be the self-classificatory category "Iranian," although itself changing over time, for example, from those who were Zoroastrian to those who are Muslim, is beyond dispute; for Iranians have for approximately two thousand years distinguished themselves from those who were born in, or dwell within, different, neighboring territories. This self-classification and its persistence indicates the existence of some kind of national cultural unity, although that unity is, as has been observed, neither uniform nor unchanging. Different meanings and

divergent traditions, including regional loyalties, about what it means to be Iranian are components of that unity. The attempt to homogenize the population by eliminating those divergent traditions, such as the persecution of Baha'is because they are judged as not being able to be members of the Iranian nation, is an example of an intolerant, ideological nationalism.

This kind of tension or co-mingling of divergent traditions within the self-understanding shared by members of a nation is by no means unique to the Iranians. Despite the indifference of both the New Testament, where Christ is everything and he is in everything, and the ultimate jurisdiction of canon law to the national divisions of humanity, there have been national distinctions within Christendom and the church. This ecclesiastical distinctiveness is not simply a matter of administrative jurisdiction; the national distinctions within the church have never been a simple matter. Already at the Council of Constance (1414-1418), as Caspar Hirschi observed in *The Origins of Nationalism*, the word *natio* was used to refer to a cultural, linguistic, and political community with a territory thought to be its own. Thus, while one is surely justified to use the category of Christendom as referring to a cultural unity of all Christians, its universal orientation has, perhaps paradoxically, co-existed with particular territorial kinships, those different "we, the people" (or "the whole community of the land" as in the *Magna Carta*) of nations: where members of a nation, recognizing themselves as being related to one another by virtue of birth or long residence in a bounded area of land, distinguish themselves from other Christians of different nations.

A nation is a social relation of territorial kinship—a kinship where relation between its members is not traced from birth to a

mother or father, but from birth in a territory that is formed over time through the traditions of previous regimes exercising legal authority over it, war, the development of a common language, and religion. Those traditions, unavoidably changing and often contested, of the nation and its territory contribute to the present understanding of individuals as fellow nationals and its territory as a homeland. Thus, the social relation of a nation is formed around two axes: a horizontal, territorial axis; and a temporal axis. No doubt part of the allure of the *Shahnameh* today for some Iranian Shi'ites is that the epic poem allows them to entertain the idea of the persistence of Iran as a nation through time.

What is distinctive of the nation, so that the category is heuristically useful by distinguishing it from other social relations such as the personal relation of a friendship, the economic relation of a business firm competitively producing goods and services for its customers, or the sacred relation of the worshippers of the monotheistic deity of the world religions pursuing an other-worldly salvation, is the significance attributed to territory. To be sure, territorial relations may have an influence on these other social relations. Christianity, which is doctrinally indifferent to questions of territory, has nevertheless developed national saints, as well as, for example, the belief that Mary, Mother of God, saved the Polish nation from the Lutheran Swedes at the battle at the monastery of Czestochowa in 1655. But in these instances, that influence is an accommodation of universal Christianity to the territorial kinship of a nation. But for a nation, a territory is central to its existence; without a territory, or at least an image of a territory, thought to belong to a people, a nation will not exist. How that territory is understood, for example, as a land of liberty for Americans

or as a Buddhist holy land for Sinhalese or a land where Bengali (and not Urdu) is spoken for Bangladeshis, will differ over time and from one nation to another.

## "We're only a partially achieved nation."

Contrary to what is often asserted by many political scientists and historians who often have little or no interest beyond modern history, the national divisions of humanity long predate the Protestant Reformation, the Augsburg Confession, and the 1648 Treaty of Westphalia. As noted previously, the participants at the Council of Constance were organized by nation. Nations, their bounded territories, and national states are not exclusive to what is referred to as "modernity." After all, one already finds an understanding of the national divisions of humanity in the classifications employed in Genesis 10. Moreover, recognition of national distinctiveness is by no means European in origin. It was not exported to the other, putatively innocent parts of the world, as wrongly insisted upon by the overly facile idea of "orientalism." As I observed in *Nations and Nationalism in World History*, both the medieval Koreans and Vietnamese understood themselves and their lands to be different from the Chinese and China, even though they shared aspects of a neo-Confucian culture. And the Buddhist Sinhalese have for a thousand years, if not longer, understood the island of Sri Lanka to be a distinctive holy land. While it is appropriate to recognize trans-national neo-Confucian and Buddhist cultural unities or civilizations, within those cultural unities, as it is within Christendom, there have been

national divisions, the result of which has been a coming together of different, often divergent traditions within each of those nations.

In the history of medieval Christianity, the 1192 papal bull *Cum Universi* of Celestine III (more than one hundred years before Scotland's declaration of independence, the 1320 "Declaration of Arbroath") formally recognized a Scottish church independent from Canterbury and York. At times this co-existence within Christendom between national and civilizational traditions has been an uneasy one, for example, the 1682 "Declaration of Gallican liberties," the origin of which can certainly be traced back to the end of the thirteenth century during the reign of Philip the Fair. At other times, the tension between a universal Christian brotherhood and nationality has been doctrinally but not historically ameliorated, abetted by the architectonic of *exitus* and *reditus* of Aquinas's *Summa* and the idea of subsidiarity. Thus, the Church has long recognized the patriotic attachment to one's nation as natural, but at the same time subordinating the love of one's homeland to the greater love of all of humanity and God. Pope John Paul II was a Polish patriot. (For a discussion of patriotism as distinct from nationalism in the Catholic tradition, see my "National Identity, Nationalism, and the Catholic Church," accessible at Oxford Handbooks Online). Nevertheless, especially in the aftermath of the reforms of Pope Gregory VII at the end of the eleventh century, the tension has been acute, such as with Thomas Becket, memorialized for us by T.S. Eliot's *Murder in the Cathedral*. Becket was, as Chancellor, the loyal defender of the interests of the king, yet, as Archbishop, also defender of the interests of the church against the king. One doesn't need the spurious idea of postmodernism to account for the existence of multiple and conflicting loyalties.

A more realistic, although complicated, understanding of a nation is, to adapt a characterization of the historian of nations and nationalism John Hutchinson, as a cultural zone of both unity and conflict. There has to be a configuration of traditions—a cultural unity—that sustains the nation, yet that unity is not uniform. Most nations have a number of different religions, languages, and pronounced regionalism that may be sources of conflict. There are even some national states that exert rule over minority nations. Moreover, other orientations or interests create complications for the territorial kinship of the nation. The previously discussed universal community of all believers of the world religions is an obvious one, but economic relations may be another, for example, disputes over free trade and mercantilism.

These kinds of divergent traditions are not the only tensions found within the “we” of any nation. The temporal depth or temporal axis of a nation is another source of tension; for, while bringing the past into the present provides a source for stability, no tradition, however cherished, can be maintained over time without modification. While the Iranians and Armenians have existed for more than a thousand years, they are different from what they were in, say, the seventh century. The Koreans, Vietnamese, and Sinhalese of the eleventh century are different from what they are today; the French and English of the thirteenth century are different from the French and English of the twenty-first century. There are continuities, but there are also disruptions. Nations disappear from the historical record such as the Moabites and Babylonians, while new ones, such as the Americans, arise.

There are important continuities between being an American in 1789 and being an American today: fidelity to the Constitution and its Bill of Rights; a religious tradition; a common language;

and, while its territory has expanded across the continent, its core has remained. But within that continuity there obviously were different traditions, so much so that they led to a civil war. The Americans of today are in some ways different from those of 1789. Some of those differences are troubling, as one hopes to conserve our better traditions of what it means to be an American in light of always developing new challenges. Which traditions are worthy of being conserved and what their conservation might entail are important subjects, but for another time; what is relevant here is a realistic understanding of what a nation is and, just as important, what it isn't. Recognizing the distinction between unity and uniformity—between, on the one hand, a national unity made up of divergent traditions and, on the other, an unrealistic national uniformity that is rarely manifested except during brief, unsustainable periods of patriotic enthusiasm—is an elementary prerequisite for cultural history and analysis.

A realistic understanding of the American nation and its history is gratifyingly presented by Samuel Goldman in *After Nationalism: Being American in an Age of Division*. The title of Goldman's cultural interpretation of what has been meant to be an American—what is it that has bound us together as Americans at a particular time and over time—might be misleading. The intention of the book's title is not to suggest that an American nation does not exist. It is, instead, to emphasize that what being an American has meant has never been uniform, as the ideology of nationalism seeks. As Goldman correctly observes, “our public discourse has always been characterized by appeals to various and potentially incompatible conceptions of the nation.” This observation, as has been noted above, provides a more realistic framework for understanding any nation, including the American.

Goldman is right in this sensible and well written extended essay to reject an understanding of the American nation and its history “as if it were a preexisting reality of fixed character.” He is by no means the first to recognize the open character of America and its democracy. More than fifty years ago, Ralph Ellison, arguably the twentieth century’s greatest African American writer, observed in his essay “The Novel as a Function of American Democracy” that “even today America remains an undiscovered country . . . We’re only a partially achieved nation.” The further development of the American nation, its culture, and its democracy was, according to Ellison, dependent upon the continuing realization of its foundational democratic ideals which, in turn, requires a civility that tolerates the actual diversity of the American people. In fact, that diversity—regional, ethnic, and racial—contributes to the vitality of its culture, an example of which, especially dear to Ellison, is how African American jazz has become a valuable part of American music. Thus, in a crucially important way, Ellison thought, rightly it seems to me, that the future of the American nation was and remains inseparable from the fate of African Americans as citizens. That further development of the American democratic ideal is clearly one of the themes of Ellison’s magnificent, but unfinished novel *Three Days Before the Shooting*, as portrayed in the relation between the white southern Senator Sunraider (as a youth, Bliss) and the African American Reverend Hickman.

Goldman identifies three different traditions that have co-existed, with varying degrees of tension, within the cultural unity of the American nation: covenant, crucible, and creed, each of which has a chapter devoted to its description. The covenantal tradition was, of course, represented by the New England Puritans and their Hebraic

understanding of America as the “new Israel,” itself a symbol containing within it divergent meanings. However, to equate that Hebraic tradition with the developing self-understanding of the American nation of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries is to ignore other contemporaneous traditions represented by the Quakers, the Anglicans, the Catholics, and the Scots-Irish. Even among the New England Protestants, there were significant differences, as can be seen in the separation of Rhode Island under the direction of Roger Williams. And obviously there were differences over slavery. While the influence of covenantal theology on the formation of the American nation has receded over time, it is nonetheless a mistake to segregate that influence historically by confining it to the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. It continues to have a bearing on how Americans understand themselves, for example, Sabbath observance and the belief in America as a promised land with its providential, salvific mission to the world.

Goldman’s characterization of the tradition of the crucible refers to the late nineteenth and early twentieth century understanding of America as a land of immigrants, the so-called melting pot out of which a new people emerged. This new people fulfilled its manifest destiny by extending the territory of the nation from the Atlantic to the Pacific. The third tradition is creedal, the twentieth century adherence to the idea of equal rights, racial equality, and a defense of democracy. Of course, this creedal tradition is not exclusively a twentieth century creation; it is found in the Declaration of Independence, the Constitution, and English common law; it is one source of the changing, developing unity of the American nation through time. But with both the crucible and creedal traditions, it is a mistake to think of the American nation as if it were the uniform creation of either. As Goldman notes, in tension with both of these

traditions, there were the anti-immigrant, anti-Catholic Know Nothing movement, the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 and the Johnson-Reed Act of 1924 which implemented immigration quotas, the discrimination and internment of Americans of Japanese descent during World War II, and the obvious challenge to the crucible and creedal traditions: continuing racial discrimination.

Irrespective of the merit of distinguishing these three different traditions in the formation and continuation of the American nation, their differentiation is rather schematic. The crucible idea of the manifest destiny of the American nation certainly has a covenantal biblical origin, albeit Old Testament, both as conveying a providential mission and a land theology. Furthermore, while the creedal ideas of equality and the rule of law have multiple sources, one of the sources is also biblical. And finally, the creedal tradition of equal rights runs throughout American history, although, of course, further realized with the adoption in 1918 of the Nineteenth Amendment to the Constitution that granted the vote to women and the civil rights legislation of the last half of the twentieth century. The contour of the continuing development of, and the relation between, these three and other traditions remains to be determined; for, as Ellison rightly noted, America remains a partially achieved nation. But all nations are partially achieved; there is no such thing as a fully formed nation, nor could there be. It is, however, the unavoidable gap between the ideals of American democracy and reality, and the taxing requirement of discussion and compromise of a democratic form of government that has made the America nation so fractious; but both may also be its saving grace.

## **All nations are partially achieved; there is no such thing as a fully formed nation, nor could there be.**

While there is an American nation or people that has existed over time, past and current political differences are expressions of the different ways the nation has been and continues to be understood. Perhaps Goldman's book is best understood as a warning to those who wish America well. It is a mistake, an ideologically dangerous one, to think that Americans have ever all been the same or, out of an unrestrained desire for cohesiveness and stability, to think that they should be. As a way to adjudicate between the different ways being an American has been and continues to be understood, Goldman, as had Ellison and others before him, is right to turn to the important American tradition of the ideals of the Declaration of Independence and fidelity to the Constitution. But the Declaration's ideals and the Constitution's principles, laws, and institutional arrangement have never exclusively defined what America is. Other aspects of what it has meant to be an American, above all its territory distinguishing it and its inhabitants from the lands and members of other nations, have required other traditions. That this has been so and remains so is the merit of Goldman's book. **A**