



CULTURAL

IDENTITY



AND



THE PURPOSES



OF GOD



*A Biblical Theology
of Ethnicity, Nationality,
and Race*

STEVEN M. BRYAN



“*Cultural Identity and the Purposes of God* is one of the most practical books I have read in recent years on the subject of God’s original intent and ongoing purposes for cultural identity. Bryan’s insightful exegesis of dozens of biblical passages reveals new understandings behind stories ranging from Genesis to Revelation, including the account of the flood, the life of the nation of Israel, events in the Gospels, conflicts in the early church, and the visions in Revelation. These biblical insights, combined with commentary on today’s issues, illuminate pervasive blind spots, demystify certain passages (such as the apparent genocide of Canaan), and equip us to act on principles that align with God’s call to spread the gospel in ways that both destabilize and renew cultures. I recommend this book to all mission workers and all believers who seek greater self-awareness about their own cultural identity and the dynamics of culture. I recommend it to all who desire to act with greater clarity, compassion, and redemptive impact in contexts where we face unprecedented cultural, ethnic, national, and racial conflicts.”

Joshua Bogunjoko, International Director, SIM

“This book does not provide simple answers, based on a few proof texts, to the complex issues surrounding ethnicity, nationality, and race. Instead, Bryan harvests the rich biblical theology behind the portrayal of diversity in the Bible and provides teaching that is vitally needed for our confused generation.”

Ajith Fernando, Teaching Director, Youth for Christ, Sri Lanka; author, *Discipling in a Multicultural World*

“Among the heated arguments and rancorous debates that characterize much Western conversation, expressions such as *culture*, *ethnicity*, *race*, *cultural identity*, *assimilation*, *individualism*, and *diversity* are dropped into live discussions like grenades. It takes a few minutes to grasp how these words mean different things to different people, and are often deployed with more zeal than insight—the purpose being to score points, not win arguments. What a pleasure it is, then, to read Steven Bryan’s learned and evenhanded book and to listen in on presentations that are mature, reasoned, and convincing. Better yet, the stances Dr. Bryan adopts are grounded in careful exegesis and wonderfully refreshing biblical theology. It could have been written only by a faithful and competent biblical scholar who has spent many years in fresh study of Scripture while being immersed in more than one culture. This is not a book to skim, it is a book to ponder.”

D. A. Carson, Cofounder and Theologian-at-Large, The Gospel Coalition

“In this book, Steven Bryan helps us to see culture holistically and redemptively by weaving biblical theology into this all-important study. We travel together, surveying cultural identity in the beauty of creation, the tragic results of the fall, and the hope reignited in the winding path of redemption and the new creation. This fresh approach leaves us appreciating the differences in the variety of cultures and how God’s plan will finally make us one people, with Christ being our ultimate identity. This tour de force is worth putting your teeth into. It will certainly mature and enrich you!”

Conrad Mbewe, Pastor, Kabwata Baptist Church, Lusaka, Zambia;
Founding Chancellor, African Christian University

*Cultural Identity and
the Purposes of God*

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A Biblical Theology of Ethnicity, Nationality, and Race

Steven M. Bryan

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Cultural Identity and the Purposes of God: A Biblical Theology of Ethnicity, Nationality, and Race

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To Dawn

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Preface

THOUGH INTENDED BY GOD to be a rich source of blessing, differences in collective identity have instead become one of humanity's greatest sources of conflict, suspicion, alienation, and violence. The animosity engendered by cultural difference has also cut deep chasms within the church. No less than others, Christians have struggled to understand and respond to the many ways in which our sense of belonging to a group shapes our experience of life and our perceptions of those who belong to other groups. As a result, these differences in collective identity and the cultural expressions that mark them out easily become a source of distrust and division.

Scripture, however, casts a vision for the recovery of cultural identity as a means of blessing for all peoples. The aim of this book is to enable Christians to see and experience the restoration of this blessing.

A New Testament scholar by training, I have spent most of my adult life teaching outside of my passport country. In doing so, I have come to appreciate the profound importance of biblical theology to the life of God's people around the world. I have witnessed the maturity and faith that come as Christians grasp the way in which the various parts of Scripture work together to tell a unified story of God's purposes. These experiences and convictions come together in the pages that follow.

The origins of this book may be traced to a seminar on ethnicity that I helped lead several years ago at the Ethiopian Graduate School of Theology. It was in that seminar that I began to grasp something of the centrality of cultural identity to the purposes of God. Over the course of

more than two decades of living and teaching in Ethiopia, I experienced a growing appreciation of the power and importance of cultural identity as a fundamental feature of human existence. But I could also see the profound struggle within most nations to hold cultural multiplicity within themselves. As I finished writing the book, ethnic tensions that had long simmered in Ethiopia erupted in civil war. In one sense, the war is news, but in another, it is part of an age-old story.

That story is told and retold wherever culturally distinct groups come together within a larger whole, from ancient empires to modern states. To be sure, the way the story is told varies with the particularities of the cultural groups involved and of the contexts in which they interact with one another. Thus, after returning to the United States, I was quickly reminded that the fault lines here are more regularly marked out in other ways. Ethnicity plays a part, but more often cultural identity is defined in racial or national terms.

However cultural identity is conceived, the tensions that arise when cultures collide have led many to think that cultural difference is itself a problem. Many have succumbed to the temptation of thinking that cultural multiplicity within a society is ultimately unworkable and must somehow be prevented, banished, or reduced. Many who identify as Christians have found themselves implicated in a global resurgence of ethnonationalism—the belief that a nation should be culturally singular. Others have supported regimes of cultural dominance or insularity. However, to take such views is to suppose that cultural multiplicity plays no part within the purposes of God or is itself a problem to overcome.

The vulnerability of Christians to such temptations increases dramatically when they take a limited view of what Scripture is about. For many Christians, the Bible is fundamentally about the relationship between God and the individual. In important ways, this is true. But it is far from the whole story. The aim of this book is to explore what Scripture has to say about God's purposes not only for people but also for peoples. As we shall see, the Bible situates individuals within families and families within peoples. Further, the relationship between peoples turns out to be a crucial, if often overlooked, feature of the biblical

story. Only by understanding God's intentions for peoples can we live in the world as God intended and live in hope of the world to come.

I owe a great debt to a generation of Ethiopian students who graciously engaged my attempts to set my not fully formed understanding of God's purposes into a not fully formed understanding of Ethiopian cultural and ecclesial realities. My hope is that many of them will benefit from this book as a more developed form of ideas that began to take shape in those years together. I am especially grateful to much-cherished Ethiopian colleagues from several intersecting spheres of life and ministry. Three of them—Worku Haile-Mariam, Donek Tesfaye, and Bekele Deboch—read all or part of this manuscript amid the pressures of a pandemic and the tragedy of war. If there is balm in these pages for the wounds of a nation, it will be applied by men and women like these.

When the manuscript was still rough, Nydiaris Hernández-Santos organized a group of students from Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, where I now teach, to meet by Zoom to read and discuss each chapter. The members of the group came from a variety of cultures from around the world. I am told that the discussions were reliably lively! Nydiaris's weekly distillation of comments from the group led to many substantive improvements. Judging from the experience of the group, I think the greatest value of the book may well come as it is read and discussed in culturally diverse groups like this one. Many of the questions posed to the group by Nydiaris have found their way into the discussion questions posed for each chapter. I am deeply grateful to George Aidoo, Caroline Thao, Kazusa Okaya, Eliezer Brayley, Alan Lee, Miranda George, Jinsook Kim, and especially Nydiaris.

My untiring graduate assistant, Olle Larson, undertook the enormous task of tidying and trimming the manuscript, squeezing it into a busy summer of ministry. In the course of doing so, he asked a number of questions that sharpened—and shortened!—the argument. My sister, Shawna Loyd, read the whole manuscript and chipped away considerable dross. Each of my three sons—Jack, Cooper, and Cy—read all or parts of the book on short notice, leaving me to marvel at how I came

to have such clear-thinking and well-read offspring. In addition to providing excellent company, they served up editorial acumen, cultural insight, and gentle critique that made the final stages of the writing process fun. Our beloved daughter-in-law Hannah has brought much joy into our family, not least for her uncommon warmth and straightforward openness. Our backyard conversations about a host of things, including this book, were a summerlong delight.

The last of my in-house editors to read the manuscript was my mother. When I was convinced that there were no more infelicities left to find, she found plenty. Her late-stage editorial work was but one of the many ways that she and Dad have supported me over many years. I can only hope that I will approach eighty with as much acuity, grace, and love for God and family as she has.

I dedicate the book to my wife, Dawn. I cannot imagine a more well-informed, engaged, and encouraging partner in thought for the ideas of this book. I may have put them onto paper, but she puts them into practice every day with consummate wisdom and skill.

Ethnicity, Nationality, and Race

The Problem of Cultural Identity

I have a dream.

MARTIN LUTHER KING JR. (AUGUST 28, 1963)

I had a dream.

NEBUCHADNEZZAR (DAN. 2:3)

LONG BEFORE MARTIN LUTHER KING JR. shared his dream on a warm August day in 1963, another leader of another sort had a very different dream. Unlike MLK, Nebuchadnezzar, king of Babylon, refused to share his dream. He had no idea what it meant, and he was afraid of it. When a young Hebrew exile deciphered its meaning, this nation-conquering king may have been unsurprised to learn that he had dreamed of empires. But his dream augured ill not only for his empire but for all that would follow.

In his dream, the king had seen an enormous four-part statue in human form. “The head of this image was of fine gold, its chest and arms of silver, its middle and thighs of bronze, its legs of iron, its feet partly of iron and partly of clay” (Dan. 2:32–33). Nebuchadnezzar was doubtless happy to learn that he and his empire were the head of

gold, though less happy to hear that his empire would be followed by three more. Scholars still debate the identities of the four empires, but the more salient point may be that there were four. One of the most frequent keys to the interpretation of biblical dreams is numbers,¹ and the number four frequently symbolizes the earth in its totality.² Both individually and together, the four empires represented human dominion over the whole earth and its peoples.

However, there was a weakness in the feet of the statue, rendering the whole of human dominion unstable and fragile. The feet, we are told, were formed from a mixture of iron and clay. The iron, of course, was the material of the final empire (the legs), but the weakness of the feet undermined the strength of the whole. Though empires claim to enfold the peoples of their domain into a unified whole, the rhetoric of unity never quite matches the reality. As the young Hebrew explained it, the mixture of materials represented a mixing of peoples who “will not remain united, any more than iron mixes with clay” (Dan. 2:43 NIV).³ As a result, every empire stands on feet of clay.

A weakness of human dominion in virtually every form arises from the challenge of incorporating peoples who differ from one another into one people. Is it even possible to forge one people from many? The waking dream of Martin Luther King Jr. was a response to one tragi-

- 1 John Joseph Collins and Adela Yarbro Collins, *Daniel: A Commentary on the Book of Daniel*, Hermeneia (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993), 166.
- 2 Moisés Silva, ed., *New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology and Exegesis* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2014), 4:486.
- 3 Translations of Daniel 2:43 vary, reflecting a difference of opinion among commentators regarding the meaning of the Hebrew idiom “mixing of seed.” Commentators who regard the fourth kingdom as Greece take this as a reference to an unsuccessful attempt to forge unity between the Seleucid and Ptolemaic dynasties through intermarriage, perhaps in the hope of recovering a unified Greek empire. Conservative commentators tend to regard the fourth kingdom as Rome and understand the verse as a reference to the attempt to forge unity between the various peoples that comprised the empire: “As diversity of languages split up the Tower of Babel, so the inability of cultures within this empire to live in peace dismantles this behemoth of destruction. [Cultural multiplicity] would become tribalism and the social and political fabric of the empire would not hold.” Eugene Carpenter, “Daniel,” in *Cornerstone Biblical Commentary: Ezekiel & Daniel* (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale House, 2010), 346.

cally common “solution” to the problem—for one people to subjugate all others. Against this, King called for a renewed focus on individuals. The best ideals of America—the ideals of equality, freedom, and justice—were rooted in the biblical notion that every individual is made in the image of God and equally endowed with dignity and worth. As a result, King longed for the day when his children would “not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character.”⁴

Some have supposed that these well-known words reflect an aspiration for a nation no longer comprised of *peoples* but of *individuals*. To be sure, King’s vision placed the individual squarely into focus, but he was addressing a nation accustomed to thinking about not just individuals but also groups. In that context, King reasoned that if all individuals are equal, the fact that they belong to different groups should not and must not change that fact.

King certainly knew that groups also matter, even if group membership has no bearing on the dignity and worth of the individual. But how do they matter? How should we think about the relationship between the groups that make up a society? Is the multiplicity of groups within a society even *good*? Or should the only group be the nation as a whole? These questions, in turn, point us to more fundamental questions. What does it mean for a nation to be a nation? Is a nation a collection of individuals or of peoples? Can a nation have many cultures or must it have only one? If a nation has many peoples, each with its own identity, what is the nature of their national identity? Can they even have one? Can a nation contain within it many peoples or will such a mixing of peoples always lead to weakness, division, and, ultimately, dissolution?

Individuals and Cultures: The Question of Identity

To ask these questions reflects the fact that a fundamental dimension of human existence, well attested in both experience and Scripture, is that humans are social, relational beings. That fact inexorably

4 Martin Luther King Jr., “I Have a Dream,” *American Rhetoric*, <https://www.americanrhetoric.com/>.

results in the formation of groups—a process described early in Scripture and assumed throughout its pages. This does not mean that the groups to which we belong gather together and function in an intentionally coordinated way—only that human social interactions invariably result in a sense of belonging, derived from an awareness of similarity with some and difference from others.⁵ As we shall see, there are different types of groups. Some people think of their groups in ethnic terms; others think in national terms; still others identify themselves in racial terms. These are not the only possibilities. Scripture, for instance, speaks of “tribes” and “clans”—forms of social organization that remain important in some parts of the world today. There are important differences between these forms of collective identity, and we will need to understand them if we are to make sense of the biblical witness regarding the nature of groups. However, though the forms of collective identity vary, the phenomenon itself is universal.

Not only is the phenomenon of group identity universal, it is often multiple: it is possible for people to sense that they belong to more than one group. This can happen with a child who has parents who come from different groups, for example. It can also happen because people identify with more than one kind of group. An Ethiopian friend from some years ago won a lottery for the US State Department’s Diversity Visa program. Shortly after arriving in the United States, he joined the US Army, served in Iraq, and eventually became a US citizen. For those reasons (and others), he thought of himself as an American. However,

5 Certain theorists have criticized the application of the term *group* to social categories of people; so especially, Rogers Brubaker, *Ethnicity without Groups* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2004). However, in using the term *group*, I am not suggesting that the “groups” to which people belong are actual groups, conceived as relatively homogenous, bounded, socially organized sets of people whose actions are coordinated. Rather a group to which we apply terms such as *ethnicity* may be only a loose collectivity, “the members of which recognize its existence and their membership in it.” So Richard Jenkins, *Rethinking Ethnicity* (London: Sage, 2008), 26. As Jenkins notes, even if there is no actual group, we feel that we are members of a group. Our perception of membership refers to the subjective sense of belonging that emerges from social interactions that produce an awareness of similarity with some and difference from others.

he also still thought of himself as an Ethiopian. When he was with other Ethiopians, he sometimes identified as an Amhara—one of Ethiopia’s many ethnic groups. As these examples imply, there are not only different kinds of groups, but different ways of belonging to groups. A person might identify with one group in certain circumstances and with another group in other situations.

Our sense of belonging to a group or groups is shaped in part by the fact that we intuitively recognize similarity. That recognition creates a feeling of affinity. That sense of affinity or kinship influences the way we think and act, often in ways we might not realize. Our sense of belonging to a group is also shaped by our awareness of other groups. Thus, when we see others as belonging to a different group, we intuitively respond in ways that reflect that fact—for good and for ill. This instinctive response to “otherness” need not be oppositional. Often, however, it is.

To recognize group identity is not to deny the obvious fact of variation between individuals who belong to the same group. Thus, it is possible to distinguish between personal identity and collective identity.⁶ Still, groups, as such, do not have an identity in the way that individuals do. In fact, we may think of collective identity as a dimension of personal identity.⁷ Whereas personal identity focuses on my sense of self that I share with no one else, collective identity focuses on the sense of self that I share with others—the recognition that I share ways of thinking, speaking, and acting with others whom I believe to be like me. We may account for *why* we share these commonalities in different ways. But all individuals form a sense of personal identity, in part, through the experience of belonging to a group.

6 For recent discussions of personal identity from a Christian perspective, see Klyne Snodgrass, *Who God Says You Are: A Christian Understanding of Identity* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2018) and Brian S. Rosner, *Known by God: A Biblical Theology of Personal Identity* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2017).

7 Jenkins draws on the anthropologist Clifford Geertz’s well-known definition of ethnicity as “socially ratified personal identity” and concludes that it is “collective and individual, externalized in social interaction and the categorization of others, and internalized in personal self-identification.” *Rethinking Ethnicity*, 13–14.

To this point, I have primarily used the term “collective identity,” but much of what I have said thus far has to do with a particular form of collective identity—that is, cultural identity. We could imagine other kinds of collectives—“all students” or “all children,” for example—and even speak meaningfully about common features of such groups. But we would soon discover that the dissimilarities between individuals within those groups outweigh the traits they share. The similarities within these broad collectives do not constitute a whole pattern of life within which members make sense of the world. By contrast, in speaking of “culture,” we are talking about a constellation of similarities in the ways that the members of a group think, speak, and act. Those similarities coalesce into a kind of playbook that guides our actions and interactions. That playbook not only contains implicit rules for how we play the game, but constantly evolves as the rules evolve and plays are added, changed, or struck from the playbook. Individuals choose how they want to play the game, but they choose their plays from the playbook.

Though notoriously difficult to define, the word *culture* remains widely used and useful. The term suffers somewhat from being used in widely different ways, but is commonly used to describe the sense that we belong to a people. Thus, when we speak of cultural identity, we are speaking of “peoplehood.” Business leaders often speak of their “corporate culture.” I teach at a university where we sometimes refer to the “campus culture.” Although these “cultures” shape our sense of self in some ways, it would be odd to describe the environment of the company or school where I work as a meaningful part of my “cultural identity.” At a workplace or on a campus, there may be a shared “language” and a way of doing things that people share while there. But that is not *my* culture. I get this not so much from places with people, but from a people who have a place that they think of as their own. Cultural identity, then, is the sense that I belong to a people and make sense of the world in relation to the constellation of norms and values, beliefs and practices associated with that people.

Nations, Cultures, and Individuals: Modern States and an Ancient Problem

If individuals have a cultural identity by virtue of belonging to a people, how does this shape what it means for a nation to be a nation? Or, to ask the question differently, what is the relationship between cultural identity and nationality? Can a nation comprise more than one people and, if so, how?

To consider these questions in a modern context means that we must think about “states.” The term *state* refers to internationally recognized political sovereignty over a territory with defined borders, together with the institutions and order that preserve and maintain that sovereignty.⁸ Though the two terms are sometimes used interchangeably, *state* and *nation* can be distinguished. Whereas a state is a government, a nation is a people. Often we think of a nation as the people governed by a state, and nationality as a form of identity that comes from a sense of belonging to that nation. But if the nation is a people, what about cultural groups inside a nation?

At the heart of debates about political systems are conflicting conceptions of the relationship between individuals, groups, nations, and states. The deepest divisions in these debates have to do with the nature of the relationship between the varying cultural identities of the peoples governed by the state and the national identity fostered by the state.

8 A state in this sense should be distinguished from the use of the term to refer to the internal states (plural) that come under the authority of the state (singular). So, for example, the states of the United States or India have only limited sovereignty. Nigeria and Australia are also examples of states that have internal states. Other states have internal entities of other names and types, such as provinces (e.g., Saskatchewan in Canada), territories (e.g., Puerto Rico in the United States), countries (e.g., England, Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland in the UK), and even nations (e.g., the Cherokee Nation within the United States). A single state can have multiple forms of internal entities, some of which reflect the diversity of peoples under its sovereignty. The cultural identity derived by a sense of belonging to these internal entities can vary widely. Though confusing to some, it is sensible to many Cherokees to have both Cherokee and American nationality, just as it is sensible to many to be both English and British. In some countries, official internal entities often mean rather less from the perspective of cultural identity than internal regions, e.g., “the South” in the United States.

As we see in the following brief survey of the various approaches that states take to the challenge of containing peoples of different cultural identities within one nation, no approach fully resolves Nebuchadnezzar's dilemma.

1. *Civic Nationalism and the Creation of a National Culture: Individuals Make States, States Make National Identity.* In the years preceding the American and French Revolutions, there emerged a new way of thinking about what it means to be a nation. In the ancient conception, a nation was a people bound by kinship and custom (i.e. ethnicity). But with the Enlightenment, that began to change. The French philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau argued that a nation should be formed by “a social contract” between individuals who come together around a set of universal truths about individuals. The social contract, it was held, would bind individuals together within a system of laws and governance designed to protect the “universal,” “natural,” or “inalienable” rights of individuals.

In this new way of thinking, a nation was formed by individuals whose commonality was a shared set of ideas about the primacy of the individual. This has sometimes been called a “civic nation” as opposed to an “ethnic nation.”⁹ The cultural identity of a “civic nation” is not the *basis* of nationhood but its by-product. As such, the formation and fostering of national identity—a cultural identity that takes the form of nationality—becomes an ongoing project of the state.¹⁰ Thus, when

9 For the distinction, see especially Anthony Smith, *National Identity* (London: Penguin, 1991), 11–13.

10 Though the term *nation* refers to a people, the nature of that people is disputed. By some accounts, a nation differs very little from an ethnic group. By other accounts, a nation is any group of individuals bound together by the desire to share a common political life. This has given rise to discussions of two types of nations, “ethnic” and “civic.” An attempt to mediate between the two regards a nation as a cultural group bound by civic ties, whether or not the culture of that group is that of a single ethnicity. See Nenad Miscevic, “Nationalism,” *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Fall 2020 Edition), <https://plato.stanford.edu/>, citing Michel Seymour, “On Redefining the Nation,” in *Nationalism and Ethnic Conflict: Philosophical Perspectives*, ed. Nenad Miscevic (Chicago: Open Court, 2000), 25–56.

the American founders came together to form a nation, they were self-consciously creating a new kind of nation—one based on certain universally valid affirmations about individuals. In theory, at least, the nation is first an idea about individuals and then a people with a national identity derived from that idea.

The individualism that characterizes many Western societies reflects this fundamental assessment of the individual as properly prior to any conception of the group.¹¹ Often referred to as “liberalism” or “classical liberalism,” its basic assumptions are held not only by “liberals” but also by people who identify as “libertarians,” “conservatives,” and more. In other words, assumptions about the priority of the individual give rise to a range of political views because of differences over human nature and over the meaning of liberty, equality, and justice. However, the shared assumption remains that the nation begins not with the cultural identity of a group but with universal truths about individuals. In countries such as France, the focus on individuals is so strong that

The distinction between ethnic and civic forms of nationality remains useful, not least in grappling with the difference between modern nations (which are often closer to the civic type) and ancient ones (which are closer to the ethnic type), including the various nations to which Scripture refers. What is clearly modern and not ancient is the concept of the state, predicated on principles of international recognition and fixed borders. The influential view of Anthony Smith is that modern nations have their origin in ancient ethnic groups, which he calls *ethnie* (a French word for “ethnic communities”). Thus, Smith both distinguishes ancient nations and modern nations and also sees continuity between them. Partly for this reason, Smith distinguishes between the states of “civic nations” and “nation-states.” While nations of both types may have ethnic origins, the term *nation-states* refers only to the small number of countries in which a single ethnic group comprises most or all of the population. See Smith, *The Ethnic Origins of Nations* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1986).

Like ethnic groups, nations of both types are “imagined communities”—an expression coined by Benedict Anderson to express the idea that nations exist as a sociological phenomenon in which the members imagine themselves as a group because of a shared sense of history, language, ethnicity, culture, religion, or ideology. See Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, rev. ed. (London: Verso, 1991).

11 The origins of individualism remain hotly debated. One common idea is that individualism is an outcome of the Reformation, but this idea has met strong resistance. See, for example, Malcolm B. Yarnell, III, *Royal Priesthood in the English Reformation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 1–9.

any discussion of the racial or ethnic identity of groups can easily give offense. In such contexts, the pressure for minority cultures to assimilate to the national culture can be considerable.

2. *Globalization and the Creation of a Global Culture: Individuals Make States, So Who Needs Nations?* If certain truths about individuals are both primary and universal, many have supposed that they are as applicable in Baghdad as they are in Boise. For many, it has been a short step from this notion to the idea that nations can and perhaps should cede all or part of their sovereignty to regional federations or superstates, or perhaps even a global superstate. If states are formed by the consent of individuals to the universal values and norms of an implicit social contract, why not superstates?

In the heady days of the early 1990s, the Soviet Union was flying apart and a “new world order” seemed tantalizingly near. The fall of the iron curtain led many to expect the imminent emergence of a stable social order founded on internationalism, liberal values, and individual human rights. As Francis Fukuyama famously theorized, “What we may be witnessing is not just the end of the Cold War, or the passing of a particular period of post-war history, but the end of history as such . . . the end point of mankind’s ideological evolution and the universalization of Western liberal democracy as the final form of human government.”¹² Many who shared that view believed that they could see an emerging global order in which nations would either cease to exist or surrender much of their sovereignty to global or international institutions.

The political order anticipated by Fukuyama never materialized, and the concept now appears naive. Still, a kind of global order did emerge with borderless free trade, a free flow of information, and, for some at least, free immigration across increasingly open borders. This global order, often described as “globalization,” has a kind of cultural identity associated with it, especially among urban youth for whom

12 Francis Fukuyama, “The End of History?,” *The National Interest* 16 (1989): 5.

social media and the internet became a powerful medium for a global cultural identity centered in pop culture. I recall stepping into a public minibus on the outskirts of Nairobi a few years ago—packed with people and pulsing with American rap music. Later, when I spoke of it with a friend, he said that he thought that youth in African cities such as Nairobi or Lagos were culturally more similar to youth in Los Angeles than to their own parents. The impact of a globalized culture has been more concentrated not only among youth but also in cities, where access to media facilitates the diffusion of a kind of globalized cultural identity.

While the phenomenon was celebrated by some, others regarded it as destructive. Many of the latter readily embraced calls to “protect” local cultures and traditions against the sameness of a globalized culture. Some of these calls have had a decided ethnonationalist cast.

3. *Ethnonationalism and the Preservation of National Culture: Cultures Are Nations, Each of Which Should Have Its Own State.* Perhaps the most concrete political achievement inspired by a vision for a world of attenuated national identity was the formation of the European Union in the early 1990s. But even as the details of the Maastricht Treaty of 1993 that formed the EU were being worked out, ancient ethnonationalist animosities erupted in the heart of Europe. Scarcely half a century had passed since the Holocaust, and once more “ethnic cleansing” and “genocide” dominated the headlines from Europe with the outbreak of armed conflict in Bosnia. The horrors of the Rwandan genocide soon followed and further highlighted the belief that every ethnic group, every people, and every cultural identity should have its own state, and that the state is properly the manifestation of a single cultural identity. On this understanding, every people is a nation with its own culture. In order to ensure the preservation of that culture, every nation should have its own state.¹³

13 Cf. Ernst Gellner’s definition of nationalism: “a theory of political legitimacy which requires that ethnic boundaries should not cut across political ones.” Gellner, *Nations and Nationalism* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1983), 1. For a Christian critique of nationalism,

The impulses of ethnonationalism that led to two world wars in the twentieth century have by no means disappeared, as Fukuyama had hoped and others had dreamed. Instead, they have morphed. The rise of militant Islam in the late twentieth century gave this old idea a new form. Against the Western dream of a globalized liberal order, the radical vision of Al Qaeda and the Islamic State was for a single Arabized culture centered on a “pure” form of Islam as the basis for a single state.

Ethnonationalist ideologies like these are often deeply opposed to democracy, but they also take root inside of democracies. Among the newer forms of nationalism, we could count “illiberal democracy”—an expression coined by the Hungarian prime minister Victor Orbán to defend the curtailment of a free press and independent judiciary on grounds that liberal institutions oppose the right of the people to preserve the integrity of their national identity and land. Similar nationalist impulses have fueled reactions to a tide of immigration and the growth of minority groups in many of the democracies of North America and Europe on grounds that, without strict limits, cultural outsiders alter the culture of the nation. Common to all such impulses is the notion that a nation should have but one people with one culture—an identity properly expressed in the form of the state and properly protected by the power of the state.

4. *Collectivism and the Protection of a Common Culture: States Are Guardians of a Nation’s Culture.* The principles that undergird most Western liberal democracies have little influence in places such as China, Russia, or Iran. In China, for instance, discussion of rights does not focus on the individual alone but on the collective good for which

see especially the recent analysis of the thought of Karl Barth in Carys Moseley, *Nations and Nationalism in the Theology of Karl Barth* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013). Moseley traces the development of Barth’s repudiation of “the nationalist dogma that every nation must have its own state” and places his thinking about nationalism both within the context of his developing theology of nationality and his experience as a Swiss theologian teaching in Germany until his employment was terminated by the Nazis. Moseley, *Nations and Nationalism*, 13.

the sovereignty of the state is foundational and the interests of the state primary. As the inverse of liberalism, collectivism regards the state as philosophically prior to the individual. But the interests of minority peoples are also subordinated to the good of the state. In China, the primary right of the individual is not to liberty but to economic well-being, and this depends on the security and sovereignty of the state.¹⁴ Thus, discussions of the rights of ethnic groups or minority “nationalities” within China begin with the presumption not of individual freedom but of the common good on which individual well-being depends. To the extent that the perception of the common good is tied to a common culture guarded and promoted by the state, the encouragement of cultural diversity within the whole is limited at best. At worst, those whose way of life varies too much from accepted norms and values may be subject to cultural “re-education.”

To the extent that people are viewed through the lens of economic class, the desire to reduce economic difference in order to subsume all people within a single class further attenuates the significance of cultural difference in the eyes of the state. However, religion and ethnicity can also generate a political impulse to regard all who come under the authority of the state as an undifferentiated whole, the integrity of which the state seeks to preserve in the interests of national unity and stability.

5. *Ethnic Federalism and the Disappearance of National Identity: States Are Guardians of Multiple Cultures.* The approaches surveyed above have a common focus on the cultivation of a singular national identity, often at the expense of the concerns of constituent cultures—particularly minority cultures. One might say that the pursuit of unity comes at the cost of diversity. But what if the opposite were the case? What if the state focused not on a single national identity but on the identities of its constituent cultures?

14 Roland Boer, “The State and Minority Nationalities (Ethnic Groups) in China,” in *The Palgrave Handbook of Ethnicity*, ed. Steven Ratuva (Singapore: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019), 93–107.

In 1994, Ethiopia adopted a new constitution and, with it, a new form of government that many regarded as novel, even experimental. If there was anything new under the sun, this seemed to be it. The new form of government was dubbed “Ethnic Federalism” because the constitution made explicit and primary the country’s commitment to the “nations, nationalities and peoples” within its borders. Of course, most countries have multiple groups within their borders. A few even acknowledge this plurality in their constitutions, but no country had gone as far in making ethnic diversity “a principle of political organization.”¹⁵

This principle was evident from the opening line of the new constitution. As many have observed, the preamble did not open with “We, the people . . .” but with “We, the nations, nationalities and *peoples* . . .” The point was clear. The nation would be a democracy in some sense but not a Western-style *liberal* democracy premised on the inalienable rights of individuals and held together by a single national culture. Neither would the nation be an empire under the domination of one people, as it had been during the country’s long imperial history. And neither would it be a centralized state with a singular cultural identity mediated and guarded by the state, as it had been under seventeen years of communist rule. Instead, it would be a country of peoples, with a state designed to ensure the rights of every ethnic group.

If the novel arrangement secured the rights of each ethnic group, it was less clear whether and how some eighty different peoples could remain unified around a common sense of national identity. The constitution had made Ethiopia a country of peoples, but could it be a people of peoples? The commitment to remain as one unified people was strictly conditional: each group was granted the right to secede from the whole. More importantly, the constitution did not, and per-

15 As the noted political philosopher Will Kymlicka put it, Ethiopia was unique in “the explicitness, at the constitutional level, of its affirmation of national [i.e., ethnic] self-determination and the logical consistency with which it attempts to institutionalize that principle.” Kymlicka, “Emerging Western Models of Multination Federalism: Are They Relevant for Africa?” in *Ethnic Federalism: The Ethiopian Experience in Comparative Perspective*, ed. David Turton (Oxford: James Currey, 2006), 51–52.

haps could not, ensure that any one people would pursue the good of every other people along with its own.¹⁶

Before long, it was clear that one ethnic group had become dominant in its control of the nation's power and resources. As suspicion between the various ethnic groups of the country grew and divisions between them became more intense, many wondered whether the unity of the nation could hold. As I write, ethnic conflict tears at the seams of a country in which ethnic identity has become for many the only identity that matters.

6. *Multiculturalism, Identity Politics, and the Attenuation of National Identity: The Secular State as a Response to Diversity.* As we have observed, nearly every country today must deal with the challenge of multiple cultures within their borders—a reality often described with the term *multicultural*. However, as a political philosophy, “multiculturalism” has had a major impact on liberal democracies, which have sought to accommodate the recognition of minority groups within a liberal order predicated on the primacy of the individual.

Initially, the impact of multiculturalism was felt particularly in debates over education. Advocates sought greater recognition of the presence and importance of minority cultures in school curricula as a form of resistance to the assimilationist tendencies of an education wholly shaped by the dominant culture in the name of national unity.

Two leading theorists of multiculturalism have been the Canadian philosophers Will Kymlicka and Charles Taylor. Kymlicka's work has focused in particular on the “group-differentiated rights” of minorities. He initially held that recognition of the rights of constituent cultures did not subvert the liberal focus on the individual because culture provides a necessary context for individuals to exercise their freedom. If liberalism presumes the freedom of individuals to choose, cultures pose the choices. In this view, nationality was little more than a political

16 A point well made by Jack Bryan, “From Rule to Responsibility: A Path Forward for Ethiopia,” *Ethiopia Insight*, October 27, 2020, <https://www.ethiopia-insight.com/>.

identity; the cultural identity of the nation was simply the sum of its constituent cultures. On this understanding, a unified sense of national identity is sublimated to the interests and cultures contained within a country. Or, to put it another way, national identity *is* multicultural. More recently, Kymlicka has stressed the need for liberal democracies to cultivate a common “societal culture” that makes a degree of assimilation of minority cultures unavoidable.¹⁷

Though Taylor is better known for his work on secularism, his earlier work focused on the problem of diversity within nations.¹⁸ Indeed, he considers the two issues together. Thus, he writes, “We [mistakenly] think that secularism . . . has to do with the relation of the state and religion, whereas in fact it has to do with the (correct) response of the democratic state to diversity.”¹⁹ That response should not be to form an antireligious culture, as many suppose, but to form a “political identity” around a common commitment to the basic premises of liberalism—democracy (the consent of individuals to be governed), the rights and freedoms of individuals, and equality—and shared historical, linguistic, or religious traditions.²⁰ Taylor here clearly means to say that a country needs a collective political identity to make democracy possible, but he carefully avoids saying that it needs a common *cultural* or national identity. Down that road lie the dangers of nationalism.

Criticism of multiculturalism as an attempt to account for multiple cultures within the framework of liberalism has often come from defenders of liberalism in its original form.²¹ One important reason for

17 See the summary of Kymlicka’s thought in Sarah Song, “Multiculturalism,” *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Fall 2020 Edition), <https://plato.stanford.edu/>.

18 Charles Taylor, “The Politics of Recognition,” in *Multiculturalism: Examining the Politics of Recognition*, ed. Amy Gutmann (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994), 25–74.

19 Charles Taylor, “The Meaning of Secularism,” *Hedgehog Review* 12 (2010): 25.

20 Taylor, “Meaning,” 31.

21 Taylor’s fellow Canadian, Jordan Peterson, is well-known for his reassertion of liberalism’s focus on the individual: “Your group identity is not your cardinal feature. That’s the great discovery of the west. That’s why the west is right. And I mean that unconditionally. The west is the only place in the world that has ever figured out that the individual is sovereign. And that’s an impossible thing to figure out. It’s amazing that we managed it. And it’s the key to everything that we’ve ever done right.” Cited in Tim Lott, “Interview:

this has been the fact that the multiculturalist goal of providing greater recognition and rights for minority cultures has been broadened to include a wide variety of groups, including some that come under the umbrella of LGBTQ. As a result, critics are now more likely to decry the rise of “identity politics” and see its focus on group identities of all sorts as corrosive of a national unity predicated on the liberal focus on the individual.

A People of Peoples

The differences between these various approaches to the question of the relationship between nationality on the one hand and ethnicity and race on the other are obviously immense. Yet, no system has proven particularly adept at dealing with the reality of cultural multiplicity within a society. To be sure, though liberalism does not account for groups within a society, it has resources for addressing issues that arise from differences between groups that others do not. Within such a society, Martin Luther King Jr. could appeal to the fundamental value of all individuals, whatever their skin color. But the fact that he had to make that appeal within a supposedly liberal society demonstrates the persistence of Nebuchadnezzar’s dilemma—the mixing of peoples within a single polity always seems to make it brittle. Is there another way?

Nebuchadnezzar’s dream did not end with an image of an idol with brittle feet. That image gives way to the image of a stone that crushes the idol. This stone strikes at every form of human pretense to dominion over the peoples of the earth, erupting beneath the fragile feet of all earthly power like a newly forming mountain that fills the earth (Dan. 2:34–35). This is the rule of God. Nebuchadnezzar did not see the nature of God’s rule over all peoples. He only saw the end of human

Jordan Peterson: “The Pursuit of Happiness Is a Pointless Goal,” *The Guardian*, January 21, 2018, <https://www.theguardian.com/>. By contrast, other popular voices come close to saying that liberalism without multiculturalism is racist. This, for instance, is the stance of Robin DiAngelo with respect to the American discourse on race: “To say that whiteness is a standpoint is to say that a significant aspect of white identity is to see oneself as an individual, outside or innocent of race—‘just human.’” DiAngelo, *White Fragility: Why It’s So Hard for White People to Talk About Racism* (Boston: Beacon, 2018), 29.

dominion brought by the advent of God's rule. He could not see how God's kingdom would address the weakness that marks all human dominion and every political system.

But we can. The mystery of God's purpose for the summing up of all things and all peoples into one has been disclosed (cf. Eph. 1:10). Although many have thought of Scripture as the story of God's purposes for individuals, that is only part of the story. It also reveals the purposes of God for peoples. It casts a vision for the profound significance of cultural identity as a source of blessing within the renewed and unified humanity of the new creation. In doing so, it never loses sight of individuals. Rather, it announces the good news that God in Christ has justified individuals and made that justification the basis for the fulfillment of his purpose to form a people of peoples. In contexts riven with ethnic and racial hatreds, it shows his people how to live in hope of the full and final fulfillment of his purposes for all peoples within one people.