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WHOSE SIDE IS GOD ON? Nationalism and Christianity

By Christopher Catherwood.

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A generation ago the conventional wisdom of middle England - whether in pub or in pew - was that religion and politics should not mix.

This seems hollow now, when the greatest threat to the USA comes from Muslim terrorists, and two governments led by avowed Christians are forced to address the claims of Shi'ite clerics to inherit the ruins of Iraq. President Bush keeps one eye on the well-heeled, well-armed fundamentalists who run the grassroots Republican Party in the name of Christ. In Britain, the Christian Institute, with its army of letter writers targeted at the House of Lords, stakes its claim to influence social policy.

Christopher Catherwood is an evangelical Anglican who has spent much time in the USA. His father, Fred, is well known to EN readers as a Christian politician. The younger Catherwood's new book asks whether there can be any such thing as a 'Christian country'. His answer to this is a vigorous 'no' - Christians are a multi-national, multi-cultural, worldwide community of converts. To claim that any particular country enjoys a special blessing from God is unscriptural. He sees such claims - heard surprisingly often in evangelical pulpits - as a 'national myth' comparable to the blood-curdling tribal nationalism that has been tearing apart the Balkans.

The younger Catherwood argues his case well. His style is easy and accessible and the book is an enjoyable read. He thinks the 'Christian America' movement draws on a 'myth' based on the history of the Puritan settlements in America, which linked citizenship rights to church membership. But, as he shows, later generations drifted away from the founders' faith, forcing the new church-states to invent a 'half way covenant' to allow unconverted citizens voting rights reserved to 'Christians'. The 18th-century Awakening revived believing churches and loosened church-state links, helping prepare the way for a secular federal constitution. So evangelicals who argue for a 'Christian nation' end up undermining their own churches by promoting nominalism. The more you think that each individual needs to be personally 'born again', the more you tend to favour a secular state which rejects the myth of an all-Christian society.

Chris Catherwood demolishes the whole idea of a 'Christian nation' and celebrates instead a Christian identity that is multi-cultural and transnational. He calls on evangelicals to reject the 'cultural war' which some Christians are trying to declare on the modern state. He also begins the task of building an alternative contemporary Christian understanding of a secular state with a limited but essential moral purpose - to guarantee the freedom of all, not to serve as an alternative pulpit.

Mr. Catherwood is to be congratulated for his short and lively book.