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The book that launched a new conservative movement

By **Donald Sweeting**

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The Virtue of Nationalism, now referred to as “the book that launched a movement,” was updated by Jewish political philosopher Yoram Hazony and rereleased this summer. The movement is national conservatism, sometimes called NatCon, which just hosted its fifth national conference in the United States. The book has deeply influenced many in the Trump administration, including Vice President JD Vance, and is partly responsible for the realignment of conservative movements in America and Europe.

National conservatism wants to go beyond William F. Buckley‘s notion that conservatives simply “stand athwart history, yelling stop!” The movement wants to play offense — to restore and fortify the nation’s cultural foundations. In so doing, it makes some exceptional but serious claims:

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1. Nationalism is a defensible political philosophy. Hazony rebuts the common view that it is evil.
2. Much of the hostility toward nationalism should be redirected toward transnational, imperialistic projects, which seek to dominate and coerce other nations.
3. There is a principled and conservative form of nationalism that says it is good to love our history and heritage and take care of our own (though not to the total exclusion of care for strangers). This kind of nationalism has nothing to do with biology or race. It upholds natural law, limited government, and individual liberties.
4. A nation is not a bare idea or a naked creed. It is much more. It is a shared patrimony, including a common language, culture, past history, and religion.
5. There is a long tradition of English and American nationalism that we have forgotten. In the United States, it was eclipsed by postwar liberal internationalism and "the new world order," which sought to dominate other nations.
6. Modern liberalism has decayed into a dogmatic, intolerant ideology. Untethered from God, Scripture, and tradition, and shaped by neo-Marxism, it has become destructive of family, faith, and freedom.
7. Hazony places the Bible at the center of political thought, pointing to the Hebrew Scriptures in particular. He says these Scriptures put a new political option on the table: a single nation that is united, self-governed, and not interested in governing its neighbors. He also says there is a biblical bias against empire and world government.

Hazony sets forth an intriguing political philosophy. It's quite different from what many of us were taught at university, where an enlightenment paradigm focused almost exclusively on the Greek origins of political thought, completely overlooking the influence of the Bible, which Hazony refers to as "the first great work of the Western political tradition."

When *The Virtue of Nationalism* first appeared in 2018, many critics got sidetracked by concentrating on Hazony's interpretation of John Locke (which I think is partly right and partly wrong). Hazony rightly criticizes Locke regarding how nations are born (individuals supposedly living in a perfect state of freedom who consent to a form of government). This is not so, according to Hazony. There has never been a state of nature where individuals were loyal only to themselves. Rather, they are loyal to family, clan, and tribe, which is the original prepolitical order, though rather anarchic. Nations emerge out of the shared heritage these groups have. We actually see this development in the Bible with the appearance of a "table of nations" in Genesis 10.

Hazony is quite right about the recent morphing of liberalism, which has not only absolutized freedom but also undermined the cultural institutions that created the conditions for liberty to flourish.

In his new, revised edition of *The Virtues of Nationalism*, Hazony also answers common objections that critics have raised about his proposal.

For example:

1. Didn't nationalism cause the last two world wars? Hazony says no. It was actually imperialistic ambitions that caused these catastrophes. Hitler was trying to establish an empire — a Third Reich.
2. Don't nationalist policies encourage hatred and bigotry? They can, according to Hazony, depending on which kind. He admits that nationalism has its flaws. There is an arrogant, statist kind of nationalism that jettisons religion and seeks to establish an individual's loyalty to the state as man's highest end. But this is not what Hazony argues for. He finds that liberal internationalism is actually more bigoted and hateful than nationalism.

This is a different take on nationalism than most of us have encountered. Before dismissing it or the national conservative movement, Hazony's book must be reckoned with.

Compared to the alternatives of tribal anarchy on one hand, and an international order under an imperial state on the other, Hazony makes the case that an order of independent nation-states is the best political arrangement known to mankind.

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