

# The Coherence of Liberal Nationalism

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The issue that I want to pursue in this chapter is whether the idea of a liberal nationalism makes sense—whether it is possible without contradiction to be both a liberal and a nationalist. To many people the juxtaposition sounds incongruous, a bit like ‘friendly Rottweiler’. Politics in Europe today is often presented as polarized between liberals and nationalists (Macron is a liberal, Le Pen is a nationalist, etc.), under the assumption that these are two starkly opposed political creeds. Evidently, if you start with that assumption, then ‘liberal nationalism’ sounds at best like a messy compromise, and at worst like a contradiction in terms. My aim is to see why liberalism and nationalism are thought to be at loggerheads with one another, and then to suggest why this need not be so.

## 1.1 Liberal Nationalism: A Very Short History

To supply a little background context, the first appearance of liberal nationalism as a political idea is usually dated to the middle of the nineteenth century, and specifically to the revolutionary period of the late 1840s when liberal demands for personal freedom and representative government were linked to national liberation claims made by national minorities within the European empires. Typical of liberal thinkers of this period were Giuseppe Mazzini (1907), who argued passionately for Italian unity and independence while defending individual rights and republican government, and John Stuart Mill, who supported the independence movements in Poland, Hungary, and Italy, while claiming that ‘free institutions are next to impossible in a country made up of different nationalities’ (Mill 1972, p. 361). But after this early flowering came a much longer period in which nationalist ideas were associated overwhelmingly with the authoritarian right. For mid-twentieth century liberals such as Karl Popper and Friedrich Hayek, nationalism was simply a regression to atavistic ‘tribal sentiments’ that had no place in a free society (Isaiah Berlin, in contrast, held a more complex view that enables us to see him from some angles as a bridge between the early liberal nationalists and their more recent successors<sup>1</sup>). The revival of liberal nationalism in the English-speaking world occurred in the 1990s, with contributions from Margalit and Raz (1990), MacCormick (1991), Miller (1993, 1995), Tamir (1993),

Canovan (1996), and others. Each of these authors had somewhat different reasons for wanting to show that nationalism could take a liberal form. Nevertheless there was sufficient overlap both in their proposals and in their justifying arguments for 'liberal nationalism' to emerge as a distinct object of scrutiny by both critics and defenders, and both of these opposing responses followed swiftly.<sup>2</sup>

So at the very least we can say that there was a lively 'liberal nationalism debate' in the 1990s. What is perhaps more remarkable is that with the exception of Moore's *The Ethics of Nationalism* from 2001, there has not really been a second generation of works defending that position at any length.<sup>3</sup> It is remarkable insofar as a version of liberal nationalism seems to have become the de facto working ideology of governments throughout the Western world. These governments operate under constitutions that are broadly if not perfectly liberal in form, and the policies they pursue are equally liberal—in matters of sexual morality and other lifestyle choices, for example. But they also have no hesitation in seeing it as their main function to defend and promote national interests abroad, and equally little hesitation in engaging in nation-building projects at home, supporting national culture in various ways, promoting education for citizenship and so forth. One might therefore expect that the academic literature in political theory would reflect this political consensus. But in fact we find very few thinkers today who are ready to describe themselves as liberal nationalists.

Yet appearances here may be somewhat deceptive. The leading lights of liberalism from the last generation, such as John Rawls and Ronald Dworkin, argued for positions that were close to liberal nationalism even if not explicitly presented under that description. Rawls, for example, introduced the concept of a 'people' to describe a body of citizens united not only by shared political institutions but also by 'common sympathies', and he immediately went on to quote at length Mill's idea of nationality to explain this idea (Rawls 1999, p. 23).<sup>4</sup> He then asked what a just set of rules would look like for a world made up of peoples in this sense. The concept of a people is often now used in this way, for the purpose of identifying a political community as distinct from a state, but leaving aside the special case of indigenous peoples, the groups picked out as 'peoples' are in fact just those groups who would previously have been described as nations. In other words, 'peoples' are in effect 'nations' minus the accumulated ideological baggage that the latter term carries with it.

So whereas liberal nationalists in the 1990s tried to detoxify the ideas of 'nation' and 'nationalism', the more recent tendency has been to find substitute terms that cover some of the same terrain but are felt to raise fewer controversial questions. This is understandable, but it is also a way of ducking the challenge that the first generation of liberal nationalists took on, namely one of showing how it was possible to combine liberalism and nationalism in a coherent way. So now I want to return to that challenge, and try to see what it is about nationalism that sticks in the throat of so many liberals today.

## 1.2 Liberalism, National Identity, and the Problem of Exclusion

In order to tackle directly the question whether liberal nationalism is a coherent political philosophy, it is helpful to start with a distinction between weaker and stronger versions of the claim that liberal nationalists are making. The weaker thesis is simply that liberalism and nationalism are in principle compatible. There is no theoretical or practical contradiction involved in valuing both the rights and freedoms that liberals defend and valuing goods such as national identity and national self-determination that nationalists champion. One set of goods does not come at the expense of the other: it is possible for a society both to offer its members a wide variety of lifestyle choices and to protect them from discrimination on grounds of race, gender, and so forth and for those members to participate in a shared national identity and to enjoy collective self-determination as bearers of that identity.

In contrast, the stronger thesis holds that liberalism needs nationality to survive: there cannot be a liberal society that does not have a national basis.<sup>5</sup> There are different ways to justify this stronger claim. One of them was anticipated in the quotation from Mill that I cited above about the conditions under which 'free institutions' can exist. This would now be expressed in terms of the preconditions for liberal democracy: democracy cannot flourish or even perhaps survive unless citizens share a national identity that unites them and creates sufficient trust to allow democratic institutions to function.<sup>6</sup> A second approach starts by assuming that social justice is an essential component of contemporary liberalism and then maintains that support for the welfare state and the other institutions of social justice depends on the solidarity that only a common national identity can create at society-wide level.<sup>7</sup> A third version points to national cultures as contexts of choice: a liberal society must be one that offers its members a wide range of lifestyle options to choose between, and this requires a state that has the will and ability to promote a common 'societal culture' within which individual life-choices can be made.<sup>8</sup>

Correspondingly, critics of liberal nationalism may direct their fire against either its stronger or its weaker formulations. They can either simply challenge the claim that liberalism needs the support of nationality; or they can go further and argue that nationalism, in whatever colours it presents itself, is always a threat to liberal values. It is this further challenge that I want to consider here.

Why might liberalism be presented as antipathetic to all forms of nationalism? One answer is that liberals, by definition, must be cosmopolitans. To be a liberal is to think of oneself as a 'citizen of the world', eschewing all forms of national allegiance. According to this view, liberals must deny that so long as states continue to exist, they are entitled to advance the interests of their own members

at the expense of foreigners. Instead they must be strictly impartial between insiders and outsiders. Now 'cosmopolitan liberalism' of this kind is certainly a political stance that we can readily recognize, and one that has significant numbers of adherents today. But it seems merely question-begging to claim that if you are a liberal you must also be a cosmopolitan liberal. If a liberal is someone who believes in personal freedom and human rights, and holds that political institutions should be designed so as to advance those aims, then, first of all, it must be an open question whether this is best achieved through having a number of independent nation-states or through a world government of some kind; and, second, it is equally open whether liberal values are better served when citizens see themselves as having a special responsibility for the interests of their compatriots, or when they think and behave only like 'citizens of the world'.<sup>9</sup>

So I am going to set aside the cosmopolitan version of the challenge to liberal nationalism in order to focus on what seems to me a more telling criticism of the compatibility claim. This holds that any form of nationalism is bound to compromise liberal equality by discriminating between citizens on the basis of how well they fit with the particular national stereotype of the country in question. The national identities that nationalists cherish and wish to strengthen are never 'neutral': they select for some traits and against others, whether these are gender, race, religion, language, ethnicity, indigeneity, etc. etc. Perhaps at a formal level a nation-state can treat all of its citizens equally, granting them equal rights under the law and equal access to public services. But, so the critics allege, people won't all experience their membership in the same way—some will continue to feel like an excluded minority so long as the state continues to recognize and promote a particular national identity as the basis for social unity. So if we understand liberalism as requiring not only that people should be treated in the same way materially, but also that they should be granted equal recognition as members of the political community, then the critics' claim is that this will not happen so long as membership is understood in national terms.

One response to this challenge has been to recommend that national identities should be reformed so that they shed their cultural features and become purely civic in their content, the nation being defined as a body of people sharing a commitment to certain political values.<sup>10</sup> And indeed, when politicians are called on to state what it means to be, for example, British, or what 'British values' are, they usually just trot out the familiar list of liberal platitudes—free speech, democracy, the rule of law, etc. But there are two problems with proposals to reconstruct national identity in this way. One is that it inevitably fails to capture how most people actually think of their own identities, which will have large historical, cultural, symbolic, etc. components—so in an attempt to include the previously excluded by redefining the nation in purely civic terms, there is a risk of alienating the majority for whom this is far from being the whole story.<sup>11</sup> Moreover it empties national identities of their specific content, since the list of

allegedly identity-conferring values will differ very little from one (liberal) society to the next, thereby failing to capture the particular elements that bind people to their compatriots. The other problem is that it is by no means certain that a liberal-democratic civic identity will be acceptable to all those it is intended to include. For it requires them to sign up to a somewhat determinate set of principles that may be at odds with their own cultural values, particularly in the case of those who belong to conservative religious communities. People from these backgrounds may find it easier to accept a somewhat fuzzier cultural version of national identity that does not require them to embrace 'militant' liberalism over questions such as gender roles and untrammelled freedom of expression. There is also the further risk that defining nationhood in terms of liberal political values will have an exclusive effect if it conveys the message that those who are born with certain cultural identities can never in fact become full members of the nation in question. This point has been made with particular reference to Islamic immigrants who are sometimes portrayed as incapable of wholeheartedly embracing liberal principles.<sup>12</sup>

What other responses do liberal nationalists have to the problem of excluded minorities? The first is to insist that national identities are always complex, containing many different cultural, historical, and political elements, so that in order to count as sharing in the identity, a person does not have to embrace them all.<sup>13</sup> The factors that go into the making of an identity might include a language, a religion, a literary icon, a landscape, or a favourite sport, but it is possible to find yourself in a minority on one of these matters and still identify with the nation so long as there are other parts of the identity that you accept. The second is that national identities are always in the process of being renegotiated as new arrivals and the upcoming generation challenge the existing ways of understanding what it means to be an X, and for liberal nationalists what matters is that everyone should be able to contribute to such re-evaluations on an equal footing—there should be no privileged guardians of national identity.<sup>14</sup> The key to this is open and inclusive democratic debate within political parties, the media, civil society groups, and so forth. Some cultural features will be downgraded and others upgraded. For example, the way that national history is portrayed, in schoolbooks and elsewhere, will shift to reflect the priorities of the present generation. New heroes—and new villains—will emerge; events once regarded as national triumphs—or disasters—may be viewed in a more critical light; and the balance of attention paid to different parts of the historical record will shift. If we follow Renan in believing that 'it is of the essence of the nation that all individuals should have much in common, and further that they should all have forgotten much' (1939, p. 191), then it should not seem untoward if what is remembered and what is forgotten about the past also changes over time as the nation redefines itself.<sup>15</sup>

Yet although it is certainly possible for people to share a national identity while still adhering to competing visions of what it means to be French or Swedish, there

will be moments at which an agreed definition is necessary—for example, in a debate over what is to be included in a common school curriculum, or when a national symbol, such as a flag, is being selected, and here it seems the exclusion issue is bound to resurface. Sometimes an ingenious compromise can be devised, to reflect the multicultural character of the society whose identity is in question. The new (post 1994) South African flag combines the yellow, black, and green colours taken from the flag of the ANC with the red, white, and blue that reflects the historical presence of Dutch and British settler communities; while the national anthem is a musical hybrid of the old Afrikaans anthem ‘Die Stem van Suid-Afrika’ and the Xhosa hymn ‘Lord Bless Africa’, with words that switch between five languages—Xhosa, Zulu, Sesotho, Afrikaans, and English.<sup>16</sup> But other issues are less amenable to compromise. Should a single language be designated for use in public settings, and if so what should it be? Should the state be a constitutional monarchy or a republic? Should it remain inside or outside of an international consortium such as the EU? Although there can be debate about the details (if the monarchy is to be preserved, what is the monarch actually supposed to do?), these are essentially Yes/No questions, so if there is disagreement about them, liberal nationalists will accept that the view of the majority must prevail. So there can be no guarantee that the (partial) definition of national identity (at least for the immediate future<sup>17</sup>) that the decision embodies will be equally acceptable to all citizens. The problem of exclusion is liable to recur: those who were outvoted may say that they can no longer recognize the country they once belonged to. Nationalists insist that the national identity must have some content; but where compromise on the content is impossible to achieve, the liberal worries that the people or the groups on the losing side of the argument will not be able to see themselves as fully equal citizens when the decision is implemented.

### 1.3 State Neutrality and Religious Establishment

A particularly important test case here is religion. What are liberal nationalists to say about the policies of the state in countries where religion has historically played a large role in defining national identity, often in direct opposition to the religious identity of a neighbouring state (think of Protestantism in several European countries, Judaism in Israel, or Islam in Pakistan)? Should national identity now be secularized and the state adopt a policy of strict neutrality, at least as far as religion is concerned? But what if their inherited religious identities still matter to citizens, and the majority wish to see that aspect of their identity reflected in the public realm?

It is in fact hard for a liberal state to remain strictly neutral on religious questions. Decisions have to be made on issues such as to whether to permit exemptions from generally applicable laws on religious grounds, which religious

practices to allow and which to debar, whether to provide public funding to religious schools, what manifestations of religion are to be permitted in public space (processions, buildings, monuments, etc.). Liberals will instinctively reach for some general principle such as Mill's famous harm principle ('the only purpose for which power can rightfully be exercised over any member of a civilised community, against his will, is to prevent harm to others' [Mill 1972, p. 73]) to resolve these questions, but in many cases such a principle turns out to be woefully inadequate to the task in hand. Take a simple question such as whether a school that has adopted a school uniform policy should allow a child not to comply with it because she has religious objections. It might seem that the child who comes to school dressed differently is not harming anyone, so she should be permitted to wear the clothing that her religious beliefs require her to wear. But clearly the school had reasons for its policy, perhaps to do with maintaining discipline or cohesion among the pupils. So allowing individual departures from the policy may have social costs. If its legitimacy comes under challenge, other children are thereby encouraged to defect, and so forth. No individual is being directly harmed by the concession, but a justifiable (let's assume) collective goal is being undermined. Or turn the question around, and consider the case of displaying religious symbols in the classroom. It is hard to maintain that students who have religious commitments that are different from those of the religion whose symbols are on display (or have no religious beliefs at all) are being harmed by the symbols' presence in any practical or material sense. Nevertheless, it may lead to their feeling alienated from the school community. In neither case, then, will an appeal to the liberal harm principle resolve a disagreement over where the boundaries of freedom of religious expression should fall.

To settle questions such as these, public authorities cannot simply adopt a stance of religious detachment. They must be prepared to enter the fray and establish whether there are compelling religious reasons either (in the first case) to allow an exemption to an otherwise valid rule or (in the second) to uphold an objection to the presence of religious symbols. There are different ways of approaching the problem.<sup>18</sup> One is to treat religious belief and practice as simply a matter of individual conviction. So long as the believer sincerely believes that his religion requires him to do, or refrain from doing, something, that is sufficient grounds to relieve him from a burdensome rule or law. Debates in the USA over religious freedom of expression have tended to follow this pattern. In contrast, European policies on religious freedom, including decisions taken in the European Court of Human Rights, have followed a more objective approach, applying a test of necessity to determine whether a particular activity is or is not required by the religion in question. This may involve consulting relevant texts, or obtaining expert evidence from religious leaders. Although there are practical problems associated with the second approach—who has the authority to say what the practice of any particular religious sect or tradition requires?—I believe it is the

correct one to follow.<sup>19</sup> What gives religious prescriptions their special force, distinguishing them from other lifestyle claims, is that they are understood by the believer to be mandatory. Such-and-such *must* or *must not* be done; this item of dress *must* or *must not* be worn. This makes sense for religions insofar as they are organized social practices with many adherents and a body of doctrine that evolves slowly over time. Establishing a religious requirement cannot then just be a matter of subjective belief. Returning to the pupil who objects to being made to comply with her school's uniform policy, we are bound to ask whether she has a valid justification for her objection, or whether she is just being wilful. This will typically involve identifying and consulting with representatives of her faith. Once that is resolved, there is a further question of how to weigh religious values against other relevant values. It may turn out that the child does have good religious reasons for wanting to breach the uniform rule, but that the reasons for maintaining it are compelling, so the child must either switch schools or comply with the rule.

So the idea that a liberal state could deal with religious problems by refusing to recognize their special character *as* religious—that is, maintaining a regime of freedom of conscience and expression qualified by something like Mill's harm principle and leaving it at that, with no reference to religion specifically—is a non-starter. Even so, one might think, liberals will continue to be attracted to the idea that the state itself should be secular. The state may indeed have to deal with religious issues such as those identified above, and that will involve its *engaging* with religion, but it should do so without having any religious complexion of its own, even the one that is shared by the majority of its citizens.

The problem with this is that it neglects the possibility that for believers, or even for those who maintain an inherited religious identity without believing literally in the doctrines of the faith, the presence of religion in the public sphere may be an intrinsic good. That is, people may value living in 'a Christian country' or 'an Islamic society', where this means, not that everyone in the society should be compelled to adopt the favoured religion, but that the public culture, including certain state practices and state symbols, should be expressive of that religion in particular. I have elsewhere explored this possibility with respect to the character of public space. People may value the fact that their physical environment bears the marks of their country's historic religion, and therefore oppose changes to public space that promote a competing religion at its expense.<sup>20</sup> The question that then arises is whether policies that respond to this by giving precedence to the majority religion can be criticized on the grounds that doing so fails to respect religious minorities, and in effect treats their adherents as second-class citizens.

Some liberal critics of religious establishment have made this argument. According to Martha Nussbaum, for example:



By throwing its support behind an orthodoxy, government makes a statement: this is the official doctrine of our nation. Such a statement, as Madison saw, suggests that nonadherents are not fully equal members of the political community, and they don't enter the public square 'on equal conditions'. Even if they are not coerced, the implication is that they exist at the sufferance of the dominant group, not as citizens of equal worth in their own right.

(Nussbaum 2008, p. 225)

I am not, however, persuaded, by Nussbaum's argument here.<sup>21</sup> Undoubtedly there are cases in which state endorsement of religion has the inequalitarian effects that she describes. The question is whether this is inevitably the case whenever the state departs from strict neutrality by recognizing a particular church as the national church and granting it certain privileges in public life (such as officiating at state ceremonies). In the weak version of establishment such as exists in several European countries including the UK, no citizen is thereby required to espouse or endorse the 'official doctrine' of the church. On the contrary, in liberal states committed to freedom of religion, people outside of the established church are not penalized or put under any pressure to conform to its teachings. Their civil and political rights are in no way affected by their religious affiliation (or lack of it). The worst that can be said is that other faith communities will not have access to whatever specific kinds of support the government offers the established church, whether these are financial subsidies for old buildings, or planning regulations that are designed to preserve the historic character of neighbourhoods.<sup>22</sup> Second, again provided civil and political rights are equally protected for all, it is not clear why citizens of different backgrounds should enter the public square on unequal terms just because some happen to belong to the established religion while others do not. After all, most political discussions that they might wish to participate in have nothing to do with religion at all, and even where some religious question is at stake, it is hard to see why being affiliated to that particular religion gives you any kind of privileged status in the debate.

Compare the case where one particular sport is widely celebrated as the national game—rugby for New Zealanders, ice hockey for Canadians, perhaps—and suppose the state *does* give that sport a privileged status, conferring resources on it that it denies to others, on the grounds that the nation's psychic well-being depends on the continued success of its teams in international competitions. People who prefer to watch or participate in other sports might grumble about the perceived unfairness, but it would be absurd for soccer or badminton fans to claim that their citizenship was being devalued or their equal worth not being recognized. Sporting identities just do not cross over in that way into general standings in society or the public realm.

It might be argued that the sports analogy is misleading because fanship in sport is unlike religious commitment in at least one important respect. The worst

that a rugby or hockey devotee can say about a football fan is that he shows bad taste by failing to recognize the superior athletic or aesthetic quality of the favoured national sport. But religions make truth claims, so when government throws its support behind one particular religion, the argument goes, it is implicitly accusing those who follow other religions (as well as atheists) of committing a moral error. Its disparagement cuts much deeper than in the sporting case. Without doubt, that was how in the past followers of established religions tended to regard religious dissidents. But in contemporary liberal societies with established churches, the case is very different. Leaders of the officially recognized religion are keen to present themselves as speaking on behalf of religion in general, not only for their own communion. They take pains to avoid being judgemental about other religions; on the contrary they often engage in outreach, taking part in inter-faith dialogue and making room for other faiths to participate in official events such as inaugurations and state funerals. So long as church leaders continue to interpret the privileges of establishment in this ecumenical way, state recognition cannot plausibly be represented as moral condemnation of those who stand outside of the national church.

It might of course still be true that members of minority religions regard any form of establishment as demeaning, as sending a signal that they are not fully-paid up members of the political community. Yet to reach such a conclusion requires an act of interpretation, and how plausible that reading is will depend on the context.<sup>23</sup> For example, if the state were to take the initiative of elevating a single religion to official status, that is very different from offering continued recognition to a church that has been established for centuries, and is therefore widely taken for granted as a reflection of the society's historically-given national identity.<sup>24</sup> In the latter case, it appears that pressure for disestablishment rarely comes from followers of minority religions, who are inclined to see secularism as the main threat to be guarded against, but rather from militant atheists who regard any form of state recognition as giving religion an unjustified aura of respectability.<sup>25</sup> It is also worth repeating that we are discussing liberal states that have long since abandoned any religious test for admission to political office and that have bills of rights or other legal protections for freedom of conscience and expression. In such a context, the claim that any form of religious preference shown by the state 'denigrates or marginalizes' those who do not belong to that faith just looks like an assertion unsupported by evidence (Nussbaum 2008, p. 11). A recent attempt to test it found that the degree to which the state supported a particular religion had no negative effects on religious minorities' confidence in the public institutions of their society (Perez et al. 2017).<sup>26</sup>

So I conclude here that, even where religion continues in some measure to shape national identity, there is no reason to think that this must pose a threat to liberal equality. It could only do so if it is not effectively counter-balanced, in public policy, by a strong regime of equal citizenship and appropriate recognition

of religious identities other than the one given precedence through establishment or other forms of support. Strict state neutrality in matters of religion is not required. I develop this general point further in the following section.

### 1.4 Liberal Nationalism Defended

I have been examining religion as a prominent example of a more general phenomenon, namely that the national identity of any given country is likely to reflect the historic culture of the majority—and this, so critics of liberal nationalism will allege, results inevitably in the alienation of minority groups. In reply, I should begin by reiterating two points made earlier: first, that national identities have multiple components, so inability to embrace one of these does not mean that the identity as a whole is inaccessible to you; second, that the content of national identities, and their institutional expression, should always remain open to challenge, so if people from minority cultures can demonstrate (with evidence and not merely by assertion) that some existing symbol, practice, or institution is for them a barrier to full inclusion, they can make a strong case for changing it.

Still, a liberal might insist that in the name of equality the state has an obligation to remain strictly neutral in matters of culture, so no matter how much the majority values some cultural feature that will disappear unless it is given political support, their wishes should count for nothing. But if we were to take this doctrine literally, it would have very restrictive implications. Consider, for example, the conservation of ancient buildings, or of landscapes that for many people have particular emotional resonance. Putting resources into these endeavours must reflect a judgement about the value of what is being conserved, which of course is always open to challenge by cultural dissidents. So what can be said in favour of the state taking on such tasks, rather than leaving them entirely to private initiative? The justification, presumably, is that the majority of citizens do regard the inherited fabric of their homeland as something to be valued and cherished, so for them it becomes a public good that may require the state to act as its provider. Another example might be legislating, or paying, to prevent historically significant works of art from leaving the country. Only a strict libertarian would argue that the state cannot act in such ways unless every citizen consents to its intervention. What a liberal state must do is attempt to respond to the cultural interests of different groups in the society fairly, which means that as well as responding to the wishes of the majority, it may need to provide some support for minority cultures. But that is not the same as observing strict cultural neutrality.

We are now in a position to bring together the distinctive features of a liberal form of nationalism. First, the nation is defined culturally rather than in terms of physical features such as race or descent. What goes into the national culture

will vary from case to case: it may be a diverse mixture of language, religion, literature, TV shows, works of art, sports, natural or created features of the physical environment, as well as political symbols such as constitutions and parliaments. Second, no single element in this mixture is treated as definitive by itself, such that if you do not speak the national language or celebrate the national sport, for instance, you are regarded as something less than a full member. In other words, there are many different ways of being Portuguese or Swedish. Third, in cases where a yes/no decision on some cultural issue is unavoidable, the views of the majority should prevail, but if possible this should be accompanied by forms of minority recognition. We might call this 'soft' majoritarianism. Thus if a national event such as a coronation or presidential inauguration involves a religious ritual, this will appropriately be performed by a representative of the established religion, but representatives of other religions can be invited to participate in the surrounding ceremony. Fourth, no cultural feature is set in stone. All are open to debate and critical challenge, and what were once minority views may turn over time into majority views.

By being fluid in all of these ways, a liberal national identity is also potentially inclusive. No one is debarred from holding the identity by virtue of some particular feature that they possess. Of course there can be no guarantee that every single person will find the identity acceptable. Someone may object to each of the distinguishing features in turn as running counter to their personal beliefs and values. But there is no reason to expect any identifiable *group* of persons to be alienated from national identity in this way.

It is also worth bearing in mind that no version of liberalism, whatever stance it takes on national identity, can rule out the possibility of alienated dissenters. Some people will find they are unable to accept the liberal principles that define their society. The idea, associated with Rawls, of a 'well-ordered society', understood as 'a society in which everyone accepts and knows that the others accept the same principles of justice, and the basic social institutions satisfy and are known to satisfy these principles' (Rawls 1971, pp. 453–4) may indeed represent a worthy aspiration, but it is not a fully achievable goal. As Bernard Williams pointed out, it may well be impossible to legitimate a society's institutions to everyone who belongs to it: 'they may be anarchists, or utterly unreasonable, or bandits, or merely enemies' (2005, p. 136). So in conceding that even the most liberal of national identities may not prove to be inclusive of everyone, we are not conceding more than any liberal tinged with a shade of realism must concede: that a diverse society of which no individual member is alienated from the main institutions and the values that support them is an impossible dream.

## 1.5 Conclusion

My aim in this chapter has been to defend what I called the weak thesis of liberal nationalism—the modest claim that a liberal state is not contradicting its liberalism when it pursues policies whose aim is to express and promote the national identity of its people. In a globalized world, where goods, ideas, and people are moving across borders at an ever-increasing rate, policies of this kind seem unavoidable if national identities are not to wither. So states can have reason to engage in identity-promoting activities, such as introducing a national curriculum in schools, promoting national culture by funding the arts, or encouraging immigrants to familiarize themselves with elements of the national culture when they apply for citizenship. This of course presupposes that shared national identities are valuable. I have not in this chapter tried to make the case that liberalism as a political project actually depends on citizens being united by bonds of nationality, even though I hold this to be true. Liberals, I believe, are often insufficiently reflective about how the societies that we now regard as robustly liberal came to be like that—and therefore insufficiently attentive to centrifugal forces that might destabilize them in future. Isaiah Berlin once said in an interview ‘I think liberalism is essentially the belief of people who have lived on the same soil for a long time in comparative peace with each other’ (Lukes 1998, p. 121). Reflection on this point might be one way to reach the conclusion that liberalism is not only compatible with a shared sense of national belonging, but positively needs it.<sup>27</sup>

## Notes

1. I have defended this interpretation of Berlin in Miller (2005a).
2. Among the defenders from that period were Lind (1994), Nielsen (1996–7), and (with qualifications) Moore (2001b). Among the critics were Weinstock (1996), Benner (1997), Vincent (1997), Brighouse (1998), Buchanan (1998).
3. A further exception must be made in the case of the Australian academic and social commentator Tim Soutphommasane: see Soutphommasane (2009, 2012). As the titles of these books reveal, however, Soutphommasane prefers the term ‘patriotism’ to ‘nationalism’ to describe his view.
4. Anecdotally, I have heard it said that Rawls originally planned to call his last book *The Law of Nations*, but was dissuaded from doing so.
5. The strong thesis of liberal nationalism itself comes in weaker and stronger forms. The strongest version is the one stated above: a shared national identity is a *sine qua non* of a liberal democracy. A weaker version would assert that having such an identity helps democratic institutions to function successfully without being strictly required.
6. For this claim, see, for example, Taylor (1998). For a critique, see Abizadeh (2002).

7. This is the claim that Sundas Ali and I examined in the light of the available evidence in Miller and Ali (2014).
8. See Kymlicka (1995, ch. 5); Margalit and Raz (1990). For a critical assessment, see Patten (1999).
9. I don't mean to deny here that cosmopolitans have arguments to make about why a consistent liberal must be a cosmopolitan—they do. But it is question-begging to *define* liberalism in such a way that only cosmopolitan versions will count, and liberalism as a political tradition has not mainly taken this form.
10. A variant of this response, associated particularly with German thinkers such as Jürgen Habermas, is that nationalism needs to be replaced by 'constitutional patriotism', where the constitution itself and the principles that it embodies become the source of unity in a multicultural society: see Habermas (1999). For a sympathetic account of constitutional patriotism, see Müller (2007). For a critical discussion, see Laborde (2002).
11. There is a long tradition of classifying forms of nationalism as either predominantly 'ethnic' or predominantly 'civic' in character. But a number of recent scholars have argued that such a distinction obscures the role that culture invariably plays within national identities, and that what is more important is how hospitable or inaccessible the identity is to incomers. See, for example, Yack (1996, 2012), Nielsen (1996–7), Zimmer (2003), Gustavsson (2019).
12. This point has been developed in Lægaard (2007).
13. In an earlier discussion I expressed this idea by borrowing a metaphor from Wittgenstein: 'The strength of the thread does not reside in the fact that some one fibre runs through its whole length, but in the overlapping of many fibres' (Wittgenstein 1963, p. 32).
14. For the argument that what matters from the point of view of inclusion is less the substantive content of national identity than the extent to which the identity is presented in voluntaristic terms as open to renegotiation by present-day citizens, see Zimmer (2003) and Jensen (2014).
15. When Renan speaks of individual members having much in common, he is referring not to any objective characteristics that they share (such as race or descent), but historical reference points—past events that are commonly judged to be significant. See also my fuller discussion of the remaking of national history in Miller (1995, ch. 2).
16. It is also of course possible for the compromise to take the form of adopting a neutral symbol, such as the Canadian maple leaf, or the silver fern that New Zealanders recently rejected as a replacement for their existing British-derived flag.
17. It is important to emphasize that decisions such as these are never made for all time. In a democracy they can be revisited periodically, so those in the minority now can hope that cultural, political, or demographic shifts in future will eventually allow them to win the argument.
18. Here I can only gesture at a complicated issue. For a much fuller treatment, see Eisenberg (2009, ch. 5).
19. See Eisenberg (2015) for a carefully nuanced defence of this approach.
20. See Miller (2016), which explores the general topic by examining the issues raised by the Swiss referendum decision to ban the future construction of Islamic minarets.

21. This and the following paragraphs adapt material from Miller (2019b).
22. The importance of distinguishing between coercive and non-coercive ways of supporting religious establishment is stressed in Laborde (2013). As she concludes ‘nothing in orthodox political liberalism prevents a religious majority from entrenching its symbols within the state, provided members of religious minorities are otherwise treated as free and equal citizens (according to principles of justice)’ (2013, p. 82). She does, however, go on to deploy Nussbaum-style arguments to argue that a *republican* form of liberalism would prohibit even moderate types of religious establishment.
23. For fuller discussions of religious establishment which stress the importance of contextual factors in determining whether establishment is inimical to religious minorities, see Ahdar and Leigh (2005, ch. 8), Brudney (2005), Lægaard (2017b).
24. In chapter 9 below, Laborde and Lægaard also emphasize the significance of this contrast.
25. For evidence that, at least in Britain, it is not members of other religions who are pressing for church disestablishment, see Modood (1994). In particular, ‘no Muslim group—and surely Muslims can no longer be accused of being shy about expressing their views about the British state—has ever identified establishment as an obstacle to full Muslim participation in British society’ (1994, p. 63).
26. Although confidence in institutions such as parliament and government is not a perfect proxy for a subjective feeling of non-alienation, it would be surprising if the alleged marginalizing effect of establishment on religious minorities failed to dent their political confidence at all, as the evidence suggests (indeed the data presented in the article cited shows a small *positive* effect of government support for religion on minorities’ confidence).
27. An earlier version of this chapter was presented to the workshop on ‘Liberal Nationalism and its Critics: normative and empirical questions’, Nuffield College, Oxford, 20–1 June 2017. I am very grateful to the participants in that event for their suggestions, and especially to Gina Gustavsson and Margaret Moore for reading and commenting on a later version.