

America, Good and Bad: The Critical Patriotism of Orestes Brownson

In the mid-nineteenth century, Orestes Brownson traveled from Protestantism to atheism to Catholicism, thinking out loud all the way. As he reflected on the relationship between faith and politics, Brownson produced insights and conclusions that continue to enlighten and provoke in the twenty-first century. In a time when Christian nationalism and Catholic integralism have resurfaced in public debate, Brownson's ideas are as fresh and important as they were in the wake of the Civil War.

I. Introduction

— Biography and importance of Brownson (1803–1876)

II. The Problem

— Augustine: “The two cities (the earthly and the heavenly) ... are in this present world commingled, and as it were entangled together.” “But the earthly city, which shall not be everlasting, has its good in this world, and rejoices in it with such joy as such things can afford.” “And therefore the apostle also admonished the Church to pray for kings and those in authority, assigning as the reason, that we may live a quiet and tranquil life in all godliness and love.”

III. Principles of Critical Patriotism

— “Every living nation has an idea given it by Providence to realize, and whose realization is its special work, mission, or destiny. Every nation is, in some sense, a chosen people of God.”

IV. The American Project

— “Its mission is to bring out in its life the dialectic union of authority and liberty, of the natural rights of man and those of society. The Greek and Roman republics asserted the state to the detriment of individual freedom; modern republics either do the same or assert individual freedom to the detriment of the state. The American republic has been instituted by Providence to realize the freedom of each with advantage to the other.”

V. American Government

— “The weak point in our Constitution is the too great strength of democracy, or the feebleness of the checks provided by the Convention of 1787 against it.”

VI. Religion and the State

— “It is true the church is not formally established as the civil law of the land, nor is it necessary that she should be; because there is nothing in the state that conflicts with her freedom and independence, with her dogmas or her irreformable canons.”

VII Conclusion: The Critical Patriot

— “We yield to no man in the interest we take in the real progress and welfare of the American people; but we are thoroughly disgusted with the ignorance and inflated vanity of our pretended patriots.”