The State of Nationalism (SoN): Nationalism and Religion

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Nationalism and Religion: Making Sense of a Complex Relationship

The relationship between religion and nationalism has received increasing scholarly attention since the late 1990s. An article I co-authored a decade ago provided a detailed review of this literature as it intersected with macro-culturalist and micro-rationalist theories of violence.[1] Since that time, the field has kept expanding and other reviews covering this topic have been published.[2] In this review, I will follow in their footsteps. It is not my aim to come up with an exhaustive list of publications. Rather, I will provide the reader with coverage of the most influential debates on religion and nationalism. To that aim, in the first section, I first cast a quick glance at the role of religion in classical theories of nations and nationalism. The second section focuses on the emergence of theories of religious nationalism, and the third section discusses the existing presumptions and possible points for improvement in the literature. In the final section I talk about avenues for future research.

For the purposes of this essay, I draw upon Émile Durkheim to define 'religion' broadly as beliefs and ideas about a supernatural power and 'a unified system of beliefs and practices relative to sacred things'.[3] 'Nation' is harder to define, especially because there is a blurry line between ethnic communities and nations. As pointed out by Max Weber, 'nation has the notions of common descent and of an essential, though frequently indefinite, homogeneity in common with the sentiment of solidarity of ethnic communities'. However, Weber continues, 'the sentiment of ethnic solidarity does not by itself make a nation'.[4] For Anthony Smith, the main difference between nations and *ethnie*s stems from the fact that nations share a historic territory while *ethnie*s only have an association with a homeland .[5] Yet, there are also ethnic groups who live on their historic homeland under the rule of a nation-state with which they do not identify. Categorized as 'nations without states', non-state nations or stateless nations, these communities make it difficult to come up with a neat separation between *ethnies* and nations.[6] Smith suggests that '(…) a mass, public culture, a centralized economy with mobility throughout, and common rights and duties for all co-nationals (…) are features that, along with shared myths and memories, define the concept of nation'.[7] Thus, the possession of autonomy, the ability to provide citizenship rights and a unified economy stand out as the main distinguishing characteristics of a nation. Keeping this complexity in mind, in this essay, I follow Smith in defining the nation as 'a named human population sharing a historic territory, common myths and historical memories, a mass, public culture, a common economy and common legal rights and duties for all members'.[8] In its simplest form, nationalism denotes 'loyalty to the nation'.

Religion in classical theories of nationalism

Influenced by the secularization thesis, scholars of nationalism, for a long time, took for granted that nationalism is a natural consequence of, and accompanied by, secularism and modernism.[9] Placing nation and religion on two ends of a historical continuum as mutually exclusive entities, these scholars argued that religion would inevitably fade away and give way to the emergence of secular, modern, industrialized nation-states. The relationship between religion and nationalism was seen as a zero-sum game. Nationalism's emergence was thought to have resulted from religion's demise and people's search for an alternative unifying identity. In this understanding, the secular 'nation-state' belonged to the 'modern' sphere, while 'religion' belonged to the 'traditional' sphere.[10] Thus formed, this approach left no place for religious nationalism. The only notable exceptions were works focusing on the role of millennial discourse in early American nationalism, with titles like 'the nation with the soul of a church', 'the righteous empire' and 'the kingdom of God in America'.[11] However, American nationalism was usually seen as an exception, an anomaly in the 'secular West'.

This supposed dichotomy of nationalism and religion has its roots in theories of the origins of nations, namely, the modernist and perennialist theories of nationalism.[12] According to the modernists, nations are novel phenomena that owe their existence to the emergence of a new political structure stressing the state as the authority rather than the church.[13] Perennialists, on the other hand, regard nations as continuations of earlier ethnic and religious communities.[14] The conflict between modernists and perennialists is further complicated by functionalist scholars who argue that nationalism not only owes its existence to the demise of religion but also acts as a substitute for religion.[15] Originating in Durkheim's writings, this approach was given greater impetus by those who argued that nationalism, as 'the god of modernity', was a religion itself.[16] According to this line of thinking, secular nationalism was the only entity that could prevent society from falling into total anomie in the absence of religion.

In the 1990s and early 2000s, religious and ethnic identities started gaining more visibility in the global political sphere.[17] As a result, several scholars started writing on the intersection of religion and nationalism.[18] They criticized earlier scholarship for reducing the relationship between religion and nationalism to a simple, linear historical continuity.[19] Taking as their main aim the identification of ‘the conditions under which religion and nationalism are fused, split or juxtaposed’, they showed that nationalism is not inherently secular and that there is a distinct form of nationalism in which religion plays an important role.[20]

Theories of religious nationalism

In ‘the Global Rise of Religious Nationalism’, Mark Juergensmeyer defines religious nationalism as ‘the mutant offspring’ of ‘the marriage between religion and secular nationalism’.[21] Coming almost twenty years after his 1993 definition of religious nationalism as ‘the attempt to link religion and the nation-state’, this definition indicates his conviction that, contrary to the conceptualization of religious nationalism as ‘a passing phenomenon’, it is here to stay.[22] While Friedland calls it ‘a particular form of politicized religion’, Gorski and Türkmen-Dervişoğlu define religious nationalism as ‘a social movement that claims to speak in the name of the nation, and which defines the nation in terms of religion’.[23] It occurs when people assert that ‘their nation is religiously based’ and that ‘religion [is] central (…) to conceptions of what it means to belong to the given nation’.[24]

Although most of these theorists agree on the co-existence of religion and nationalism, they differ in their understanding of the timing of this intersection. Some see the transformation of national identities by religion as a recent phenomenon.[25] According to this argument, religious nationalism owes much of its existence to: the failure of Western style secular democracies; reactionary movements against colonialism; and, the masses’ attempt to make sense of their competing identities in a quickly changing world.[26] Others, on the other hand, believe that there is an ancient link between nationalism and religion. They thus emphasize the continuous role of religion as the basis for both early and modern nationalisms.[27] To highlight this 'ancient link' between religion and nationalism, scholars like Adrian Hastings and Conor Cruise O'Brien argue that the Hebrew Bible provides 'for the Christian world at least, the original model of the nation'.[28] In the same vein, Gorski, Tilly and McLoughlin believe that the emergence of the Western nation-state is directly related to Christianity; Protestantism in particular.[29] According to Hans Kohn, the Puritan Revolution was the first example of modern nationalism as it was based on 'the notion of Providence guiding and directing the affairs of men to a predetermined end, the idea of a chosen and covenanted people, the expectation of a messianic fulfillment'.[30]

This idea of a 'chosen people with a covenant' is the main framework with which religious nationalists operate in many cases — the United States being the paradigmatic example.[31] As recent scholarship has demonstrated, at the heart of America's white Christian nationalism stands this emphasis on the Americans as the chosen people, who through an 'Exodus' from Europe reached the 'Promised Land'.[32] The 'chosen nation' myth plays an influential role in other Western national identities as well.[33] In Britain, Protestantism continued to form the basis of national identity throughout much of the 19th century, when Britain was believed to be a chosen nation, destined to defend Christianity.[34]

As shown by works on Eastern European religious nationalisms, the Old Testament's emphasis on 'the chosen nation' retains its importance in the New Testament in the form of Messianism.[35] The nation and the national religion are so tightly linked in this understanding that they become one. Orthodox nationalist movements, in Russia, in Poland, and in Serbia all rely on such a Messianic conceptualization of the nation.[36] Recurring themes like martyrdom, resurrection and salvation play an important a role in mobilizing such religious nationalist movements. The use of religious symbols like the Cross, saints, pilgrimages to sites of apparitions and cults are also quite widespread. During the Bosnian war, the belief in the apparitions of the Virgin Mary in Medjugorje, a small town in Bosnia and Herzegovina and a Catholic pilgrimage site since 1981, led to the declaration of the town as part of the short-lived Croatian Republic of Herceg-Bosna and the launching point for ethnic attacks on Orthodox Serbs and Muslim Bosnians.[37] Similarly, Sells shows the impact of 'Christoslavic' religious nationalism in the Bosnian genocide.[38] Basque and Catalan nationalisms also rely on religious symbols like Marian cults and martyrdom.[39] In his analysis of the Lithuanian, Polish and Ukrainian religious nationalist movements, Johnston draws attention to the heavy use of saint cults and other religious symbols and calls the use of religious symbolism 'a double-edged sword' in that it can act as successful mobilization tool, but it can also alienate secular supporters, and pave the way for violence in some cases.[40] The same warning is voiced by Sells when talking about the vital role institutions and symbols of Christianity played in mobilizing Serbian Orthodox and Croatian Catholic nationalisms.[41]

Western vs non-Western religious nationalisms

In addition to being central to the formation of Western and Christian national identities, religion has also been central to the formation of non-Western, non-Christian nationalisms. As underlined by Friedland, religion plays a pivotal role for state-formation in Hinduism, Judaism and Islam.[42] The Qur'an spells out a political religion and is a political text.[43] So is the Torah, 'which is understood as a covenant between a people and a God'.[44] Scholars have thus written on the intersection of religion and nationalism in diverse regions such as the Middle East and North Africa, South Asia, and Southeast Asia.[45] They have also analyzed Japan, where Shinto has played an indispensable role in the formation of Japanese national identity.[46]

Although the literature is heavily influenced by the secularization thesis in its analyses of Western nationalisms, this is not the case when it comes to analyses of non-Western nationalisms. Resultantly, the presence of religious nationalism in 'the West' is often presented as a surprising finding while its existence in the global South is taken for granted or overplayed.[47] However, theories of non-Western nationalisms are not completely free of the secularization thesis, either. As demonstrated by Willfried Spohn, they embrace two macro-paradigmatic approaches: one that essentializes the secular nation-state system and one that essentializes the global system.[48] Convinced by accounts of modernism, scholars in the first group believed that modernization would convey secular values to the global South, which in turn would 'tame' religion in non-Western nationalisms and 'secularize' them.[49] However, things didn't turn out that way. To explain the stubborn presence of religion, scholars in the second group conceptualized religious-nationalist movements as reactionary formations against globalization and the globalizing forces of secularization.[50]

Believing that neither approach can adequately explain the global rise of religious nationalism, the 'multiple modernities' thesis argues that these ethno-religious movements are parts of multiple modernization processes in different parts of the world. Yet, while they at least manage to go beyond the problematic dichotomy of 'Western' vs. 'non-Western', multiple-modernities scholars contribute to sweeping generalizations by categorizing geographic regions according to certain religious or political 'civilizations'.[51] Such categorization has been criticized by those who have demonstrated that cases assumed to belong to one 'civilization' can (and do) differ among themselves, while cases assumed to belong to different 'civilizations' can (and do) share common aspects.[52]

Religious nationalism and violence

Accompanying the civilizational approach is another sweeping generalization: the assumption that religious nationalism almost always ends up in violence.[53] In this narrative, religion and nationalism can coexist but their co-existence is problematic because ‘religion combined with nationalism can be a very deadly mixture’.[54] Looking for a way of legitimizing itself in the political sphere, religion causes violent clashes by threatening the secular nation-state as well as religious and non-religious ‘others’. Despite rejecting the modernist division between ‘primitive religion’ and ‘modern nation-state’, an incessant emphasis on the violent results of the intermingling of religion and nationalism perpetuates the idea that religion and nation-state cannot accommodate each other and an attempt to do so is bound to fail. Notwithstanding a few exceptions, most works on religious nationalism have followed this track.[55]

Under this rubric, the most discussed ‘problematic’ regions have been the Middle East, Northern Ireland, South and Southeast Asia and the Balkans/Eastern Europe.[56] Meanwhile, works looking at religious nationalism in the United States and Western Europe have not particularly highlighted violence. It was only after the election of Donald Trump and the Capitol attack of January 6th in 2021 in the United States, as well as the exclusionary combination of populism with anti-immigrant rhetoric in Europe after 2015, that the number of publications on exclusionary religious nationalism in these regions has increased.

It is true that ‘in most places with a religious national movement, the result has been a non-democratic state’ that violates religious freedom and pluralism.[57] However, as criticized by Omer and Springs, presenting religious nationalism as ‘uniquely volatile and antimodern’ not only reproduces ‘the myth of religious violence’ but also overlooks ‘the ambivalence of the sacred’ and the dual role religiously motivated actors and ideas might play as both peacemakers and warmongers.[58]

In the rare cases the literature discusses religion as a unifying force it does so with a particular focus on civil religion.[59] This approach is useful in showing the dual face of religion but it also has its limits as civil religion is usually presented as a uniquely 'American' construct that is rarely observed in other parts of the world.[60] Works focusing on an exclusionary and violent combination of religion and nationalism in the United States still juxtapose an inclusionary civil religion with an exclusionary white Christian nationalism.[61]

Some scholars attempt to overcome such juxtaposition by putting forward alternative categorizations of the relationship between religion and nationalism.[62] For example, Soper and Fetzer propose a tripartite classification — secular nationalism, religious nationalism, and civil-religious nationalism — highlighting the dual role religion and nationalism might play as sources of both solidarity and strife.[63] Via the cases of the United States, Israel, Greece, Malaysia, Uruguay, and India, they demonstrate that neither civil-religious nationalism nor religious or secular nationalism are inherently stable or unstable; much depends on the local and historical context. This is also why a model that works well in one country might not be easily reproduced in another country.

Contextuality is also at the heart of meso-level approaches to religious nationalism and violence.[64] While not overlooking the importance of macro- or micro-scale arguments, these approaches have demonstrated the importance of historical, political, and local contexts in explaining when religious nationalism leads to violence and when not. To uncover the mechanisms of religious nationalist violence and anti-pluralist interpretations of religion (and nationalism) they have drawn attention to questions like how sacred texts are interpreted at the hands of religious elites, how religious elites ally with political elites, and how sacred spaces cause contestation.[65]

Yet another attempt to contextualize religious nationalist violence has come from comparative-historical works. For a long time, comparisons in the field were made between similar regions, such as the United States and Western Europe, or between countries from the same region, such as those in Western Europe, South Asia, Southeast Asia, and Eastern Europe.[66] While interregional comparisons were not absent from the field, they were either edited volumes looking at separate cases or works focusing on religious fundamentalism and the broader intersection of religion and politics in different parts of the world.[67] This has changed with the publication of interregional works, which have helped deepen our understanding of the variation in religious nationalist violence.[68]

Such interregional comparison has also contributed to unearthing the 'why' of religious nationalism rather than the 'how' of it, which was the main focus of the literature in earlier periods.[69] While some early works still inquired why religious nationalism occurs and why it takes different shapes in different countries, the main questions being asked at the time were how religious nationalism comes into being, how religion and nationalism intertwines, how religion affects nationalism and vice versa.[70] A switch from the area-specific approach to interregional comparison has provided better analytical tools in coming up with a general understanding of religious nationalism and why it might differ from case to case.

Whither religious nationalism studies?

At the current moment, religious nationalism, once considered an oxymoron, has established itself as a factuality in world politics. From the United States to India, from Hungary to Turkey and Israel, several cases have demonstrated the influential role it plays in shaping politics and society. As such, it is imperative that the literature go beyond the current impasse in its inquiry of the relationship between religion and nationalism. One way of doing so would be to divert the literature's attention away from the state to the nation itself.[71] For a long time, religious nationalism scholars have followed the lead of nationalism scholars in embracing a state-centric approach in their analyses. Resultantly, they have paid more attention to how religion and nationalism intersect at the macro-level (e.g. the encounters between the secular nation-state and religious ideology, religious actors/ movements), rather than how that intersection plays out in more micro-level identity formation processes. The recent 'affective turn' in analyses of nationalism might provide a suitable template for a more nation-centric focus in the subfield of religious nationalism.[72] An emphasis on how nationalism happens on the ground, how nationhood is sacralised, and what role emotions and moral judgments play in its formation, combined with an emphasis on 'lived religion', would open up further avenues for future research.[73]

Such a turn would also help operationalize religious nationalism better. As put by Grzymala-Busse, the literature still needs 'a set of evidentiary standards for establishing the empirical existence of religious nationalism that goes beyond the invocation of religious motifs and symbols in politics'.[74] Paying attention to how religious nationalism comes into being in everyday life and how it shapes individuals' identity formation beyond state-level analyses would improve our measures of the phenomenon. Though many scholars have worked towards a nuanced definition of the concept at the theoretical level, the subfield could still benefit from more ethnographic studies analysing 'lived religious nationalism'.[75]

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