Religion and Nationalism

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Abstract

This essay examines the relations between religion and nationalism by highlighting the existing scholarly approaches as well as the ways in which they might be further expanded into deeper engagements with the legacies of colonialism and race. The argument is that cross-fertilizing the religion and nationalist literature with critical race theories and the study of coloniality will provide explanatory frames and analytic tools to interpret the waves of right-wing populist nationalisms in Euro-America in the twenty-first century. In particular, the ways in which appeals to Christianity, Judeo-Christianity, or "civilizational" values participate in patterns of exclusion and inclusion through the mechanisms of sexual politics and human rights' instruments are studied as an opportunity to interrogate the interrelation between anti-Semitism and anti-Muslim rhetoric to the histories of colonialism and how they have undergirded the patterns of interactions between religion and the production, reproduction, and subversion of political national identities.

WHY RELIGION?

At the sight of electoral victories earned by explicitly xenophobic and Islamophobic political parties in the first few decades of the twenty-first century, even casual observes can recognize that right-wing populism is on the rise in Europe and North America (Marzouki, McDonnell, & Roy, 2016). In this essay, I examine why this phenomenon presses upon us the importance of investigating the relation between religion and nationalism. I ask why anti-Semitism is still in circulation in the rhetoric of populist nationalisms, and how and why this hatred interacts with Islamophobia, as a different side of the same coin. Both anti-Jewish and anti-Muslim sentiments relate in complex ways to the elucidation of the self-representation of Euro-American nationalisms as white and Christian. In some instances, this self-representation intersects with sexual conservatism. In other instances, it intersects with appeals to sexual liberation as a mark of a civilizational identity, with certain targeted groups marked as prohibitive in their traditional conservatism. This reference to sexual politics conveys one entry point

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where religion's relevance to nation and nationalism becomes evident as a site that also demands that we will engage with the question of modernity as a political, cultural, colonial, and intellectual project.

Contemporary nationalist populism, therefore, echoes the early modern construction of nations as a project of cultural homogenization. Populists claim to speak in the name of the "people" and against "elites" as well as the supposed "others" within (Brubaker, 2017, p. 1192). This dualism is characteristic of right-wing populisms' (Canovan, 1981; Marzouki *et al.*, 2016) intent on reclaiming a perceived golden age when "the people" or the "virtuous community" were not contaminated and corrupted by "others" and "elites." Euro-American populist currents exhibit such patterns, which employ religious symbols as constitutive elements in drawing the boundaries of the threatened "virtuous community" and in defining those that need to be excluded, expelled, disappeared, and eliminated for a redemptive path to open up.

The exclusionary populist nationalist moment in the West exhibits a great country-by-country variation. However, in each instance, Muslims are constructed as the other of Europe. Roy (2016) puts it bluntly: "most of these [populist] parties are Christian largely to the extent that they reject Islam" (p. 186). They posit the supposed threat of Islam (the loss of "our ways of life") as a mobilizing card that enables curious conversions between conservative Christian and secular (anti-religious/anticlerical) secularists (Roy, 2016, p. 188). At the same time, Roy (2016) identifies a paradoxical relation between the increased secularization of European contexts and the amplification and traction of populist cries to reclaim Europe's "Christian roots," even if they mean little, if nothing at all, in terms of dogmas or content beyond belonging to particular modes of imagining nation (pp. 192–193). Roy interprets the amplified role of "religion" in nationalist populism in terms of secularism rather than as a sign of greater religiosity qua depth in tradition. Populist invocation of religion as belonging (nation construction or reclaiming) conveys secularity, unfolding through the language and mechanisms of human rights. The latter—whether through the European Court of Human Rights' granting permission to display crucifixes in classrooms in Italy or through a German court upholding a decision of a school in Baden-Württemberg to ban girls from wearing of head scarves—are pivotal in reducing Christianity to "culture" and "heritage" (see also Zubrzycki, 2016, Chapter 5). Accordingly, such legal discourses and mechanisms frame Christianity as an indigenous European culture, merely "a collective historical and cultural fact" contrasted with "alien" elements that are interpreted not as "cultural," but rather as religiously other (Roy, 2016, p. 193). Roy's focus on legal technologies of exclusion resonates with a body of work (Mahmood, 2015; Hurd 2017) that highlights the infrastructure

of the modern secular state's centrality in defining and redefining religion, a process that needs to be understood in terms of power.

I likewise approach this discussion by examining the concept of coloniality. Following Quijano (2000), "coloniality" refers to the production of "race" as instrumental for and constitutive of the Eurocentric expansion of global capitalism and colonialism and denotes the "historical reidentification" of non-European geographies and populations (p. 540). The modern nation-state, accordingly, involves a process and histories of homogenization based on racial classification, genocide, and slavery and needs to be examined through this critical decolonizing lens, which is often not in conversation with the nationalism literature. The latter remains embedded within Eurocentric, capitalist, and political liberal intellectual coloniality. But this intellectual oversight is now challenged.

Nationalist, populist, and xenophobic rhetoric in Europe (viewed broadly as the Eurocentric colonial project) comes at a moment when the streets of its urban centers are confronted with their colonial pasts in the form of increasingly diverse, multiracial, multicultural, multireligious, and multinational demographics. The globality of the local landscape illuminates the relevance of diaspora studies to the analysis of nationalism and nation as a normative, geographic, and religioculturalist orientation (Brubaker, 2005; Tölöyan 1996), also observing patterns of securitizing, racializing, and minoritizing nonwhite and non-Christian communities (Kurien, 2004). An emphasis on the diasporic as the condition for transnational hybridity and fluidity, rather than homogeneity and purity (Gilroy, 1992, 1997), is in tension with the biopolitical drive for segregation, differentiation, and elimination pivotal for the story of European modernity, its effects bearing striking conceptual similarities from a global analysis of domination, oppression, displacement, and elimination of indigenous populations and nonwhites.

Similarly, segregating religion and race as two distinct sites of analysis in the study of nationalism is myopic and contributes to the veiling of the need to scrutinize coloniality as integral to the analysis. David Chidester's *Empire of Religion* (2014) reveals the centrality of race to the construction of religion in the British colonial context of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, which persistently preoccupied itself with the deployment of power/knowledge for differentiating civilized from uncivilized populations (Chidester, 1996). Notably, Chidester's contribution illuminates that the manifestation of civilization discourses in contemporary Euro-America, however, needs to be situated within a deeper colonial history that likewise demands desegregating the conceptual boundaries between race and religion. In addition to challenging liberal mythologies (Cavanaugh, 2009) about the privatization and territorialization of religion as pivotal to the emergence of modernity qua toleration encapsulated in the institution of

the modern nation-state, critiques of modernist approaches to "religion" need to be emboldened by the tools of critical race theory and a global and transnational engagement with coloniality. Centering coloniality is necessarily an intersectional undertaking, which presents religion, race, and gender as key constitutive sites for critical analysis, and also for constructive conflict transformation and emancipatory schemes.

Before returning to the constructive possibilities I identify in putting the nationalism and religion literature in conversation with comparative transnational race theory and its focus on decolonization, I briefly highlight some key currents in the study of religion and nationalism.

RELIGION AND NATIONALISM: A SCHEMATIC REVIEW

Some scholars have emphasized the ancient roots of contemporary religious nationalism in biblical narratives of chosenness (Smith, 2003). Others have critiqued such narratives as insufficiently attentive to modern processes, institutions, and history and as overly beholden to nationalist rhetoric as evidence for the anachronistic endurance of nations (Marx, 2003). For the most part, however, the "nation" has been coextensive with Eurocentric narratives of modernity, telling a story about shifting authority structures away from religious institutions (Anderson, 1991; Little, 2015). Earlier contributions to the study of religion and nationalism, therefore, underscored its instrumental role in constructing modernity and its political unit of the nation-state. Others zoomed in on nationalism as amounting to a selective retrieval and reinterpretation of cultural and religious symbols and resources in imagining national mythologies as forms of substitute religions. Concerns with power and colonialism were mostly articulated in the relatively segregated sectors of feminist and postcolonial questioning about who is doing the imagining in Anderson's famous conception of the nation (1991) as an imagined community (Chatterjee, 1991; Yuval Davis, 1993). Their relative segregation explains why authoritative accounts of the literature normally exclude them.

Brubaker, for instance, concludes that scholarship on religion and nationalism effectively challenges unreconstructed approaches to the study of secular modernity by illuminating "the religious matrix of the category of the secular itself" (Brubaker, 2012, p. 15). This intervention's importance aside, Brubaker's review reflects on a specifically Eurocentric history embedded within particular theological and philosophical developments within European Christian history (Hurd, 2008). These developments inform universal projection and participation in consolidating a global hegemony (Lynch, 2015), but the interweaving of nation making and coloniality is bracketed and, with it, a consideration of the role of race both in the construction of

"religion" as a comparative category of analysis and in the very project of western colonialism.

But with the so-called postsecular age, which denotes a broad recognition of the enduring public relevance (rather than ultimate irrelevance) of religion, some of those engaged in the nationalism literature devoted a substantial attention to the interlinking of religion, nationalism, and violence or explicit and obvious violent interpretations of national identities. One site of research examines the cultural, historical, symbolic, and religious building blocks of ethnoreligious nationalism on a case-by-case basis, underscoring contextuality, institutional frameworks, and political conditions and opportunities (Little & Swearer, 2006; Sells, 1998).

Another site began to situate the "nation" within a deeper analysis of the colonial project and its construction of "religion" as the binary other of the "secular" and "political" fields (Asad, 1999, 2003) and to consider the mutual construction of religiocultural conceptions of nationalism in both the colonial metropole and the colonies (van der Veer, 2001). The focus on the epistemological violence of liberal secularism and the political project of the modern nation-state led to a blossoming of scholarship devoted to exposing the dominant liberal grammar that underpins the legal deployment of the language of rights in Euro-America (Sullivan, Hurd, Mahmood, & Danchin, 2015). The other scholarly focus on the religiocultural content of explicit ethnoreligious manifestations of nationalism contributed to a subfield of religion and violence (Juergensmeyer, Jerryson, & Kitts, 2013; Gorski & Türkmen-Dervişoğlu, 2013) as well as, inversely, to scholarship and practice in religion and peacebuilding (Omer, Appleby, & Little, 2015). Other subfields, as noted, engage the "nation" from a feminist angle (which does not always integrate "religion" because of feminist traditions' contested approaches to religious traditions as they relate to or constrain their political emancipatory projects) and others focus specifically on religious and nationalism in the Global South and on postcolonial challenges to modernist theories of nationalism.

Modernist theories of nationalism are, as noted, profoundly challenged in the Global North where religion is pivotal in constructing exclusionary boundaries. Indeed, the emergence of nationalist populisms in Euro-America betrays a rhetorical spectrum (Brubaker, 2016; Marzouki *et al*., 2016). It ranges from a Huntingtonian celebration of "Judeo-Christian" civilizational values and/or Christianity qua cultural heritage as the ground for conceptions of social and economic progress (including sexual and gender fluidity) and liberalism to explicit appeals to Christianity, critiques of social progressivism (especially along sexual and gender emancipatory practices and policies) for enacting national boundaries. The latter explicit invocation of (white) Christianity converges with and draws upon classical anti-Semitic tropes and ingrained structures of racialization. The former

appeals to "civilizational identity" and "heritage," in distinction, employ philosemitic (manifesting in an unqualified support of Israel) rhetoric but are likely embedded in coloniality and racialization. Indeed, both varieties are ultimately anti-Semitic and likewise capitalize on Islamophobia and anti-Muslim orientalist underpinnings. The current moment of populist nationalism, therefore, exposes the need for a transnational and global comprehensive analysis of the interrelations between anti-Muslim and anti-Jewish frames and how they relate to the discursive practices of nationalism globally and to deeper questions about religion, race, and modernity qua coloniality. Those studies that move in this direction and draw upon or interact productively with critical theoretical tools constitute intriguing research trajectories.

AVENUES FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

The study of religion and nationalism, as the review above illustrates, has shifted significantly away from simplistic applications of an unreconstructed secularism thesis and modernist paradigms of progress. Indeed, one of the most promising aforementioned scholarly directions disengages from the conceptual boundaries imposed by the actual geopolitical borders of nation-states. I indicated that the first way in which these boundaries are challenged is through the study of diasporas as sites for negotiating and contesting the meanings of identity and nation. The study of the African diaspora as encompassing those dislocated due to modernity's patterns of transatlantic slave trades and genocidal practices and as, subsequently, engaging in a decolonizing intellectual mode of struggle remains mostly within the purview of cultural studies (Iton, 2010).

The study of nationalism and religion is not conversant with cultural and comparative racial studies and their turn to decolonization. Even increasingly sophisticated schematic accounts of scholarship on religion and nationalism, as exemplified in Brubaker's account, bracket the analysis of coloniality. From the perspective of the Global South, any engagement with the modern nation-state—the political mechanism of Eurocentric modernity, exploitative capitalism, and hegemony—is incomplete without also grappling intersectionally with the condition of coloniality. This grappling entails decolonizing the very categories of nation, religion, and race, as Chidester does in his study of religion, but also is prevalent in the transnational and global study of circuits of racialization and Euro-American colonization (Lubin, 2014).

What is at stake in the turn to the decolonial is the interrogation of European modernity, secularity, and their embeddedness within Christian history, philosophy, theology, and imaginations. As we will see in the

following discussion, appeals to Christianity as a threshold for belonging as well as a mechanism for the control of traditional gender norms and women's bodies are as secular and modern as the invocation of Christianity as "heritage" and "culture" functioning subsequently, through progressive sexual politics, as tools of exclusion. This is consistent with Roy's interpretation (2016) of the patterns of reducing religion (read Christianity) to (European) culture, a process reliant upon cultivating an Islamophobia that intersects in various ways with anti-Semitism. Interrogating the nature of these intersections tells not only specific stories about Muslims and Jews, but also relates a broader narrative about the centrality of the "nation" to narratives of religion and modernity.

Accordingly, a second promising scholarly avenue to which I previously alluded explores the global, transnational, and local circulations of anti-Muslims and anti-Jewish tropes and narratives, focusing on how they relate to the construction of exclusionary populist nationalist ideologies and practices. To deepen the analysis of the empirical reemergence of anti-Semitism and its relation to contemporary manifestations of anti-Muslim sentiments, the nationalism scholarship needs to be in conversation not only with critical approaches to the emergence of religion as a comparative category whose legacy is entangled with coloniality (e.g., Chidester), but also with critical theory that specifically addresses the Christian underpinnings of Eurocentric secular modernity because these scaffolds are now exposed in populist patterns framed within the discursive sites of nation-states.

The work of Gil Anidjar is especially relevant for this philosophical and semiotic investigation. In his *Blood: A Critique of Christianity* (2014), Anidjar shows that Christianity has persisted and metamorphosed into, rather than been superseded by, modern conceptions of the secular. Indeed, on his account (Anidjar, 2014, p. 257), the political organization of the modern nation-state—as is the modern project of scientific racism—can be analyzed using blood as a category to interpret modern nationalism, capitalism, and law.

As a historical category of analysis, "blood" has its roots in medieval Christianity and in a trajectory that rewrites Christianity as a biological boundary. This rewriting especially manifested in the Iberian *limpieza de sangra* (blood purity or cleanliness) as a tool employed to differentiate "real" Christians from (Jewish and Muslim) converted Christians in the process of the Inquisition (Anidjar, 2014, p. 65) itself interpreted as a mechanism for constructing a prototype of the modern (Spanish) nation (Marx, 2003). Consequently, Anidjar (2014) argues that "the pervasive distinction of (modern) nation and (medieval) religion is not only regrettable and inaccurate but also answers to (and complies with) disciplinary and governing mechanisms

and to long-standing biases, which continue to affect and even structure our historical understanding, our understanding of the present" (p. 65). He challenges conventional modernist narratives that posit a radical break with medieval Christian conceptions of the body politic. Indeed, the *limpieza*, according to Anidjar (2014), can only make sense within a deeper contextualization of "a theological-political history" (p. 65). The latter "produced the *necessary* (if, perhaps, not sufficient) conditions of what we call nationalism (or racism) (Anidjar, 2014)." While variations and distinctions of religion, race, and nation exist, for Anidjar (2014), a critical analysis of Christian Europe exposes them as "co-constitutive and contemporaneous" (p. 65). Hence, any secularist, binary view of the political, social, cultural, and legal organizations of western modernity, as emancipated from religion and thus generative of an industry of commentaries on the supposed "resurgence" of religion, whether as "culture" or as explicit "religion," is distorted by an illusion that needs to be demystified.

Further, the contemporary moment of right-wing, nationalist populism and its reliance, across Euro-America, on Islamophobia, or othering of Muslims who are viewed as "non-belonging" and as "foreign infiltrators" intent on Islamicization, is not alien, but rather entirely consistent with the *limpieza* at the heart of modern nationalist discourse. In order to obtain more robust analytic purchase on the relation between religion and nation, therefore, a discursive critique of the metamorphosis of Christianity in the production of modernity becomes a generative site of scholarship. Such a discursive critique can connect fruitfully with those threads within the social scientific (Zubrzycki, 2006) and humanistic (Hanebrink, 2008) nationalism literature that have taken religion seriously, tracing its elastic links to imagining and producing nation.

Zubrzycki's works (2006; 2016) contribute significantly to the potential of the critical turn to enrich the substantive sociological study of the religiocultural textures of nationalism (examining not only ideological claims, but also social, symbolic, and semiotic mechanisms for imagining and reimagining nation). The critical turn also contributes to the global critical engagement with the enduring hold of anti-Semitism and its interplay with anti-Muslim sentiments in multiple contexts of modern nationalisms. As noted, the latter focus on this interplay is critical for explaining religion's relevance to nation within a deeper engagement with the analysis of modernity as we sought to do here. Zubrzycki's *The Crosses of Auschwitz* (2006) examines the complex ways in which the multivalent legacy of anti-Semitism and its treasury of tropes play into nation construction and reconstruction, in this case, post-Communist Poland's relation to Roman Catholicism.

Anti-Jewish motifs, with deep historical, theological, and popular roots, indeed, are enduringly relevant for the construction of national thresholds

and boundaries, which are concurrently articulated using anti-Muslim rhetoric. This point speaks to my earlier stress upon the importance of thinking integratively about anti-Jewish and anti-Muslim legacies of European modernity as pivotal for expanding the scope of scholarship on religion and nation.

Anidjar's earlier work *The Jew, the Arab: A History of the Enemy* (2003) provides important resources for contextualizing the discussion of religion and nation as it plays out in terms of anti-Semitism and Islamophobia. Anidjar traces the construction of the Jew and the Arab as enemies as having an unsurprisingly highly modernist Christian and European genealogy. Further, he shows how the very construction of Europe as a political, cultural, and intellectual project involved a process of differentiating it from both Jew and Arab. He, therefore, links innovatively, and in ways that anticipate his argument in *Blood*, the "Jewish problem" and the "Muslim problem," effectively situating them both in Europe as a set of discursive practices; philosophical reworkings of the relations between Judaism, Christianity, and Islam; and ideological formations from the hold of which "geographies of liberation" seek to emancipate (Lubin, 2014). Sociological analyses of populist nationalisms that are not conversant with such critiques of modernity as they relate to the discourses of nationalism remain diminished in their interpretive scope.

Nevertheless, Brubaker's aforementioned analysis of the populist–nationalist currents in Europe and the United States opens up the examination to discursive scholarly investigation and thus offers promising trajectories for research. Brubaker traces how exclusionary nationalist claims around supposedly threatened ways of life are articulated not in nationalist, but rather in civilizational, terms. He calls this "civilizationalism," the outcome of the dominance of the "clash of civilizations" (Huntington, 1993) approach in policy circles and public imaginations since the collapse of the Soviet Union (for a critique, see, e.g., Said, 2001), but nonetheless—and here there are potential cross-fertilizations with the critique of coloniality—a discourse with roots in the history of western Christian colonialism. Civilizationalism, Brubaker (2017) continues, relies on and is co-extensive with "identitarian 'Christianism,' a secularist posture, a philosemitic stance and an ostensibly liberal defence of gender equality, gay rights, and freedom of speech" (p. 1193). The nationalist populist moment, accordingly, is marked by the convergence of "identitarian Christianism with secularist and liberal rhetoric" (Brubaker, 2017, p. 1194), or what Judith Butler examines too in terms of sexual politics (Puar, 2007; Puar, 2013; Butler, 2016, pp. 101–136).

Pim Fortuyn, in the Netherlands, was the prototype case of sexual politics (Buruma, 2006), but other political entrepreneurs, such as the Dutch Geert

Wilders, have likewise performed this genre successfully, especially in west and north European countries. In addition to Roy's focus on legal mechanisms and human rights instruments, sexual politics constitutes a key mechanism in the construction of Christianism as a secular and liberal cultural civilizational identity contrasted with Islam (Brubaker, 2017, p. 1200; Scott, 2010; Farris, 2017). Other populist manifestations in eastern Europe (Hungry, Poland) and the United States (the Trump era) convey different relations to gay and trans rights as well as economic and social liberalism.

Roger Friedland is a forerunner in identifying sexual politics as a critical site for the examination of religion and nationalism. "Religious nationalism, unlike the capitalist market or the democratic state, has the organization of sexuality at its center," he wrote (Friedland, 2001, p. 134). Friedland, therefore, analyzes religious nationalism as inhabiting a distinct ontology of power that is seeking to challenge the logic of the capitalist market and its reliance on an abstract conception of the individual consumer citizen by stressing the need to recover the family as the basic unit of society. The fact that sexual politics, control of the family, and traditional gender norms are featured on the spectrum of populist nationalisms stresses the need to more systematically integrate the scholarship on gender and nationalism into the study of religion and nationalism. Indeed, white ethnoreligious nationalism in the United States converges with capitalism as well as social conservatism. As in the case of progressive sexual politics, this conservative employment of the genre is Islamophobic and works out its logic over women's bodies (and by extension over gender fluidity and sexual identities), whether through veiling or unveiling them. Sexual politics, therefore, is characteristic of exclusionary nationalist populism, which traffics in secularist allusions to tradition qua civilizational identity or through explicit, though narrow and conservative, assertions of religiosity as demarcating the authentic nation (in the case of the United States as white and Christian). Race and religion operate concurrently and are coextensive with the construction of nation (as both white and Christian or "Judeo-Christian"). Sexual politics, with its long historical legacy within the discourses of orientalism and colonialism, constitutes a multivalent mechanism for populist trends. The nationalism literature needs to account for this dual complexity and work together with decolonizing trends in scholarship.

Certainly, sociological studies such as Brubaker's employ the language of paradox to account for the diminished conceptions of tradition articulated through words such as "culture" and "heritage," and also through explicitly religious interpretations of Euro-American nationalism. However, approaching such analyses differently and through a broader semiotic

outlook suggests that the manifestations of anti-Semitic and Islamophobic practices and ideologies are highly consistent with conclusions emerging from the critiques of Eurocentric modernity. An enhanced de-siloing of such scholarships can fruitfully advance the conversation. Brubaker's account of civilizationalism and Christianism not only hints at potential cross-fertilization with the critical study of Christian modernity, including its relevance to the study of race and coloniality as in the subaltern critical study of geography through the lens of critical race theory, but also illuminates the complex interlinking of Islamophobia and anti-Semitism and a need to examine comparatively the mechanisms and hermeneutics of sexual politics and boundary making as symbolic sites for renegotiating nation and religion.

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