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The neglected interactions of religion and nation and how they shape politicization of religion

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The main argument of this chapter borrows from my research on the concomitant dissemination of the nation-state and of the concept of religion (Cesari, 2022). This is not an attempt at deconstructing the concepts of religion and nation: this has been done (Asad, 1993; Masuzawa, 2005). It is an exploration of the mutual interactions of religion and nation-state and how these interactions explain the politicization of religion in different national contexts.

A few disclaimers are in order. First, the allegation is not that prior to the nation-state, political and religious cultures were in a fixed and unchangeable state. There have, of course, always been influences and cross-pollination, and no claim can be made for untouched “authenticity”. Hindus lived under the rule of monotheist Muslims before Christian and Western imperialism, Russian Orthodoxy was influenced by the Byzantines and the Greeks. My argument is limited to the modern period for which I emphasize the specific input brought by the exportation and accommodation of the nation-state, in ways that have shaped the current forms of politicization of religion.

Second, exploring the diffusion of the twin concepts of nation-state and religion and their intersections requires an approach to nation and secularization beyond the expected discussion of nationalism and secularism. Combining them can explain why and how religion and politics influence each other.

**Nation is more than nationalism**

Nationalism usually refers to a group with a collective identity and aspiration to self-determination. When the borders of this group or nation line up with the borders of the state monopoly of power, we have the ideal type of nation-state. Yet, one may wonder, how does nationalism arise? That is where scholarly disagreements are the most acute. On one hand, some emphasize the pre-existence of cohesive social groups, grounded in culture or bloodline, which would explain unification (Kedourie, 2002). The basic assumption in that approach is that there must be some unifying factor in any given national identity – whether it be history, language, religion or otherwise. On the other hand, scholars argue that nationalism
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is the product of social processes that forged solidarity on the basis of shared communication or interests. In this second perspective, nationalism commenced with the expansion of capitalism, which implied shared language and cultural homogenization to foster a collective experience and commonality within the masses thereby brought into political history. The result has been described by Benedict Anderson (1983) as an “imagined community”, therefore giving priority to the language over blood. Besides Anderson, scholars like Ernest Gellner (2006) and Eric Hobsbawm (1990) forged the new paradigm, soon to be referred to as “modernism” or “constructivism”, which became hegemonic among scholars in the last few decades. Whereas the traditional paradigm confidently established nations in the longue durée of history and emphasized their continuity and organic, natural qualities, the modernists saw nations as “constructed communities” that coalesced only with a new discourse of politics that located sovereignty within peoples rather than divinely sanctioned monarchs. Anthony Marx has astutely objected that the imagined community shares with the liberal intellectual tradition the assumption that early social cohesion requires no institutional action; hence, in this perspective, no state action is necessary to encourage community cohesion or national loyalty (Marx, 2005, p. 15). However, it is worth noting that if nationalism is defined not only by collective consciousness but also by self-determination, the creation of a desired community only explains half the story. The coalescence of collective identity has to therefore be studied in the context of the political project of self-determination. In other words, all communities are to a certain extent imagined, but not all of them carry a specific project of political sovereignty and independence.

From this perspective, it is important to distinguish nationalism and nation. The former is the ideology that tells the story of “us” or how people say “we”. The latter as the modern political community is the new frame for understanding all types of societal and political situations. Liah Greenfeld has demonstrated how the national frame has reshaped not only culture but also the mentality of individuals and even illness (Greenfeld, 2013, p. 2). She shows how nationalism is a form of consciousness that has redefined the boundaries of groups and relations between people according to two principles: equality of membership and popular sovereignty. This consciousness is at the foundation of our understanding of modern society and politics. In the words of R. Friedland: “Nationalism is not simply an ideology; it is also a set of discursive practices by which the territorial identity of the political power and the cultural identity of the people whose collective representation it claims are constituted in a singular fact” (Friedland, 2002, p. 386). While nationalism offers a form of representation, it does not determine the context of the representation itself or the identity of the represented population, whether it be civic, liberal, ethnic and/ or religious.

The exclusive political legitimacy of the nation-state was established in 1648 with the Westphalian Treaty that marked the end of the War of Religions in Europe and the formation of the international secular order. The result of this political and cultural transformation was the deep change of the human psyche with the rise of the “nationalized personality structure”, i.e. collective psycho-cultural traits that shape people’s individual interests and social norms (Swanson, 1975; Hintze and Rokkan, 1975). This transformative capacity of the nation on collective mentalities and norms has been mostly ignored or understudied.¹ The Foucauldian concept of “governmentality”, which emphasizes the connection between techniques of individual socialization (governing of the self) and techniques of domination (governing others), can help decipher these intertwined transformations of norms and identities (Foucault, 2010). Governmentality refers to different procedures for regulating human behaviors, which are not in any way limited to state actions or policies.
Religious traditions, organizations, discourses and practices are a part of national govern-
mentality even when they are independent from the state. Notably, religion was already an
institutional space before the nation-state. Through a network of sacred sites and ritual spaces,
community centers, associations, schools, hospitals, courts and charities, religion offered a social
space from which to mobilize, as well as a concrete cosmos within which a particular vision of
the social could be imagined and prefigured. This vision has been deeply transformed by the
rise of national communities and state institutions.

As a matter of fact, policies cannot be explained without analyzing the sets of acquired ideas,
emotions, codes of behaviors and social etiquette that people in a given territory associated
with political power and community. The differentiation of religion and politics came to be
when the inherent political power associated with religion was transferred to the nation-state
legitimacy.

The invention of the religion versus politics divide

It is only in modern times that religion and politics emerge as distinct categories in association
with the secular/religious ones.

Charles Taylor (2007) has superbly described how the “secular” developed as a specific “cat-
egory” within Latin Christendom in the aftermath of the War of Religions: saeculum, or “profane
time”, was contrasted with eternal sacred time. In Latin, “saeculum” meant a fixed period of time,
roughly one hundred years or so. In the Romance languages, it evolved into “century”. After the
War of Religions, it became used to contrast this temporal age of the world from the divinely eter-
nal realm of God. Anything “secular” has to do with earthly affairs rather than with spiritual affairs.

In other words at this critical juncture in time, the Catholic Church was forced to delegate
its guidance of the mundane affairs to the secular political power. It led to two major changes:
first, the concept of good political order and social virtues was disconnected from Christian eth-
ics; second, the immanent became the domain of secular activities while the church legitimacy
was confined to the transcendent. To be clear, the division between transcendent and immanent
is foundational to Christian thinking, but, as explained by Saint Augustine, both were under
God’s purview. The division of tasks between the secular immanent and the religious transc-
cendent was the invention of Latin Christendom and, incidentally, constituted Christendom’s
contribution to the process of secularization.

As a consequence, certain places, institutions, persons and functions were inscribed within
one or the other “times”. The transfer of certain properties and institutions out of church con-
trol to the state was therefore “secularization”. For the first time since the establishment of the
Catholic Church, the political community could exist outside the divine guidance of the Pope
and be defined on its own terms. From this moment on, secularization in western Europe has
never stopped, not simply at the institutional level but most importantly at the societal level,
leading to today’s dominant perception that “this worldly” is all there is, and that the higher
“other worldly” is the product of the human community.

This separation between religion/politics and secular/religious was accelerated through the
Reformation, which gave preeminence to the believer’s responsibility in the relationship to God
while empowering the individuals in the regulation of mundane and political affairs. While the
religious allegiance was re-centered on the individual, the nation became the superior collective
identification that took precedence over religious collective allegiances. The implication is that
religion can only be accepted if religious collectivities come to terms with their political disem-
powerment. In other words, religion is the domain of personal spirituality while all collective
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allegiances are oriented toward and subdued to the nation as the sovereign community made of individuals equal in rights.

As a result, secularization is primarily defined as the separation between “this worldly” and the “other worldly”, relegating religion to personal faith and beliefs with no direct implication on society and politics. The problem is that this relegation has continuously challenged the societal and collective claims of religions, even in advanced secular democracies. In this regard, the former Chief Rabbi of the Commonwealth, Lord Sacks of Aldgate (1948–2020), repeatedly called to attention the fact that liberal democracies cannot handle the moral challenges that religion is able to address because democratic institutions are procedural and focused on individual differences. Along the same line, the public manifestations of religion pose a challenge to European secularities that locate most of the religious expressions in the private sphere. That is one of the reasons why behaviors of practicing Muslims are seen as a rejection of this private/public disjunction (while in the US, Islamophobia is mostly caused by security issues) (Cesari, 2013; Cainkar, 2009). Another recent contestation of the religion/politics divide is the rise of civilizationism and nativism, in the sense that some Christian groups in Europe and the US make religion a key marker of the national community, therefore challenging the taken-for-granted notion that being Christian is mostly a private affair. They also put the religion at the service of the sacred of the national community (and not the other way around).

This distinction between secular and religious has not eliminated the sacred. In fact, it now refers to both political symbols, such as flags, national anthems and memorials, as well as religious ones, such as places of worship, shrines and rituals. In some circumstances, both converge to strengthen the nation. In others, they can compete or clash.

Additionally, the division of labor between the state as regulator of the immanent and religion as the domain of the transcendent has been exported everywhere with the diffusion of the nation-state through colonization, trade and wars. Even when there is no immanent/transcendent distinction (like in Hinduism), religious traditions have nevertheless been transformed along this divide through the adoption of the nation-state. In fact, everywhere traditions had to grapple with what anthropologists call the “monotheistic diktat”, that is, the alignment of the message (there is only one God), the people (pledge exclusive allegiance to this one God) and the territory (a land is part of the covenant between God and the people who accept the message, at least for Judaism). Missionaries outside the West did not systematically convert the autochthones, but they contributed to the fashioning of local traditions toward homogenization and centralization, which facilitated the parallel building of the colonial state political power. These adjustments therefore reinforced the conceptions of the people and the territory brought by the national framework. It means that domains of action historically enacted by religious figures and institutions became increasingly challenged and sometimes replaced by state institutions. As a consequence, religious groups gradually emphasized spirituality, texts and doctrines over practices. It is important to point out that the immanent/transcendent split affected non-monotheistic traditions not because they adopted monotheistic creeds but because their scope of legitimacy was reordered along the immanent/transcendent axis exported by the nation-state. Even in the case of Buddhism, where the concept of transcendence preexisted the modern nation-state, the reordering of hierarchies brought by nationalization opened the door to new discussions influenced by the Christian understanding of the concept (see Cesari, 2022b).

The politicization of Hinduism in modern India, as well as of Islam in the post-colonial Muslim states, are two distinct illustrations of the religious influence of the nation-building (Cesari, 2022b).
The Indian nation: nexus of communalism and secularism

The Indian national identity was conceived both as Hindu and secular, therefore clashing with identification at the local level where class, cultural and religious allegiances were at play. The critical transformation brought by the national community was to redefine local communities along religious lines. This reshaping of local allegiances was a key feature of the modern Indian political community in order to define “Indianness” amid an ostensible lack of unity.

The problem is that Indian political identity and institutions are usually analyzed as secular, and hence are not really understandable through the religious angle. It means that secularism is presented as the glue that has held the country together, and the rise of the Hinduist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) is decried as a denial of this secular project. By contrast, the modelling of Hinduism as a modern religion, adjusted to the national framework, sheds a different light on the politics of secularization.

One of the consequences of British imperialism was the exportation to India of the immanent/transcendent axis. It started the self-reinforcing transformation of the multiple Hindu traditions into Hinduism as a text-centered religion associated with the construction of the nation and the state. In other words, the multiple and diffuse meanings associated with Hinduism have collided with the shaping of the national identity and of secularism, instead of being relegated to the private sphere. Therefore, they provide the language for politics shared by all protagonists, even the non-Hindu ones, creating the latent conditions for claims to Hinduist supremacy as well as the preeminence of the religious boundaries over local identifications. It therefore set the stage for local competitions between religious groups because for the first time, the religious boundaries prevailed over local identification instead of being embedded in it. This habitus can be captured through the cluster of meanings about Hinduism, nation, state and secularism that go back to the Imperial encounter with the British.

With the British imperial politics in the Indian subcontinent, six critical periods created cumulative sequences in the formation of the national habitus: the cow movement (1893–1894), Swadeshi and the New Patriotism in Maharaja (1905–1910), the debate around constitutional reform and the status of Islam (1906–1909), the Khilafat Movement and the Separation of Sind (1919–1932), the Untouchable Reform (1932), and the debate on religion at the Constituent Assembly (1946–1950). These sequences led to the re-organization of Hindu practices and visions along the immanent/transcendent division by aligning them with the national narrative while the state promulgated secularism.

The exploration of the conceptual history of nation, state and religion reveals a cluster of concepts: communalism, secularism, nation and dharma which were worked into building the collective meaning of the nation with a sense of rational-universal-superior meaning for all Indians. At the same time, the grafting of the Western concept of religion onto the multiple local traditions translated into religious communities legally defined by state law. It implies that the state commits to the support of religious education of all religious communities, whilst avoiding privileging by law one religion over another and defining nationalism as the coexistence of pluralities (religious, ethnic linguistics, class). From this perspective, secularism, as the state responsibility vis-à-vis all religious communities, has been established as the central feature of the national identity. Nonetheless, the principles of neutrality and fairness inherent to Indian secularism are not easy to translate into policies since they are grounded in the implicit priority of inter-religious over intra-religious diversity, hence holding the possibility of setting up one homogenous religious group against the other and minimizing the communality of language, culture or locality across religious groups,
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In sum, the modern political community is built on the conception of Hinduism as Vedanta, universalist, tolerant, spirituality, non-violent, and therefore presented as the epitome of Indian national identity. Additionally, secularism is defined as a state project for mediating and arbitrating between religious groups but not within religious groups. These features shape politicization of religion that takes four main forms: disputes over sacred spaces, local political competition between religious and ethnic groups, tensions over religious conversion and competition for the shaping of the national narrative. The Ayodhya dispute will serve as an example of the political tensions over sacred sites.

Dispute over sacred sites

The most intense controversy concerns the access to a site regarded by Hindus to be the birthplace of the deity Rama, on which the mosque known as Babri Masjid was built. This temple/mosque has been an object of local tensions between Muslims and Hindus for more than a century before the national independence, as attested by numerous reports of the British rulers (Van der Veer, 1992, p. 97). After independence, there were notable incidents like when in 1949, a Hindu crowd forced the entry of the mosque and installed an idol of Rama. The local administrators refused to remove the idol while allowing only some Hindu notables to enter the site every year on 22 December (birthday of Rama) for worship while the site remained closed to the general public. Such a solution highlights the political ambiguity at the time: the local political forces stopped the Hindu crowd from turning the mosque into a temple and closed its access to the general public. The fact that the local authorities did not stop Hindu worship completely meant that the mosque had de facto been turned into a temple (Van der Veer, 1992, p. 99). Interestingly, no further local action was taken. It was the campaign of the Vishva Hindu Parishad (VHP) movement in 1984 to liberate Rama's birthplace that turned these local tensions into a divisive nationwide issue. As a result of the VHP mobilizations, the judge of the Faizabad district decided on 14 February 1986, to open the site to the public. Communal violence erupted all over North India, and on 30 March 1987, Muslims launched in New Delhi their biggest protest since independence (Van der Veer, 1992, p. 101). From that date onward, the local dispute has been a national political issue, taken on by all main political parties and made central in the agenda of the BJP, contributing to its national electoral influence. The site was assaulted by Hindu crowds, and the mosque was destroyed during a political rally which turned into a riot on 6 December 1992.

This case is typical of the nationalization of a religious dispute. Instead of simply claiming as a matter of religious belief that the mosque occupies the spot on which Rama has been born, the VHP goes further by claiming that a temple was demolished by Muslims and replaced by a mosque, hence challenging the everlasting Hindu feature of the site. For this additional claim, evidence has to be provided in the form of historical and archaeological “facts”.

A land title case was lodged by the local Muslim groups in the Allahabad High Court. In the landmark verdict of 30 September 2012, the three judges ruled that the 2.77 acres (1.12 ha) of Ayodhya land be divided into three parts, with one-third going to the Ram Lalla or Infant Rama represented by the Hindu Maha Sabha for the construction of the Ram temple, one-third going to the Islamic Sunni Waqf Board and the remaining one-third going to the Hindu religious denomination Nirmohi Akhara. The three-judge bench agreed that a temple predated the mosque at the site although they were not unanimous that the mosque was constructed after destruction of the temple. The excavations by the Archaeological Survey of India were heavily used as evidence by the court to establish that the predating structure was a massive Hindu religious building. The Muslim community challenged the verdict, asking with no success for
the Supreme Court to hear the case with a larger bench of seven judges since it concerns a land belonging to a mosque and has implications for the constitutionally guaranteed freedom of religion (eLegalix, 2010).

Finally, on 9 November 2019, the Indian Supreme Court ruled that the ownership of the holy site in Ayodhya would be given to the Hindus. The Muslims, who also laid claim to the site, would be given a five-acre plot in another part of the city on which to build a mosque. The verdict was unanimous, and one of the strongest pieces of evidence was that archaeological remains of a non-Islamic, earlier building were found at the site (BBC News, 2019). Nirhomi Akhara, a Hindu religious denomination and a third party laying claim to the site, had their plea dismissed by the Supreme Court when they wanted control of the entire holy site (India Today, 2019). Additionally, the court ruled that the destruction of the Babri Masjid mosque in 1992 was unlawful, as well as the forced placement of Hindu deities in the mosque in 1949 (Ahmed, 2019).

This dispute is emblematic of the national Hindu-Muslim divide because the two groups competed for the longest ownership of the holy site, which is also a rivalry over the status of their respective religions within the nation. In other words, the sacred time and space of the nation have displaced the sacredness of the sites toward the political community. Within the nation-state framework, the sacredness of the religious sites is not only religious but also political. That is why “holy” and “sacred” are not synonymous. “Holy” refers to places of worship like a mosque or temple, while “sacredness” involves the religious centrality of a place for the whole religious community. In this perspective, the Babri mosque is holy for Indian Muslims, but not sacred like the Ka’aba. That is why the sacred space is the receptacle of the eternity or longevity of the religious identity of the group. This longevity is amplified and takes a political direction when it also confers legitimacy to the nation.

**Hegemonic Islam beyond borders**

Nation-building in Muslim countries resulted in a decisive re-organization of the society-state-religion nexus, unknown in pre-modern times (Enayat, 2005). Under the caliphates, Islamic institutions and clerics were not subordinate to political power, since the former were financially and intellectually independent from the latter. Additionally, the caliphs ruled over a huge amount of ethnically, religiously and linguistically diverse populations.

As the Ottoman Empire collapsed, the emergence of the state as the central political institution went hand-in-hand with the homogenisation of the populations inhabiting the nation’s territory. That is why nation-building systematically omitted and sometimes eradicated particular ethnic, religious and linguistic groups in order to create one nation defined by one religion (Islam) and one language. This homogenisation also led to a politicised narrative of religion, i.e. what I have called hegemonic Islam (Cesari, 2018). A congruence was created between Muslims of a certain obedience (for example, Maleki, Shafi’i, Hanbali and Hanafi schools) and a bounded territory. Shari’ā, previously the monopoly of Ulemas, was reshaped as state law and secularised with the introduction of French or British legal procedures. It was also reduced to family law (marriage, divorce, custody of children and inheritance), while Shari’a courts were abolished and replaced by a secular court system. Because of the lasting role of Islam in regulating these dimensions of the immanent (family life, sexuality, freedom of speech), they are nowadays the most acutely disputed issues between “ secular” and “ religious” actors. In other words, the Ulemas lost their influence on the immanent and were progressively relegated into
the guidance of souls and regulation of family affairs. In this respect, hegemonic Islam occurred in three major ways:

1. The nationalisation of institutions, clerics and places of worship of one particular trend of Islam (for example Sunni over Shia).
2. The re-definition and adjustment of Shari’a to the modern legal system as well as inclusion of Islamic references into civil law (marriage/divorce), criminal law, and as restriction of freedom of speech (blasphemy/apostasy), based on the prescriptions of that particular brand of Islam.
3. The insertion of the doctrine of that state-approved Islam into the public school curriculum though national history textbooks and civic education.

Consequently, Islam became a marker of national and collective identity independently of the level of personal religious practice, not only for Muslims but also for religious minorities. In other words, the political cosmology brought by the nation-state is shaped by the co-terminality of Islam territory and political power in ways unknown in pre-modern Muslim empires. It creates a connection between Islam and citizenship by establishing Islam as the parameter of public space for Muslims and non-Muslims, believers and non-believers alike. It implies that before being expressed in Islamic parties or movements, political Islam is a foundational element of modern political identities framed by the nation-state. In this sense, religion is “less about beliefs” and more about a world view which is often effective without the active awareness of those experiencing it (Williams, 1996).

It is therefore no surprise that the sacred that used to be associated with the foundational Islamic community has become a feature of the national one. Take, for example, the dispute over the Syrian flag. In 2018, the Turkish-backed Syrian opposition gathered in a constituent assembly in the northern Idlib province in order to change the Syrian revolution flag, which would retain the green, red and black colors adopted in 2012 but replace the red stars with the Shahada, the Islamic testimony of faith (i.e. “I believe that there is no God but Allah and that Muhammad is the prophet of Allah”). This decision caused an uproar among all factions of the Syrian revolution.

Yahya al Aridi, a member of the Druze community, described the flag change as “heresy” and wrote in a tweet, “Those who came out of this heresy to change the flag of revolution did more harm to the cause of the Syrians . . .” (al Aridi, 2018). Even Islamists were conflicted. The leader of Hay’at Tahrir al-Sham, Abu Malik Tali, commented via telegram, “No party should oblige other groups or the general public with a specific color or shape. This is one of the divisions that should be avoided”, adding that “the Prophet, peace be upon him, had numerous flags, of different shapes, and banners shouldn’t be limited to a single color” (Enab Baladi, 2018). This battle over religious inscriptions on flags illustrates the tensions between the secular/sacred of the national community and the sacred of the religious community.

Additionally, and most crucially, this genealogy of the religion/politics divide sheds a different light on Islamic parties and movements: they are not the beginning of political Islam, but the second iteration of a political culture ingrained into the national communities (Cesari, 2018). That is the reason why these movements claim an Islamic state. Their goal is not to get rid of hegemonic Islam but rather to expand its influence beyond the domains currently controlled by the secular states.

In a similar vein, the dispute over Muslim minorities in the current Middle Eastern politics is influenced by the modern meaning of minority associated with the building of the nation-state. The status of the Alawi minority in Syria is a case in point.
The shaping of the Alawi community

The Alawi sect, founded by Muhammad ibn Nusayr al-Bakri an-Namiri (d. 883 or 873) in the ninth century, found a home in the coastal mountains of Latakia, currently Syria (Farouk-Alli, 2015). It is worth noting that Alawis were not defined as a religious minority in the Muslim empires, since the term applied only to the Dhimmis (mostly Jews and Christians). As a Shia sect however, this did not prevent their discrimination or oppression.

The French mandate (1923–1946) over this portion of the Ottoman Empire changed the power dynamic between Alawis and Sunnis. The articles of the mandate allowed the French powers to impose or encourage divisions within groups along religious lines. As a result, the French administration defined the Alawis as a minority, similar in status to Christians and Jews (Rabinovich, 1979). Even more importantly, this political management operated on the misconceived understanding of the Ottoman millet system as a hierarchical relationship between the religious communities and the central power in Istanbul. As a matter of fact, the reality was that the locality was the dominant collective identity for diverse religious groups sharing the same history and culture to a particular region of the Empire, not to mention that this religious diversity within the various locales was regulated independently of the administration in Istanbul.

The fact that the Alawis could also be identified to a particular portion of territory (i.e. the coast) facilitated the creation in 1924 of the État des Alaouites, set apart from the central state institutions, that would become the muhafaza (province) of Latakia within the Syrian post-colonial republic. In doing so, the French intended to counter the rise of Arab nationalism associated with the Sunni majority (Fildis, 2012). Such a purpose was endorsed by the Alawis as a way to overcome their historical marginality by becoming a legitimate component of the new nation. As a result, the Alawis became simultaneously a national religious minority and a sectarian community within the Syrian nation.

Like the Alawis, all non-Sunni minorities from Christians to Druzes became the principal means by which the French maintained their control of the region (White, 2011, p. 135). All the non-Muslim religious leaders endorsed the modern concept of minority because they saw it as a way to secure a strong vertical relationship to the state and to ensure the political legitimacy of their respective community. Interestingly, these divisions and their connection to the central political power were also sanctioned by the Syrian nationalist leaders. As a result, the religious leaders became the sole mediators between the political power and their respective communities, hence establishing religion as a significant benchmark of political representation.

The rise of the Baath Socialist Party in the 1940s promised Syrians equality on the basis of language and culture, not religion (Fildis, 2012). Nonetheless, due to the shift in distribution of power within the army, by 1963 Alawites made up 90% of the newly appointed officers. This new political dynamic was the opportunity for Hafiz al-Assad (1930–2000) to unify all factions around him, and for the minority to politically dominate the Sunni majority. In order to assert his legitimacy Hafez Al-Assad took great care at never emphasizing the Shia/Sunni difference. He also cultivated good relationships with the Sunni clerical establishment, even trying to include them in his repression of the Islamist political opposition (for more details see Cesari, 2022b, Chapter 2).

It therefore does not come as a surprise that since the outbreak of the 2011 revolution, Bashar al-Assad has promoted the idea that the state and the Alawi minority are inextricably linked and has presented himself as the protector of all religions against radical Sunni opponents.

Based on the existing power distribution and the patterns of politicization of religion, the relegitimization of the Assad system will probably translate into the acknowledgement of Islamic
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religious institutions and figures. Firstly, local and especially rural zones will be key to that strategy, which started during the siege of the towns occupied by the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) (al-Saidawi, 2019). Secondly, the state will continue to assert its role as the privileged provider of religious legitimacy. For example, the state has strengthened its grip on Islamic organizations and figures. After Assad retook Aleppo in 2016, individuals who had any role in local government in opposition-held areas were deemed terrorists and pushed out. To avoid any vacuum, the government granted religious institutions the capacity to operate in these areas. These government-supported entities are now establishing their own charities and medical, educational, economic and welfare services, which will lead to new societal structures and local networks and therefore influence the balance of power between state and religion at the national level.

The law passed on 31 October 2018 exemplifies the government’s attempt to further control Syria’s religious networks. The new legislation expands the presence and powers of the Ministry of Awqaf (Ministry of Religious Affairs) and its personnel; defines the “correct” version of Islam; determines the appointment procedures for religious positions such as that of the grand mufti; outlines the responsibilities, limits and salaries of religious officials; and specifies penalties for violations committed by such officials. The document also confirms the government’s intention to strengthen the Waqf’s socio-economic role in support of the local clerics (Syrian Law Journal, 2018).

These actions are good indicators of the future of political Islam in Syria: the state will posit itself as the protector of religions in general and Islam in particular, while Islamically based political opposition will be discredited as anti-national and against the interests of the country. At the same time, Sunni political forces will not be able to create a united front because of conflicting allegiance to transnational Islamic movements like al-Qaeda or ISIS and to regional political powers in the Gulf.

This succinct analysis illustrates how the power dynamics in the nation-state building were facilitated by the transformation of religious meaning within the nation-state. It is worth mentioning that most of the religious concepts redefined during the nation-building have spread beyond national boundaries to give rise to transnational forms of Islamism that can be radical, like al-Qaeda and ISIS.

From national to transnational politicization of Islam

From this perspective, al-Baghdadi’s (1971–2019) caliphate is better understood as a globalization of the national forms of Islam, rather than a return to the pre-modern form of polity before nationalism. If political Islam is the result of the diffusion of the religion/politics divide associated with the nation-state, it implies that global jihadism is the most recent and radicalized iteration of the nationalized versions of Shari’a, jihad and Ummah.

The transnationalization of the Muslim Brotherhood ideology and strategy illustrates this apparent contradiction. Hassan al-Banna (1906–1949), the founder of the Muslim Brotherhood, was not opposed to the nation-state, and since its inception, the brotherhood had a distinctly national focus on Egypt. This position led to divisions within the movement; the majority wanted to operate within the state-sanctioned political system, while the minority wanted to destroy the state. Sayyid Qutb’s (1906–1966) re-definition of jihad as the fight against the unjust ruler was instrumental to the systematic use of violence for political purpose. The pre-modern conception of jihad emphasized the efforts of the believer to implement the revelation-based community as defined by the message of Islam and can be compared to the just war tradition since it laid out the proper “rules” for starting and conducting a war. From this perspective,
jihad was a collective duty and a tool for the caliph to preserve and expand his international authority. By contrast, the current global conception of jihad originates in the resistance against the colonial power, to turn against the secular nationalist rulers and finally to expand to all state powers (Peters, 1979). In the same vein, it is worth mentioning that the national form of jihads, from Hezbollah to Hamas, remains the most significant form of political resistance.

With the creation of al-Qaeda, this re-definition has gone even further to define jihad as the use of indiscriminate violence against all enemies of Islam across national borders.

In this regard, global jihad – also known as Salafi-jihadism – is a unique modern combination of the jihadi guerrilla of Qutb with the Wahhabi religious doctrine of Saudi Arabia. In other words, the national form of jihad from the Egyptian context became global with the internationalization of the Afghan jihad against the Soviet, while its literalist and exclusivist vision of the Ummah comes from the modern Wahhabi doctrine (Gerges, 2009).

Transnational Islam and jihad also connect to the Ummah and its various definitions and interpretations. At its inception, the Ummah is defined as the human collective that uniquely received guidance from Allah through the revelation received by the Prophet Muhammad. Initially, it served as the political model for the successive caliphates, but their expansion across diverse populations, ethnicities, cultures and religions resulted in the plural understanding of the Ummah as the totality of territories under the rule of Islam, making it a multi-religious, linguistic and cultural entity. However, a turning point came in the nineteenth century, when activists and ideologues reformed the Islamic tradition in order to address the challenges of political modernization brought by the encounters with Europe. From this moment onward, the Ummah redefined by pan-Islamists such as Rashid Rida (1865–1935) and Afghani (1839–1897) came to designate an ideal political community of all Muslim believers under the rule of Islam, contrasted to the national community. At the same time, the loyalty to the Ummah was not in contradiction with the national allegiances and could in fact be channeled into national and state interests. For instance, Saddam Hussein’s rhetoric during the first Gulf War (1990–1991) promoted the shared virtue of the Arab and Muslim community and the duty of the Muslims to defend the Ummah. Hussein’s rhetoric further highlighted the Ummah’s role as a political transnational project, based not simply on faith, but also on the resistance against the imperialist project of the West. The Islamist versions of the Ummah have built on this modern understanding to turn it into a combatant community. From this perspective, true Muslims must see themselves as being in a permanent state of war against state and society, hence departing from the traditional definition of the Ummah as Muslims and non-Muslims under the rule of the caliphate. Ironically, this conception of a homogenous and political Ummah is also channeled into the Western rhetoric of the threat of Islam and its “deteritorialized community of Muslims”.

In sum, the Ummah of the global jihad is not a rupture but an ultra-radicalized version of the modern political community of the nineteenth century. Like Christianity in Europe at the time of the Reformation but with very different outcomes, the Islamic tradition has seen not only its societal influence reordered by the nation-state, but also its doctrinal content redefined to make room for state sovereignty over mundane matters. Evidently, these transformations have not generated a stable consensus and are in fact a significant factor in the rise of political movements based on Islam.

Conclusion

The genealogical method adopted in this chapter is not about finding historical causality but identifying discontinuities and changes. It seeks to understand how the present is made possible through specific circumstances from the past and to pay attention to how and when these
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circumstances change. That is why the focus is the rise of dissension about ideas, narratives and institutions, i.e. when people fight and compete to impose one particular meaning of concepts such as community, law, secularism, etc. over others.2

Such dissonances reveal the power struggle underneath apparently stable ideas and institutions. Social change is therefore the outcome of competition of power between different actors and ideas which operates in all social arenas and not only through state actions. Power is a dynamic of both struggle and repression: individuals and institutions are constantly affected by power and exercising power at the same time. Power is the constituting force shaping and forming discourses, knowledge, interests, and institutions in all aspects of social life, including religion.

It is important to keep in mind that the timelines of these disputes are not always reflected in the political and academic established periodization of national and international politics. For this reason, there is no before and after associated with colonization or national independence. Instead, these events open new sequences that have disrupted pre-existing orders and debates but have not created them. For example, prior to Western imperialism, some indigenous secularization was occurring in the Ottoman Empire with the distinction between Shari’a as monopoly of the clerics and the Shari’a Syasa as the domain of the Ottoman administration. Similarly, in the Indian subcontinent, a sort of homogenization of Hindu practices was at play in some provinces in order to compete with the scriptural model of the Muslim rulers. These pre-Western processes were re-oriented and channeled into the building of the national communities. They are, in fact, key to understanding the specificity of the existing tensions and competition between religious and political actors and ideas.

More broadly, the genealogy method is a useful tool to overcome two major limitations of the investigation of religion and politics. The first one is anachronism, i.e. attributing current meanings of politics and religion to past phenomena that were not politically salient or even understood as such. A significant example is defining all forms of political power as state, like empires or cities. We contend that the term “state” should be used only as the modern form of political power. This modernity does not refer to centralization and bureaucracy, which can be found in other polities. The most important feature of the state is its association with the nation as the political community founded on two principles: equality of individuals and popular sovereignty, which are not present together in any other political system.

The second one is the taken-for-granted religious/politics dichotomy enshrined in our scholarship. There is no such a thing as two separate political and religious entities but instead, continuous interactions between actors, ideas and institutions to define what is religious and what is political. In this respect, despite its attempt to question secularism, the concept of postsecularity (Habermas, 2006; Abeysekara, 2008) does not capture this never-ending process because it implies that there was a fixed distinction between secular and religious that has been challenged. In fact, the genealogical method tells us that since the “division of labor” between politics and religion at the end of the War of Religions, the domain and boundaries of the secular have continuously shifted. The issue is that modern political orders were built and legitimized on the idea that religion is apolitical in essence, which can only be an occasional interloper on political affairs (Walhof, 2013).

Consequently, the analysis of the never-ending interactions between religion and politics is challenging, if not impossible, within the existing political theories. For this reason, combining the investigation of ideas and institutions allows us to capture the interactions between the two. It then becomes more obvious that the redistribution of power between political and religious institutions has influenced the content of religious doctrines on issues of law, sovereignty and inter-religious interactions. In the case of Islam, the current conceptions of Islamic Law as state law or the claims for an Islamic state are the most salient examples of these theological changes.
brought by the nation-state framework. The building of the nation-state in India has also led to the re-definition of Hinduism as a scriptural and universal tradition, which is at the core of the current political tensions on Hindu and nationalism.

Notes

1 See Liah Greenfeld’s. *Mind, Modernity, Madness: The Impact of Culture on Human Experience* (2013), which has documented the influence of the national framework on mental illness, happiness and other conditions usually seen as inherent psychological characteristics independent of social structures.

References


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