

COURSEWORK COVER SHEET

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Does Religion oppose or enhance Nationalism?

Smith states in his work Nationalism and Modernism That “Nationalism is the natural response of human beings whose social world... has collapsed... they turn to the transhistorical nation as the only available replacement for... religious community... which [has] been eroded by capitalism and westernisation” (97). Yet we find that religion has certainly not eroded in the Western world and most definitely not in the Eastern world. Indeed, Smith contradicts himself in his introduction to his article “Nationalism and Religion” by stating that he intends to “throw light upon the intimate relationship between the forces of religion and nationalism in the modern world” (Smith 23). The question of whether religion enforces, produces or enhances nationalism can only be dealt with after looking at that very intimate relationship according to the various socio-political theories, and thus my goal is to look at both the connection and the division of religion and nationalism and whether they coexist and more importantly whether, in fact, religion opposes or enhances nationalism. To this end I will look at both Jewish nationalism and the role of the Church in Europe to reach such a conclusion for it is my belief that it enhances nationalism but also opposes it as the powers of religion and national authority can only conflict with each other.

There is much debate over the idea of 'political religion', originating in the 1960's, with theorists such as the sociologist, Durkheim¹, being a proponents of this idea. The basis of a political religion is one where interests are shared and authority established, but moreover where personal sacrifice is expected in order to achieve social adhesiveness. The similarities between this type of nationalism and the church are clear to see since the goal for such a community was, as Smith puts it, a “pure, sinless and seamless community to be worshipped by the citizenry in the same way as communities of believers had formerly worshipped the deity” (Smith 98). In this way nationalism substituted religion, allowing a modern, secular ideology to take the place of traditional religion but at the same time the distinction between holy and profane remains much as it was in traditional religion. According to David Apter this politicisation of religion was necessary to unite communities through their personal sacrifice in the name of their collective nation. Furthermore it seems, according to Smith, that this concept can be applied specifically in the non-Western world, in places such as Africa and Asia, and we will discuss how this is possible shortly.

Hastings in his work The Construction of Nationhood: Ethnicity, Religion and Nationalism focuses much of chapter 8, “Religion further considered”, on European Christianity and the way in which Christianity shaped England, France and a number of other nations. According to him the connection between religion and nationality existed even in the Middle Ages where national identity centred around a kingly line and holy places, i.e. churches, and therefore power and religion were closely associated. It is not only the ultimate national powers that were so closely connected with religion. Lower class clergy were forced to think in national terms since their work in the church entailed establishing relationships between all classes and communities and this forged relationship between communities further enhanced their collective memories and therefore their sense of national identity and especially when up against other rival religions and communities since the threat of opposition can only strengthen ones identity. Insofar as the Church was a central factor in Europe throughout history, and we have already seen the connection between national authority and the church, we can go so far as to say that the New Testament was paramount in establishing and shaping nationalism.

The Catholic Church's response to this strong bond further emphasises the intricacy of this connection between religion and nationalism, and the strength that religion gave

¹Smith, Anthony. 1998. Nationalism and Modernism

to nationalism in Europe. In the early modern period inasmuch as the Catholic Church was controlled by the national monarchy in countries such as France and Spain, they also sought to transcend community and nations rejecting the absolutist claims of national sovereignty but this was brought to an end with the political compromise following the Wars of Religion at the end of the seventeenth century where the universalistic essence of Christianity was put aside in the face of the triumph of state sovereignty. The role of Christianity in enforcing nationalism can also be divisive, however. In modern nations we see the role of Christianity in producing civil wars and ethnic conflict, for example, in northern Ireland where the nationalist churches are in rivalry with each other and see rival communities as a threat to their nationalism despite both being founded in Christianity.

The basis of Smith's ideas in his article "Nationalism and Religion: The Role of Religious Reform in the Genesis of Arab and Jewish Nationalism" is that there are three possible answers to the question of the relationship between nationalism and religion. The first is that religion and nationalism are conceptually opposed to each other; that despite this opposition religious reform has enabled the emergence of nationalism from ethnic religion, and finally that, in the case of the Jews there is an obvious transition from religion to nationalism but, while they substituted the nation for religion, they still conform to their religion in many respects.

The concept of political religion fits in seamlessly in Europe where the Church was a central part of life throughout history, but in the Eastern world, where Westernisation has only occurred in the past century or so, it is puzzling to understand how this theory could be relevant. Perhaps then the Jews can bridge this gap in that while they were not Christian they were an unidentifiable part of the Western world, taking from it the concepts of nationalism in order to establish their own nationality.

Hastings discusses this very issue vis-a-vis the Jews as being the only nation that exemplifies the non-Christian nationalism since only in the last century did Zionism and therefore nationalism for the Jews even arise as an idea. Before this time the Jews existed as a nation through collective memories of tradition and religion whilst existing in both Christian and Muslim nations though not having an actual state or nation to speak of, therefore indicating a religious and ethnic Jewish identity as the basis to their nationalism. This in turn means that Zionism, whilst a secular and modern concept, is firmly rooted in religion so that, for example, Moses as their biblical leader, while not necessarily representing a religious figure certainly represents a traditional figure rooted in religion (Hastings, 1997).

Without tradition and religion the move for a State, specifically in Israel, the land of the Bible, would never have become a quest for the Jews. Certainly this very secularism of religion was much opposed by true traditionalists for, although it is rooted in religion, the creation of nationalism has invented a new form of religion with no real religious significance because the very essence of nationalism and elevating community and nation means that religion and the deity is being replaced and cannot exist alongside the power given to humans as part of a nation and certainly the authority at the head of nation.

There was much controversy in the idea of a Jewish nationalism. The reformist Rabbis in Germany at the end of the nineteenth century who began the 'enlightenment period' of Judaism wanted religious reform, and the rationalists wanted radical changes within Judaism. All in all this meant that during this period Judaism was redefined, focusing on secularism rather than tradition as the foundation of the community and thereby making Judaism cultural rather than religious. The aim of these new figures in European Jewry was in fact to make the Jews into a nation like any other and being simply historical and social as a unit and community. Judaism was only relevant insofar as it could enhance and strengthen Jewish nationalism.

Smith quotes Eliezer Perlman, one of the founders of Zionism, in his assertion that “Judaism is no longer the religion of Moses. Nor is it a form of evolutionary Deism... it has been reinterpreted to become now the spirit and thought of the people” (Smith 41). The only relevance of Judaism, according to Smith, was, as we have already mentioned, its reformation as the basis for redemption and therefore nationalism, thus Judaism was redefined in political terms.

Durkheim gives a different spin on the contradiction between nationalism and religion through his definition of religion in functional terms which refers to “common objective consequences of religion” meaning anything that evokes community or collective aims and therefore nationalism can be considered a function of religion and this explains how they go hand in hand in regards to the Jews thereby supporting the traditionalists in that nationalism reinvents religion as a new set of beliefs rather than the traditional beliefs that formed the religion. Smith, though, asserts that Zionism cannot be seen as a purely political version of Judaism, further commenting that while they may be in opposition they can certainly coexist.

This certainly overlaps with Hastings ideas and it would seem that there is truth to both ideas for Judaism as a religion is what allowed the Jews to stay together as a nation in spirit and then only once the concept of nationalism came to the forefront and the quest for reform, assimilation and westernisation came to forefront did Judaism turn into a secular, modern ideology for the purposes of nationalism. This would not have been possible, however, had Judaism in its traditional format not been beating at the heart of Jews while living in foreign lands throughout history.

In Africa and Asia, according to Kedourie², there was a Europeanisation of thought whereby their leaders, be it Confucius, Muhammad etc., became their national role models as opposed to the religious leaders. This turn in non-Western countries was a direct result of the destruction of traditional society in Europe which aroused a sense of national identity and appealed to traditional religion and past as the basis of that very national identity. The reason that this idea of nationalism appealed outside of Europe was because of the idea of salvation behind nationalism within Europe and that can certainly be attributed to the Jewish cause.

The aim in Europe was a pure, just society and one where everyone belonged to a community and the similarity with religion is intricate in this sense. Kedourie talks of “medieval Christian millennialism” (Smith 110) meaning that nationalism and millennialism share similar foundations in the abolition of the distinction between public and private, the institution of morality and purity and the self sacrifice and renouncement of earthly pleasures in favour of justice on earth. In his opinion, though, nationalist mobilisation can only really succeed if history and religion are taken seriously, even if that means that they are perverted in the process.

This is where the national position of the Abrahamic religion of Judaism begins to take form. Religious motifs and figures, vital to the establishment of nationalism, are given a new form and turned into mere political and national symbols, perverted into new understanding and meanings in order to give shape to nationalism, but again this can only occur if the religious history is at the centre of the people to begin with.

There remains the question, however, of whether nationalism can exist without religion and this is discussed by many theorists who see religion as directly relevant to nationalism and moreover secular nationalism as a failure. Bruce Kapferer proves this link by using the case studies of Sri Lanka and Australia where, in both cases, nationalism has taken on the role of a religion although, in the case of Australia, a religion did not pre-exist. Nationalism supplies both with purpose and meaning and

²Smith, Anthony. 1998. Nationalism and Modernism

therefore, in the case of Sinhalese Buddhism in Sri Lanka, reinforces it and links religion to nationalism and therefore the sacred to the secular.

Kapferer believes, similarly to Hastings, that nationalism must connect to collective memories in order to move forward. He sees nationalism as the “religion of history” where there is most certainly a religious contribution and in the same way that religion is influential in the construction of nationalism, so too it influences the expression the nation. Again, we can further understand how the Jews, pre-State of Israel, existed as a nation before they had Zionism as a nationalism, and moreover, how Zionism coexists with and and the very same time replaces traditional Judaism but still remains strong nonetheless.

In contrast, Arabism completely rejects the idea of nationalism, instead strictly adhering to traditional Islam, save for a small number of countries, such as Egypt. To the Arab world, Islam *is* their nationality and they are bound by their Islamic heritage and religion. They are self defined by Islam and their strength lies in their adherence to their religion and the incorporation of politics in their traditions. Smith's assertion in his article certainly bears true in understanding the difference between the Jewish and Arab relationship to nationalism and religion:

“... their main ethnic bond was in fact religion. But the nation is a secular and political concept, and nationalism... must dissolve the traditional ethnocentrism of such communities to create the nation. To achieve this, it must neutralise the appeal of religion... and redirect[ing] it into an allegiance to the new formation of the nation state” (Smith 43).

The Jews and their Zionist nationality certainly did this, but the Arab world managed somehow to oppose nationalism as a political and secular concept while in fact creating a steadfast nationalism based purely on traditional religion.

It would seem that nationalism cannot in fact exist without religion according to Arabism for although they have not actively created a nationalism, their adherence to their religion has in turn created a form of religious nationalism.

The main question that we need to address is whether religion enhances or opposes nationalism. It is evident that there is a direct correlation between nationalism and religion. Whether religion is reformed, twisted to suit authority and their desire to unite their nations or in fact strictly obeyed, there is no nationalism without a religious foundation at some point in history. That religion can be turned into a political concept rather than a traditional one is irrelevant, for be it as it may, it is the religious roots, memories and traditions which binds and unites, and can also divide, nations.

It is for these reasons that I believe that religion does not oppose nationalism in any way, but rather can only serve to enhance it. The concepts of religion and nationalism are strikingly similar, as Smith discusses, and this is no coincidence. It is religion that has given nationalism its definition and thus constructed it. Most certainly one could argue that the political religion is not religion in its true form and therefore it is a newly constructed, socio-political religion that has influenced nationalism, but either way, the roots remain the same and it is the power of tradition, collective memory, reformation and change of religion that has given nationalism the political power it holds in the Western World and has given the Eastern World the desire to embrace westernisation and the idea of nationality.

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