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Shall the Religious Assist the Earthly Conquest? How Religions Reinforce Nationalism

Given any book on world history, one can easily identify traces of religion amidst the wreckage of conflicts and wars as a detective may uncover evidences in the aftermath of a crime. The traces are enough testimony that religion is present in those crimes, and a trial may be summoned in attempt to present verdict on this defendant, whether he is innocent or guilty of the misery and woes of humanity. Did he commit the crime, or compel others to commit the crime in his stead, or stand by in silence, or actually attempt to stop others during the felonious acts?

From “the Troubles” in Northern Ireland to 9/11 attacks, it is undeniable that religion has its involvement in conflicts around the world, alongside nationalism – which is believed to be propelling force of such clashes. However, some might argue that religion does not condone nationalism, or may even disregard it in some cases. In this essay, I will present the evidences – using the earlier analogy – before the reading judges and hope to deliver verdict on this matter.

Religion: Provider of the Imagined Identity

Religion is an old invention of humankind, much older than the concept of nationalism¹. Nonetheless, the notion of “nation” is old enough to exist alongside religions, and proto-nationalism – the struggle of pre-modern ethnic groups against one another – definitely existed in that epoch². To define religion is an easy task: an organized hierarchy to promote certain value based on sanctified words of gods/prophets. **Nation** is much harder to describe, and whether “nation” itself existed in pre-modern era is still being debated among scholars today. This essay recognizes nation, following D. Smith’s definition, as a *named human population occupying a historic territory sharing a common myth*.³ Nation in this sense certainly existed before the rise of **nationalism** itself, which is an *ideological-political* movement for autonomy, unity, and identity on behalf of the population. Incidentally, pre-nationalist nations did feature **national identity**: the continual reinterpretation of value, symbols, memories, myth, and, eventually, the identification of individuals within nation with those properties⁴. As mentioned earlier, the common theme of nation and national identity appears to be the stress on common myth and identity.

This raises a separate need for understanding what it means to have an **identity**, how it was constructed and preserved to succeeding generations. On the surface, “sameness” may be adequate to constitute an identity (i.e., people of same origin, or of same political demands), but that is not the case. Identity requires both “sameness” and “difference”, or, to be more precise, “opposition” – the “us and them” mentality, a process of simultaneous inclusion and exclusion⁵. Needless to say, identity is not necessarily real; rather, it is an imagined narrative.

Religions, with their holy texts explaining how things came to be, easily supply national identity with such imagined narrative. Israel, an imagined community housing wide range of

ethnicities (Jews from both Eastern and Western Europe, Christians, Druze, Ashkenazi, etc), adopts narrative of exile and re-gathering based on their religious belief⁶. The case of religion and national identity can also be found in medieval England. Bede's *Chronicles of Anglo-Saxon History* portrays England as a triumph of Roman Christianity over pagan and Celtic Christian rulers⁷. For Bede, Englishness was equivalent to Christian values. Much later, after British partition of Bengal in 1905 some Indian nationalists adopted Hindu identity as national identity by invoking tales of Hindu local gods warring against evil to rally support for struggle against foreign invaders⁸.

Special attention should be directed to the rise of Islamism, definitely our contemporary phenomenon. As a matter of fact, development of Pan-Arabism paralleled the rise of Islamism in colonial Middle East⁹. After centuries of enmity with Christian nations' aggression into the region through the Crusades and Western Imperialism, Islam was portrayed as the oppressed in a land dominated by European oppressors. Arabia and Islam came to be seen by the Muslim Brotherhood as mutual coexistence: restoration of Arab glory means return of Islamic splendour¹⁰. Arabic was held as holy language, supposedly the language that God chose to communicate with humans. This dual ideology of Pan-Arab and Pan-Islam can be summed up by Rashid Rida's proclamation, "A brother to all Muslims, and a brother to all Arabs."¹¹

By using the concept of religion as provider of identity, we may understand how Islam actually fuels Pan-Arabism. Despite of its trans-national appearance, we can safely see Pan-Arabism as a form of what I call *collective nationalism* for many of its traits (in fact, Pan-Arabism will eventually break down into scattered nationalism rather than a collective nationalism, more on this later). Nationalism is described to be a product of "negation", a sense of rejection and denial¹² (again, the "us and them" or "the Otherness" mentality). By denying lesser values of other civilizations, nationalism promotes its own special value which other nations or civilizations cannot acquire. Therefore, nationalism requires the identity of "superordinate VS subordinate" to develop. In short, nationalism operates through the process of "exclusion" – some kind of a "club membership"¹³. Religion easily provides this. Claiming the sole Truth of the universe, religions assure their followers that they are on the True path, superordinate to other beliefs. Here, the boundary Otherness is drawn. In the case of Arab Islamism, Islam is the true religion and way of life amidst the world of false idols. Even the communication with the Islamic god can be only through Arabic language¹⁴ (language as national/religious identity can also be found in Gaelic language revival attempt in 1920s Ireland, which was meant to highlight Irish Catholicism against Protestants¹⁵).

In an ironic twist, however, Pan-Arabism does not live up to its realization, mainly due to the nature of its *collective nationalism*: the *collective* part of *nationalism* disintegrated. In the present time, nation-states are far from Arabic unity in the Middle East, and "national interest" overrides the inspiration toward collective greatness of Arabia. For example, Saudi Arabia's status of a major economic power and, in turn, haven to labour immigration puts the nation's concern in its border policy rather than opening up to fellow Arab nations¹⁶. Despite common

religion, the Islamic world is also plagued with internal conflict: Iraq-Iran War, ethnic tensions in Pakistan¹⁷, and Iraq's invasion of Kuwait testify well for this fact. Nationalism prevails.

Zionism is not dissimilar to the exclusive religious/(trans)national identity of Pan-Arabism. It may be even more accurate, its common myth and idea of historical homeland are derived directly from religious doctrine. The mystical belief that the race of Jews is chosen or selected by God is perilously close to Adorno's statement that nationalism is mobilization of narcissism¹⁸ – in this case, the narcissistic nature of nationalism and religion.

Religion and Nationalism: A Political Instrument

In spite of its failure, Pan-Arabism is too distinct an example of holy matrimony of religion and nationalism to discard. Pan-Arabism, along with Pan-Islamism, simultaneously developed together in the face of the West's "invasion" of ideology, political power, and lifestyle; modern globalization would fall in the same category as Western colonization for Islamists¹⁹. Does the concurrent rise of Pan-Arab nationalism and Islamism reveal to us some noticeable connection between religion and nationalism?

In a region prone with intervention and influx of influence from the West, it was natural for some Arabs to feel that their volatile homeland was being threatened. What they saw was "modernization" adopted by elite that brought some norms of Westernized hierarchy and institution, leading some to perceive that the "old way" was leaving them²⁰. In response to such threat, Islamists resorted to the power of de-modernized "imagined past" (or myth, as we discussed) to provide them with "older and familiar" society – in this case, Islamism, the ideology of reconstructing Islamic past of Mohammed days, by implementing Islamic laws and adopting traditional, Islamic way of life. Religion is what these Islamists sought to cope with the changing world, for religion provides exactly what they wanted to hear: the idea of monolithic Truth, rooted firmly in form of sacred texts in the face of ever-changing world²¹.

Religion and nationalism coincided at this point. Both supply the answer to individuals' need of security and image of united wholeness. In fact, the equivalence to nationalistic rhetoric of individuals as organs of "greater part" can be found in religion's notion of individuals as part of "greater plan"²². Furthermore, adherence to nationalism's monolithic Truth requires unquestioning obedience to the (nation's) goal, this is often solved by uniting the nationalistic endeavour with that of religious; "God's judgment" serves as shortcut for moral decision – it frees believers from difficult task of having to judge on their own term what is ethically right or wrong²³. Nationalism, a political movement, benefits greatly from this mentality.

Religion as a political instrument is not new, neither. It is no mystery that many regimes had their authorities consolidated by religious establishments – dating back to the days of proto-national conflicts. In medieval Europe, for instance, religions transmit sense of royal influence and (though still vague) idea of *nation* unto illiterate mass via sermons or presence of royal-associated cathedrals²⁴. During the Hundred Years War, English royal court had the churches say

prayers for the king's and country's attempt to win the crown of France, and some centuries later the English state once again ordered every church to possess one copy of *Book of Martyrs* – account of English Protestant martyrdom in tumult of religious and political unrest. In Calvinist regions, religious rhetoric was used to mobilize citizens to fight against foreign rulers and “false church”²⁵.

Another familiar case of religious establishments supporting nationalism is the rise of fundamentalist Christians in America. This is a rather peculiar case for fundamentalism, as religious fundamentalist movements tend to develop in post-colonial, impoverished nations amidst anti-Imperial sentiment²⁶. American fundamentalism is the opposite: it grows in an “Imperialist” superpower, wields some political power, and enjoys living standard and freedom of expression than any of its counterpart in Third World countries²⁷. American fundamentalists do not only serve as illustration of religious nationalism in the US, they also serve as example of the belief that radical religious movements grow out of economic and political deprivation is in fact a myth.

The Evangelicals harnessed millions of supporters in America, operating commercialized TV networks and mega-churches around the nation, and holding close association with many politicians and even presidency candidates – all this in a country ruled by Constitution which explicitly separates Church and state. Link between American fundamentalists – also known as Evangelicals – and conservative, nationalist political identity had surfaced ever since its rise in the 1970s²⁸. Calling itself “New Christian Right”, the movement was well established as de facto supporter of Republican Party agenda. They preach not only “traditional family value” (anti-homosexual, anti-abortion, anti-sexual license, among other things), but also “Abrahamic Covenant”, which is basically the duty of America to defend Jews, and America's rights to invest anywhere in the world. The Evangelicals, in short, are fully supportive of what we may recognize as globalization, free-market capitalism, and American expansionism²⁹.

Arab Islamism, Jewish Zionism, and American Evangelicals share too many strikingly common traits to dismiss. The religious motifs in those movements construct, and are a part of, nationalist fervour of the regions, believing that each is divinely destined to be “chosen”, unique, independent people confronting the unholy Others. The feature eerily reflects the triangular ideology of the three superstates in Orwellian world of *Nineteen-Eighty-four*. Religions do not only promote nationalism; rather, it is engulfed by nationalism and transformed into instrumental establishment for nationalistic goal. Let us now examine how the transformation may be done.

Mining For Uniqueness of Nationalism and Religion

Religion is an ancient artefact whereas nationalism is relatively a recent invention, yet their connection is clear, as we have seen. The claim that nationalistic identity and common myth are wholly imagined product by nationalists, as a recipe may be conjured by a chef, would prevent us from understanding how the “old” may reinforce the “new”. Nationalism, though an

imagined mentality, does not grow *ex nihilo*; rather, it is constructed by relying on historic layers of identities³⁰, as a miner may mine deep into layers of rocks to retrieve whatever mineral deposits he desires. If we are to employ this geological analogy, religion is somewhere in the rich cultural deposits that nationalists unearth and reuse. As we know, nation tends to be defined as an imagined discourse, symbols, images, and narrative – “a cultural artefact of modernity”³¹, but this process of imagination is in fact based on pre-modern properties that represent national identity to some extent (myth, language, for example). The process of imagining nation is therefore based on making *connection* with those “old” things rather than conjuring up “new” things.

It is further argued that the identity must be either “continued” or “re-discovered”, and must have been a familiar, common product for the population since pre-nation era, otherwise the citizens would not embrace it³².

Discovery of Masada is a good example for a situation in which artefacts of the religious as well as national past were unearthed – figuratively and literally – to reinforce narrative of a nation. The fortress of the famed zealots, which is now Israeli symbol of staunch struggle in the face of invaders, was actually never remembered or celebrated until 1920s, an era coinciding with the ascension of Zionism³³. Incidentally, it was not held as national symbol until late 1940s after the Holocaust and the Jews’ war with Arabs. The zealots might have been proto-national fighters, but their deeds were eventually unearthed by the nationalists to reinforce the religious and national identity of the Israeli citizens, “reminding” them of their history³⁴. The nationalist Indians’ invocation of ancient gods to assist their fight against the British imperialism that was mentioned earlier in the essay can easily fall into this category as well.

It can be said that nationalism is a kind of archaeology³⁵: it provides us link to the ancient past which we may not have been present in that time, yet we share the space of the event. Nationalism takes a step farther than archaeology, though, by constructing common myth out of the distant past, assuring us that the destiny of our nations is inscribed in our past.

Not all historical artefacts and events were chosen as national narrative, and not all that were chosen had to be glorious. Trauma or tragedy is often selected³⁶, as the case of Masada shows us, mythologized as mental recollection of what happened to the ancestors of a nation. Trauma may be buried for generations before being “discovered” again, passing on the ancient hatred of enemy in question from the old world into the new. Faces of “foreign invaders” may change – Roman into English or Arab – but the memory of how the nation fought “foreign invaders” lives on. Such hatred is sustained even more effectively by religions, which brandishes the power of sanctification and ritualization. Joan of Arc is a good example of national hero who is also sanctified into religious saint. Religion, like nationalism, claims a linkage into the past, drawing on chosen glory or trauma as article of faith. It is therefore not surprising how religious sites (churches, mosques, synagogues, etc) are habitually placed on historically significant (or even contested in some cases) sites³⁷ – each claiming association to the chosen trauma or glory.

If nationalism is indeed about “rediscovery” of the past and establish the linkage to the present (regardless of how relevant the past is to the present, and vice versa), religions certainly help to consolidate such connection. In reality, nationalism even adopts religious achievements of the linkage: shrines were transformed into national sites, religious martyrs into national heroes, and sacred chronology into national epic³⁸. Religion, in this sense, is a form of archaeology, not unlike nationalism, as both can offer the mass of nations their version of constructed history, upheld as unquestioningly true. By combining religion and nationalism, states may put forward a vision of united purpose, goal, and justification in the quests to achieve them, as we have seen thus far in the essay.

Prospect for Religious Nationalism

A survey about civil wars between 1940-2000 indicates that civil wars that feature religious grievances increase in number, religious civil wars also tend to last longer and kill more non-combatants than political civil wars³⁹. Strangely enough, many choose to place blame on exclusive clique of *religious fanatics* rather than on the roots of religions themselves⁴⁰, even though their uncompromising nature is prominent (each believing in their own divine holy texts). In conflicts, the fundamental belief of eternal afterlife will always tilt the *outcome* (paradise, heavenly rewards, etc) to overwhelm *cost* (physical earthly selves), resulting in religious fighters more willing to sacrifice their lives to pursue their holy wars⁴¹.

If the current trend of religious nationalism perseveres, we can rest assured that religions will continue to be featured in various ethnic and national conflicts in our world, as it has achieved in the preceding chapters of human history. On the surface, religion has promising capability to transcend national borders and unite believers into one homogenous identity, yet it fails. Factions keep on warring against one another, in spite of the same umbrella religion – as entangled drama of Pashtuns, Baluchs, and Talibans in Pakistan exemplify⁴². Iranian Revolution, initially hailed by enthusiasts as true awakening call of worldwide Islam, eventually unfolds as something close to ideological farce. The “export of Revolution” was clearly pro-Shia rather than Islam as a whole, while Syria and Lebanon – two countries with visibly mass supports of the Revolution – end up somewhat under Iranian influence, leading many to speculate whether the Revolution is merely expansion of Iranian hegemony in essence⁴³.

Fate of religious solidarity is perhaps not any more fortunate than Socialist internationalism. History of mankind has proven that nationalism prevails over all other alternative ideologies, and, as this essay intends to demonstrate, even religion is incorporated into the progression of nationalism, eventually contributing to its increase rather than decrease. The religious, we can assume, shall always assist any nation’s earthly conquest.

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