Rethinking the Secular and Religious Aspects of Violence

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Behind many of the strident new religious movements that have arisen around the world in recent years lie some common themes. Regardless of their religious tradition—from Islamic jihadist militants to Jewish anti-Arab activists to Christian militia in the United States—the activists involved in these movements are parts of communities that perceive themselves to be fragile, vulnerable, and under siege from a hostile secular world.

These movements are political as well as cultural, in that they share a common ideological perception that the secular state is the enemy. Their supporters have lost faith in secular nationalism and regard the secular state as an insufficient agency to protect their communities or provide the moral, political, economic, and social strength to nurture them. In scores of interviews with political activists around the world, I have found a frequent motivating cause, not a yearning for a specific political goal but the gnawing sense of a loss of identity and control in the modern world.

This sense of social malaise is not a religious problem, but in many contemporary movements of political activism, religion has become the ideology of protest.[1] Particular religious images and themes are marshaled to resist what are imagined to be the enemies of traditional culture and identities: global secular systems and their secular nation-state supporters. Why are social and political tensions in the twenty-first century imagined as confrontations between religion and secularism?

This is an interesting question. One answer is that this problem has been created by secularism as much as by religion. Or to put it another way, it has been generated by the construction of the idea of a secular social order that marginalizes religious values, practices, and identities and creates a potential scapegoat for social and cultural frustrations. When individuals feel marginalized, for whatever reason, they can imagine that their situations are fostered by an alienating secular state.

In each of the recent cases of violent religious activism, the supporters who have embraced these radical antistate religious ideologies have felt personally upset with what they regard as the oppression of the secular state. They experience this oppression as an assault on their pride and feel insulted and shamed as a result. The failures of contemporary society—though economic, political, and cultural—are often experienced in personal ways as humiliation and alienation, as a loss of selfhood. The secular state is the imagined enemy, and regimes that are corrupt or inept or militant contribute to their own demonic self-images. Acts of violence against the secular state become symbolic expressions of empowerment and attempts to claim leverage in a public arena that is perceived as hostile and marginalizing. Thus, these acts need to be taken seriously as calls for inclusion in an alienating global world.

In thinking about the way that the activists I interviewed described the role of religion, I have come to an unsettling conclusion. It is not religion that is the cause of much of the violence associated with it—as if religion were an entity that could do things by itself—but the way that the activists and their foes have come to think about religion. In particular, the problem lies in the idea that there is something called "religion" that is excluded from public life and "secularism" that dominates the public sphere. Behind this notion is the distinction between things religious and secular that has been a habit of thought since the Enlightenment. This image of a bifurcated religious and secular world has caught on in virtually every society—today in Asia and the Muslim world, as well as the West—and it has become linked with social and cultural tensions that from time to time erupt in public violence. In one of history's great ironies, the political construction of secular nationalism—meant to bring peace and civility to social life—has in this period of late modernity become a contested idea and a source of conflict and critique.

The Rise of the Secular State

It is not entirely clear how this imagined bifurcation between the secular world and the religious world came about. It is usually described as being an invention of the European Enlightenment, but there were precedents. According to some accounts, secular nationalism was promoted in thirteenth-century France and England in order to buttress the authority of secular rulers after the clergy had been removed from political power earlier in the century. In the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, there was a reaction against central secular-national governments; the next great wave of laicization occurred in the sixteenth century.[2] Challenges to the divine right to rule in Europe reach back at least to the twelfth century, when John of Salisbury, who is sometimes regarded as the first modern political philosopher, held that rulers should be subject to charges of treason and could be overthrown—violently if necessary—if they violated

their public trust; and William of Ockham, in the fourteenth century, argued that a "secular ruler need not submit to spiritual power."[3] But despite these earlier examples, the most complete expression of the independence of what is imagined to be a secular state is to be found in the political manifestation of the Enlightenment view of social order.

The role of religion in Enlightenment thought is complicated.[4] Although John Locke and Jean-Jacques Rousseau had religious sensibilities and allowed for a divine order that made the rights of humans possible, these ideas did not directly buttress the power of the church and its priestly administrators. Although he advocated the "reasonableness" of Christianity, Locke's ideas of the origins of a civil community had virtually no connection to the communities of church and Christendom. Because humans are "equal and independent" before God, Locke argued, they have the sole right to exercise the power of the law of nature, and the only way in which an individual can be deprived of his or her liberty is "by agreeing with other Men to joyn and unite into a community, for their comfortable, safe, and peacable living one amongst another."[5] And Rousseau's social-contract theories required little commitment to religious belief. According to Rousseau, a social contract is a tacit admission by the people that they need to be ruled and an expression of their willingness to relinquish some of their rights and freedoms to the state in exchange for its administrative protection. It is an exchange of what Rousseau calls one's "natural liberty" for the security and justice provided through "civil liberty."[6] Rousseau implied that the state does not need the church to grant it moral legitimacy; the people grant it a legitimacy on their own through a divine right that is directly invested in them as a part of the God-given natural order. Their secular concepts of nation and state had the effect of taking religion—at least church religion—out of public life.

The medieval church once possessed "many aspects of a state," as one historian put it, and it commanded more political power "than most of its secular rivals."[7] By the mid-nineteenth century, however, Christian churches had ceased to have much influence on European or American politics. The church—the great medieval monument of Christendom, with all of its social and political diversity—had been replaced by churches: various denominations of Protestantism and a largely depoliticized version of Roman Catholicism. These churches functioned like religious clubs, voluntary associations for the spiritual edification of individuals in their leisure time, rarely cognizant of the social and political world around them.[8]

The Enlightenment ushered in a new way of thinking about religion—a narrower definition of the term which encompassed institutions and beliefs that were regarded as problematic and conceptually separated them from the rest of social life, which was identified by a new term, "secular." What many people in Europe were afraid of at the time was the economic and political power of the clergy and the fanaticism associated with the terrible wars of religion of the

sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. These would be controlled in a society in which "religion" had its limitations within "secular" society.

At the same time that religion in the West was becoming less political, its secular nationalism was becoming more religious. It became clothed in romantic and xenophobic images that would have startled its Enlightenment forebears. The French Revolution, the model for much of the nationalist fervor that developed in the nineteenth century, infused a religious zeal into revolutionary democracy; the revolution took on the trappings of church religion in the priestly power meted out to its demagogic leaders and in the slavish devotion to what it called the temple of reason. According to Alexis de Tocqueville, the French Revolution "assumed many of the aspects of a religious revolution."[9] The American Revolution also had a religious side: many of its leaders had been influenced by eighteenth-century Deism, a religion of science and natural law that was "devoted to exposing [church] religion to the light of knowledge."[10] As in France, American nationalism developed its own religious characteristics, blending the ideals of secular nationalism and the symbols of Christianity into what has been called "civil religion."[11]

The nineteenth century saw the fulfillment of Tocqueville's prophecy that the "strange religion" of secular nationalism would, "like Islam, overrun the whole world with its apostles, militants, and martyrs."[12] It spread throughout the world with an almost missionary zeal and was shipped to the newly colonized areas of Asia, Africa, and Latin America as part of the ideological freight of colonialism. It became the ideological partner of what came to be known as nation-building. As the colonizing governments provided their colonies with the political and economic infrastructures to turn territories into nation-states, the ideology of secular nationalism emerged as a by-product. As it had in the West during previous centuries, secular nationalism in the colonized countries during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries came to represent one side of a great encounter between two vastly different ways of perceiving the sociopolitical order and the relationship of the individual to the state—one informed by religion, the other by a notion of a secular compact.

In the West, this encounter and the ideological, economic, and political transitions that accompanied it took place over many years, uncomplicated by the intrusion of foreign control of a colonial or neocolonial sort. The new nations of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, however, have had to confront the same challenges in a short period of time and simultaneously contend with new forms of politics forced on them as by-products of colonial rule. As in the West, however, the challenge they have faced is fundamental; it involves the encounter between an old religious worldview and a new one shaped by secular nationalism.

When Europeans colonized the rest of the world, they were often sustained by a desire to make the rest of the world like themselves.[13] Even when empires became economically burdensome, the cultural mission seemed to justify the

effort. The commitment of colonial administrators to a secular-nationalist vision explains why they were often so hostile to the Christian missionaries who tagged along behind them: the missionaries were the liberal colonizers' competitors. In general, the church's old religious ideology was a threat to the new secular ideology that most colonial rulers wished to present as characteristic of the West.[14]

In the mid-twentieth century, when the colonial powers retreated, they left behind the geographical boundaries they had drawn and the political institutions they had fashioned. The borders of most Third World nations, which were created as administrative units of the Ottoman, Hapsburg, French, and British empires, continued to survive after independence, even if they failed to follow the natural divisions between ethnic and linguistic communities. By the middle of the twentieth century, it seemed as if the cultural goals of the colonial era had been reached; although the political ties were severed, the new nations retained all of the accoutrements of Westernized countries.

The only substantial empire that remained virtually intact until 1990 was the Soviet Union. It was based on a different vision of political order, of course, one in which international socialism was supposed to replace a network of capitalist nations. Yet the perception of many members of the Soviet states was that their nations were not so much integral units in a new internationalism as colonies in a secular Russian version of imperialism. This reality became dramatically clear after the breakup of the Soviet Union and its sphere of influence in the early 1990s, when old ethnic and national loyalties sprang to the fore.

The Golden Age of Secular Nationalism, 1945–1990

In the middle of the twentieth century, when many colonies in the developing world gained political independence, Europeans and Americans often wrote with an almost religious fervor about what they regarded as these new nations' freedom—by which they meant the spread of nationalism throughout the world. Invariably, they meant a secular nationalism: new nations that elicited loyalties forged entirely from a sense of territorial citizenship. These secular-nationalist loyalties were based on the idea that the legitimacy of the state was rooted in the will of the people in a particular geographic region and divorced from any religious sanction.[15]

In the mid-twentieth century, the new global reach of secular nationalism was justified by what it was—and what it was not. It distanced itself especially from the old ethnic and religious identities that had made nations parochial and quarrelsome in the past. The major exception was the creation of the state of Israel in 1948 as a safe haven for Jews, but even in this case, the nation's constitution was firmly secular, and Israeli citizenship was open to people of all religious backgrounds—not only Jews but also Christians and Muslims. In

general, mid-twentieth-century scholars viewed the spread of secular nation-
alism in a hopeful, almost eschatological light: it was ushering in a new future.
It meant, in essence, the emergence of mini-Americas all over the world.

European and American scholars in the mid-1950s embraced the new global
nation-state era with unbridled joy. At that time, Hans Kohn, his generation's
best-known historian of nationalism, could brazenly assert that the twentieth
century was unique: "It is the first period in history in which the whole of man-
kind has accepted one and the same political attitude, that of nationalism."[16] In
his telling, the concept had its origins in antiquity. It was presaged by ancient
Hebrews and fully enunciated by ancient Greeks. Inexplicably, however, the
concept stagnated for almost 2000 years, according to Kohn's account, until
suddenly it took off in earnest in England, "the first modern nation," during
the seventeenth century.[17] By the time of his writing, in the mid-twentieth
century, he cheerfully observed that the whole world had responded to "the
awakening of nationalism and liberty."[18]

Not only Western academics but also a good number of new leaders—espe-
cially those in the emerging nations created out of former colonial empires—
were swept up by the vision of a world of free and equal secular nations. The
concept of secular nationalism gave them an ideological justification for being,
and the electorate that subscribed to it provided them with power bases from
which they could vault into positions of leadership ahead of traditional ethnic
and religious figures. But secularism was more than just a political issue; it was
also a matter of personal identity. A new kind of person had come into
existence: the "Indian nationalist" or "Ceylonese nationalist" who had an abid-
ing faith in a secular nationalism identified with his or her homeland. Perhaps
none exemplified this new spirit more than Gamal Abdel Nasser of Egypt and
Jawaharlal Nehru of India. According to Nehru, "there is no going back" to a
past full of religious identities, for the modern, secular "spirit of the age" will
inevitably triumph throughout the world.[19]

There was a cheerful optimism among the followers of Nehru after India's
independence, political scientist Donald Smith writes: "The Indian nationalist
felt compelled to assert that India was a nation," even though some "embar-
rassing facts"—such as divisive regional and religious loyalties—had to be
glossed over.[20] The reason for this compulsion, according to Smith, was that
such people could not think of themselves as modern persons without a national
identity. "In the modern world," Smith writes, "nationality and nationalism
were the basic premises of political life, and it seemed absolutely *improper* for
India to be without a nationality."[21] A similar attitude predominated in many
other new nations, at least at the beginning.

Leaders of minority religious communities—such as Hindu Tamils in Ceylon
and Coptic Christians in Egypt—seemed especially eager to embrace secular
nationalism, because a secular nation-state would ensure that the public life of
the country would not be dominated completely by the majority religious

community. In India, where the Congress Party became the standard bearer of Nehru's vision, the party's most reliable supporters were those at the margins of Hindu society—untouchables and Muslims—who had the most to fear from an intolerant religious majority.

The main carriers of the banner of secular nationalism in these newly independent countries, however, were not members of any religious community at all, at least in a traditional sense. Rather, they were members of the urban educated elite. For many of them, embracing a secular form of nationalism was a way of promoting its major premise—freedom from the parochial identities of the past—and thereby avoiding the obstacles that religious loyalties create for a country's political goals. By implication, political power based on religious values and traditional communities held no authority.

The problem, however, was that in asserting that the nationalism of their country was secular, the new nationalists had to have faith in a secular culture that was at least as compelling as a sacred one. That meant, on a social level, believing that secular nationalism could triumph over what they thought of as "religion." It could also mean making secular nationalism a suprareligion of its own, which a society could aspire to beyond any single religious allegiance. In India, for example, political identity based on religious affiliation was termed communalism. In the view of Nehru and other secular nationalists, religion was the chief competitor of an even higher object of loyalty: secular India. Nehru implored his countrymen to get rid of what he called "that narrowing religious outlook" and to adopt a modern, nationalist viewpoint.[22]

The secular nationalists' attempts to give their ideologies an antireligious or a suprareligious force were encouraged, perhaps unwittingly, by their Western mentors. The words used to define nationalism by Western political leaders and such scholars as Kohn always implied not only that it was secular but also that it was competitive with what they defined as religion and ultimately superior to it. "Nationalism [by which he meant secular nationalism] is a state of mind," Kohn wrote, "in which the supreme loyalty of the individual is felt to be due the nation-state."[23] And he boldly asserted that secular nationalism had replaced religion in its influence: "An understanding of nationalism and its implications for modern history and for our time appears as fundamental today as an understanding of religion would have been for thirteenth century Christendom."[24]

Rupert Emerson's influential *From Empire to Nation,* written several years later, shared the same exciting vision of a secular nationalism that "sweeps out [from Europe] to embrace the whole wide world."[25] Emerson acknowledged, however, that although in the European experience, "the rise of nationalism [again, secular nationalism] coincided with a decline in the hold of religion," in other parts of the world, such as Asia, as secular nationalism "moved on" and enveloped these regions, "the religious issue pressed more clearly to the fore again."[26] Nonetheless, he anticipated that the "religious issue" would never again impede the progress of secular nationalism, which he saw as the West's

gift to the world. The feeling that in some instances, this gift had been forced on the new nations without their asking was noted by Emerson, who acknowledged that "the rise of nationalism among non-European peoples" was a consequence of "the imperial spread of Western European civilization over the face of the earth."

The outcome, in his view, was nonetheless laudable: "With revolutionary dynamism…civilization has thrust elements of essential identity on peoples everywhere.…The global impact of the West has…run common threads through the variegated social fabrics of mankind, [and it] has scored an extraordinary triumph."[27]

When Kohn and Emerson used the term "nationalism," they had in mind not just a secular political ideology and a religiously neutral national identity but also a particular form of political organization: the modern European and American nation-state. In such an organization, individuals are linked to a centralized, all-embracing democratic political system that is unaffected by any other affiliations, be they ethnic, cultural, or religious. That linkage is sealed by an emotional sense of identification with a geographical area and a loyalty to a particular people, an identity that is part of the feeling of nationalism. This affective dimension of nationalism is important to keep in mind, especially in comparing secular nationalism with the Enlightenment idea of religion. In the 1980s, social theorist Anthony Giddens described nationalism in just this way—as conveying not only the ideas and "beliefs" about political order but also the "psychological" and "symbolic" element in political and economic relationships.[28] Scholars such as Kohn and Emerson recognized this affective dimension of nationalism early on; they felt it appropriate that the secular nation adopt what Charles Taylor has described as the cultural sensibility of secularism and what might also be called the spirit of secular nationalism.[29]

The Religious Challenge to the Secular State in the Twenty-First Century

Since the modern nation-state has been presented to the world as a secular institution, the criticism of it has often been clothed in religious language. In the contemporary era, the "crisis of legitimation" that Jürgen Habermas has observed in social institutions has led to a rejection of the optimistic premises of secular politics.[30] The legitimacy of the secular nation-state has been eroded by several factors, including a resurgent new wave of anticolonialism, the corrosive power of globalized economic and communication systems, and the corruption and incompetence of secular leaders. In many parts of the world, the failure of the secular state began to be attributed to secularism itself. This raised what Talal Asad describes as its twin concept, the newly created idea of "religion," to a position of political influence. In earlier decades, traditional leaders and cultural institutions seldom played a political

role, although when they did become involved, it was often to critique specific social issues of the state rather than to challenge the credibility of the entire political system.[31]

Contemporary religious politics, then, is quite a new development. It is the result of an almost Hegelian dialectic between what has been imagined by most citizens of the modern world to be two competing frameworks of social order: secular nationalism (allied with the nation-state) and the Enlightenment idea of religion (allied with large ethnic communities, some of them transnational). The clashes between the two have often been destructive, but they have also offered possibilities for accommodation. In some cases, these encounters have given birth to a synthesis in which cultural ideas and institutions have become the allies of a new kind of nation-state. At the same time, other liaisons with contemporary political trends have led to a different vision: religious versions of a transnationalism that would supplant the nation-state world.

The rivalry between secular nationalism and cultural identities makes little sense in the modern West, where the idea of religion has been conceptually confined to personal piety, religious institutions, and theological ideas. But it makes sense in traditional societies around the world, in which the cultural and moral elements of religious imagination are viewed as an integral part of social and political life.

Perhaps it is useful, then, to think of religion in two senses, in Enlightenment and non-Enlightenment ways of thinking. The first, the Enlightenment view, is the narrow idea of religious institutions and beliefs contrasted with secular social values in the modern West. The other, the more traditional view, is a broad framework of thinking and acting that involves moral values, traditional customs, and publically articulated spiritual sensibility. The latter, traditional view of "religion" (or, rather, the religious worldview) includes much of what the secular West regards as public virtue and purposeful social life—values shared by most thoughtful and concerned citizens within a society.

Thus, the elusive term "religion," in the broad sense, can point to a moral sensibility toward the social order that in many ways is remarkably similar to the civic values of those who feel most ardently about secularism. This is especially so in the non-Western world. In traditional India, for instance, the English term "religion" might be translated as the word for moral order (*dharma*), as well as for belief (*mazhab*), fellowship (*panth*), or community (*qaum*). As *dharma*, Hindu thought is like political or social theory, the basis of a just society. The Enlightenment thinkers who were most insistent on secularism did not see religion in this way; what they saw was an arrogant religious hierarchy keeping the masses enslaved to superstition in order to avoid justice and reason. They thought of religion as competitive with Enlightenment values, yet religion as *dharma* looks very much like that moral ground on which the Enlightenment thinkers were able to build the edifice of a just society. In ways that might surprise them, religion—at least in its broad sense, as a conveyor of public

values—and secularism as a social ideology might well be two ways of talking about the same thing.

Because the functions of traditional religious and secular social values are so similar, it might be useful to designate a general category that includes both terms, a "genus" of which this kind of religion and secularism are the two competing "species." Wilfred Cantwell Smith recommended enlarging the idea of "traditions" to include both religious and secular humanist traditions; Benedict Anderson suggested "imagined communities" for all national societies; and Ninian Smart offered "worldviews" as the common term for nationalism, socialism, and religion.[32] Elsewhere, I have suggested the phrase "ideologies of order," even though the term is freighted with meanings attached to it by Karl Marx and Karl Mannheim, and a great deal of controversy lingers over its interpretation.[33] The term originated in the late eighteenth century in the context of the rise of secular nationalism.[34] A group of French *idéologues*, as they called themselves, sought to build a science of ideas based on the theories of Francis Bacon, Thomas Hobbes, John Locke, and René Descartes that would be sufficiently comprehensive to replace religion, in the broad sense, and provide a moral weight to public values that would counter the violent excesses of the French Revolution. According to one of the *idéologues*, Destutt de Tracy, whose book *Elements of Ideology* introduced the term "ideology" to the world, "logic" was to be the sole basis of "the moral and political sciences."[35] The French originators of the term "ideology" would be surprised at the way it has come to be redefined, especially in contemporary conversations, where it is often treated as an explanatory system that is specifically nonscientific.

In proposing a "science of ideas" as a replacement for religion, the *idéologues* were putting what they called ideology and what we call religion (in the broad sense) on an equal plane. Perhaps Clifford Geertz, among modern users of the term, has come closest to its original meaning by speaking of ideology as a "cultural system."[36] Geertz includes both religious and political cultural systems within this framework, as well as the many cultural systems that do not distinguish between religion and politics. Religion and secular nationalism could both be considered cultural systems in Geertz's sense of the word, and thus, as he uses it, they are ideologies. Both conceive of the world in coherent, manageable ways; both suggest that there are levels of meaning beneath the day-to-day world that give coherence to things unseen; and both provide the authority that gives the social and political order its reason for being. In doing so, they define for the individual the right way of being in the world and relate persons to the social whole.

Secular nationalism is a social form of secularism that locates an individual within the universe. The idea of a secular nation ties him or her to a particular place and a particular history. A number of social scientists have argued that the phenomenon of secular nationalism is linked to the innate need of individuals for a sense of community. Recently, John Lie has posited that the idea of a

common "peoplehood"—often construed in ethnic or religious terms—is essential for the modern idea of a nation.[37] Earlier, Karl Deutsch pointed out the importance of systems of communication in fostering a sense of nationalism.[38] Ernest Gellner argued that the political and economic network of a nation-state can function only in a spirit of nationalism based on a homogeneous culture, a unified pattern of communication, and a common system of education.[39] Other social scientists have stressed the psychological aspect of national identity: the sense of historical location that is engendered when individuals feel they have a larger, national history.[40]

But behind these notions of community is the stern image of social order. Nationalism involves loyalty to an authority that, as Max Weber observed, holds a monopoly over the "legitimate use of physical force" in a given society.[41] Giddens describes nationalism as the "cultural sensibility of sovereignty," implying that, in part, the awareness of being subject to an authority—an authority invested with the power of life and death—gives nationalism its potency.[42] Secular nationalism, therefore, involves not only an attachment to a spirit of social order but also an act of submission to an ordering agent.

Scholarly attempts to define religion also stress the importance of order, although in a post-Enlightenment context in which religion is thought of in the narrower sense, the orderliness is primarily metaphysical rather than political or social. In providing its adherents with a sense of conceptual order, religion often deals with the existential problem of disorder. The disorderliness of ordinary life is contrasted with a substantial, unchanging divine order.[43] Geertz saw religion as the effort to integrate everyday reality into a pattern of coherence at a deeper level.[44] Robert Bellah also described religion as an attempt to reach beyond ordinary phenomena in a "risk of faith" that allows people to act "in the face of uncertainty and unpredictability" on the basis of a higher order of reality.[45] This attitude of faith, according to Peter Berger, is an affirmation of the sacred, which acts as a doorway to a truth more certain than that of this world.[46] Louis Dupré prefers to avoid the term "sacred" but integrates elements of both Berger's and Bellah's definitions in his description of religion as "a commitment to the transcendent as to another reality."[47] In all of these cases, there is a tension between this imperfect, disorderly world and a perfected, orderly one to be found in a higher, transcendent state or in a cumulative moment in time. As Émile Durkheim, whose ideas are fundamental to each of these thinkers, was adamant in observing, religion has a more encompassing force than can be suggested by any dichotomization of the sacred and the profane. To Durkheim, the religious point of view includes both the notion that there is such a dichotomy and the belief that the sacred side will always, ultimately, reign supreme.[48]

Even on the metaphysical level, religion, like secular nationalism, can provide the moral and spiritual glue that holds together broad communities. Members of these communities—secular or religious—share a tradition, a

particular worldview, in which the essential conflict between appearance and deeper reality is described in specific and characteristically cultural terms. This deeper reality has a degree of permanence and order quite unobtainable by ordinary means. The conflict between the two levels of reality is what both religion and secular nationalism are about: the language of both contains images of chaos, as well as tranquil order, holding out the hope that, despite appearances to the contrary, order will eventually triumph and disorder will be contained. Because religion (in both broad and narrow senses) and secular nationalism are ideologies of order, they are potential rivals.[49] Either can claim to be the guarantor of orderliness within a society; either can claim to be the ultimate authority for social order. Such claims carry with them an extraordinary degree of power, for contained within them is the right to give moral sanction for life-and-death decisions, including the right to kill. When either secular nationalism or religion assumes that role by itself, it reduces the other to a peripheral social role.

Religious Violence as a Response to Secular Nationalism

The rejection of secular nationalism is often violent. The reason for this is not only that those who challenge the secular state are eager to assume their own positions of power in public life. They are also challenging the right of the secular state to the legitimacy provided by its monopoly on the use of violence to maintain public order. The creation of "religion" in juxtaposition to "secular" provides the potential for those identified with this kind of religion to utilize the same force of power that the secular state has used to maintain its order.

Thus, the religious critique of secular nationalism contains a challenge to the source of social power on which secular public order is based: absolute control undergirded by the moral sanction of political violence. Ascribing to an alternative ideology of public order—the imagined idea of religion—gives one the ability to be violent. In the modern world, the secular state, and the state alone, has been given the power to kill legitimately, albeit for limited purposes: military defense, police protection, and capital punishment. Yet all the rest of the state's power to persuade and to shape the social order is derived from this fundamental power. In Weber's view, the monopoly over legitimate violence in a society lies behind all other claims to political authority.[50] In challenging the state, today's religious activists, wherever they assert themselves around the world, reclaim the traditional right of religious authorities to say when violence is moral and when it is not.

Situations of social conflict provide contexts in which religious authority is called upon to sanction killing. This is especially true in the case of conflicts that involve issues of identity, loyalty, and communal solidarity. Religious identities may be a factor in movements of mobilization, separatism, and the estab-

lishment of new states. It is interesting to note, in this regard, that the best-known incidents in which religious language and authorities have played a role in the contemporary world have occurred in places where it is difficult to define or accept the idea of a nation-state. At the end of the twentieth century, these places included Palestine, the Punjab, and Sri Lanka; in the first decade of the twenty-first century, they included Iraq, Somalia, and Lebanon, areas where uncertainties abound about what the state should be and which elements of society should lead it. In these instances, religious loyalties have often provided the basis for a new national consensus and a new kind of leadership.

Cultural practices and ideas related to Islam, Judaism, and Christianity have provided religious alternatives to secular ideology as the basis of nationalism, and political images from their religious history have provided resources for thinking of modern religion in political terms. This is also true of Hinduism, Sikhism, and, perhaps most surprisingly, Buddhism. In Thailand, for example, Buddhist political activists recall that the king must be a monk before assuming political power—he must be a "world renouncer" before he can become a "world conqueror," as Stanley Tambiah has put it.[51] Burmese leaders established a Buddhist socialism, guided by a curious syncretic mix of Marxist and Buddhist ideas, and even the protests against that order in Burma (renamed Myanmar) had a religious character: many of the demonstrations in the streets were led by Buddhist monks.[52] Thus, in most traditional religious societies, including Buddhist ones, "religion," as Donald Smith puts it, "answers the question of political legitimacy."[53] In the modern West, that legitimacy is provided by nationalism, a secular nationalism. But even there, religious justifications wait in the wings, potential challenges to the nationalism based on secular assumptions. Perhaps nothing indicates this potential more than the persistence of religious politics in American society, including the rise of the Christian militia and the American religious right.[54] The justification for social order may be couched in secular or religious terms, and both require a faith in the unitary nature of a society that can authenticate both political rebellion and political rule.

When I interviewed Sunni mullahs in Iraq in 2004 after the U.S. invasion of their country, they told me that opposition to U.S. occupation was because they regarded America as the enemy of Islam. What was striking to me about this comparison was that they were equating the two and perceived that a secular state was in competition with what is regarded as a religion. This would have startled many of the twentieth-century proponents of secular nationalism. In the 1950s and '60s, scholars such as Kohn and Emerson and nationalist leaders such as Nasser and Nehru regarded secular nationalism as superior to religion, in large measure because they thought it was categorically different.

Yet it is clear that the belief in secular nationalism required a great deal of faith, even though the idea was not couched in the rhetoric of religion. The terms in which it was presented were the grandly visionary ones associated with

spiritual values. As early as Tocqueville, comparisons have been made between secular nationalism and religion.[55] After the global rise of secular nationalism at the end of World War II, quite a few scholars observed that there was a similarity between the ideological characteristics of secular nationalism and the modern idea of religion—both of which embraced "a doctrine of destiny," as one scholar observed.[56] Some took this way of viewing secular nationalism a step further and stated flatly, as did an author writing in 1960, that secular nationalism is "a religion."[57] A scholar of comparative religion, Ninian Smart, specified the characteristics that make secular nationalism akin to a certain kind of religion, "a tribal religion."[58] Employing six criteria to define the term, he concluded that secular nationalism measured up on all counts: on doctrine, myth, ethics, ritual, experience, and social organization.

The two inventions of modernity—secular nationalism and religion—both serve the ethical function of providing an overarching framework of moral order, a framework that commands ultimate loyalty from those who subscribe to it. And although the modern assumption is that nationalism is a moral order for the public realm and religion for the private realm, both provide moral sanction to martyrdom and violence. As a result, the modern idea of religion is a potential revolutionary construct, for it can provide a justification for violence that would challenge the power of the secular state.

Although it may be true that other entities, such as the Mafia and the Ku Klux Klan, also sanction violence, they are able to do so convincingly only because they are regarded by their followers as (respectively) quasi-governmental or quasi-religious organizations. Since the line between secular nationalism and religion has always been quite thin—the public and private notions of modern moral order—they have sometimes emerged as rivals. Both are expressions of faith, both involve an identity with and a loyalty to a large community, and both insist on the ultimate moral legitimacy of the authority invested in the leadership of that community.

Benedict Anderson, in observing the ease with which secular nationalism is able to justify mass killings, finds a strong affinity between "nationalist imagining" and "religious imagining." The rise of secular nationalism in world history, as Anderson observes, has been an extension of "the large cultural systems that preceded it, out of which—as well as against which—it came into being."[59] Secular nationalism often evokes an almost religious response, and it frequently appears as a kind of "cultural nationalism" in the way that Howard Wriggins once described Sinhalese national sentiments.[60] It not only encompasses the shared cultural values of people within existing, or potentially existing, national boundaries but also evokes a cultural response of its own.

This similarity between secular and religious imaginings in the implementation of public acts of violence enforces the idea asserted by many present-day religious activists that religion can provide a justification for the power, based on violence, that is the basis of modern politics. And why not? If secularism, as

an imagined concept of social order, is capable of providing the ideological legitimacy to modern political communities, this same legitimizing function can be extended to secularism's twin concept, the idea of religion. The religious activists of today are unwittingly modern, therefore, because they accept the same secularist notion that there is a fundamental distinction between secular and religious realms. Religious activists think that they are simply reclaiming the political power of the state in the name of religion. It might be a workable arrangement in a premodern world where religious sensibilities were intertwined with a broad sense of moral order, and a religion-based polity could embrace a varied and pluralistic society.

The irony is that the modern idea of religion is much narrower than that, consisting of doctrines and communities that have been marginalized by secularism and that in some cases seek revenge. The Frankenstein of religion created in the Enlightenment imagination has risen up to claim the Enlightenment's proudest achievement, the nation-state. The tragedy is that the challenge to the secular order that emerges from this kind of religious nationalism shakes the foundations of political power in ways that are often strident and violent.

Notes

1. See Mark Juergensmeyer, "Is Religion the Problem?" *Hedgehog Review* 6, no. 1 (Spring 2004): 21–33; and Mark Juergensmeyer, *Global Rebellion: Religious Challenges to the Secular State* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008), where many of the ideas in this essay first appeared.

2. Joseph Strayer, *Medieval Statecraft and the Perspectives of History* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1971), 262–265.

3. See Sidney R. Packard, *Twelfth-Century Europe: An Interpretive Essay* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1973), 193–201; and Thomas Molnar, "The Medieval Beginnings of Political Secularization," in George W. Carey and James V. Schall, eds., *Essays on Christianity and Political Philosophy* (Lanham, Md.: University Press of America, 1985), 43.

4. See, for instance, Jonathan Sheehan, "Enlightenment, Religion, and the Enigma of Secularization," *American Historical Review* 108, no.4 (October 2003): 1061–1080; and David Sorkin, *The Religious Enlightenment: Protestants, Jews, and Catholics from London to Vienna* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2009).

5. John Locke, "Of the Beginnings of Political Societies," *The Second Treatise on Government* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1960), 375.

6. Jean-Jacques Rousseau, "On the Civil State," *The Social Contract* (New York: Pocket, 1967), 23.

7. Strayer, *Medieval Statecraft,* 323.

8. Although the churches supported a number of secular reforms in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, religion in the West largely fit Whitehead's description: it was what "an individual does with his own solitariness." Alfred North Whitehead, *Religion in the Making*, in F. S. C. Northrup and Mason W. Gross, eds., *Alfred North Whitehead: An Anthology* (New York: Macmillan, 1961), 472.

9. Alexis de Tocqueville, *The Old Regime and the French Revolution*, trans. Stuart Gilbert (New York: Doubleday, Anchor, 1955), 11. See also John McManners, *The French Revolution and the Church* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood, 1969).

10. Ernst Cassirer, *The Philosophy of the Enlightenment* (Boston: Beacon, 1955), 171. Among the devotees of Deism were Thomas Jefferson, Benjamin Franklin, and other founding fathers of the United States.

11. Robert Bellah, "Civil Religion in America," *Daedalus* 96, no. 1 (Winter 1967): 1–22.

12. Tocqueville, *The Old Regime*, 13.

13. Liberal politicians within the colonial governments were much more insistent on imparting notions of Western political order than were the conservatives. In the heyday of British control of India, for instance, the position of Whigs such as William Gladstone was that the presence of the British was "to promote the political training of our fellow-subjects"; quoted in H. C. G. Matthew, *Gladstone, 1809–1874*, vol. 1 (Oxford: Clarendon, 1986), 188. Conservatives such as Benjamin Disraeli, however, felt that the British should "respect and maintain" the traditional practices of the colonies, including "the laws and customs, the property and religion"; from a speech delivered after the Sepoy Rebellion in India in 1857, quoted in William Monypenny and George Buckle, *The Life of Disraeli, 1: 1804–1859* (London: John Murton, 1929), 1488–1489. In the end, the liberal vision caught on, even among the educated Indian elite, and the notion of a British-style secular nationalism in India was born.

14. Not all missionary efforts were so despised, however. The Anglicans were sometimes seen as partners in the West's civilizing role. Activist, Evangelical missionaries were considered more of a threat.

15. Anthony Giddens, *The Nation-State and Violence,* vol. 2 of *A Contemporary Critique of Historical Materialism* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985), 2: 4. For the idea of nationalism and the nation-state, see also Ernest Gellner, *Nations and Nationalism* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1983); and Craig Calhoun*, Nationalism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998).

16. Hans Kohn, *Nationalism: Its Meaning and History* (Princeton, N.J.: D. Van Nostrand, 1955), 89.

17. Ibid., 16.

18. Ibid.

19. Jawaharlal Nehru, *The Discovery of India* (New York: John Day, 1946), 531–532.

20. Donald Eugene Smith, *India as a Secular State* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1963), 140.

21. Ibid., 141.

22. Nehru, *The Discovery of India*, 531.

23. Kohn, *Nationalism*, 9.

24. Ibid., 4.

25. Rupert Emerson, *From Empire to Nation: The Rise to Self-Assertion of Asian and African Peoples* (Boston: Beacon, 1960), 158.

26. Ibid.

27. Ibid., vii.

28. Giddens, *The Nation-State*, 2: 215–216.

29. Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2007).

30. Jürgen Habermas, *Legitimation Crisis*, trans.Thomas McCarthy (Boston: Beacon, 1975).

31. Gerald Larson describes the relation between religion and nationalism as ambivalent. Although the global system relies on nation-states that need religion for their legitimacy, the "religionization" of politics can challenge secular nationalism and call into question the global nature of the nation-state system. Gerald Larson, "Fast Falls the Eventide: India's Anguish over Religion," paper presented at a conference on Religion and Nationalism, University of California, Santa Barbara, April 21, 1989.

32. Wilfred Cantwell Smith, *The Meaning and End of Religion* (New York: Macmillan, 1962); Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 1983); Ninian Smart, *Worldviews: Crosscultural Explorations of Human Beliefs* (New York: Scribner's, 1983).

33. See Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *The German Ideology*, ed. R. Pascal (New York: International, 1939); and Karl Mannheim, *Ideology and Utopia* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1936). For a discussion of the contemporary meaning of ideology, see David Apter, ed., *Ideology and Discontent* (New York: Free Press, 1964); and Chaim I. Waxman, ed., *The End of Ideology Debate* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1964).

34. Richard H. Cox, *Ideology, Politics, and Political Theory* (Belmont, Calif.: Wadsworth, 1969).

35. Quoted in ibid., 17.

36. Clifford Geertz, "Ideology as a Cultural System," in Apter, ed., *Ideology and Discontent*.

37. John Lie, *Modern Peoplehood.* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2007).

38. Karl Deutsch, *Nationalism and Social Communication* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1966).

39. Ernest Gellner, *Nations and Nationalism* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1983), 140.

40. Anthony D. Smith, *Nationalism in the Twentieth Century* (Oxford: Martin Robertson, 1979), 3. See also L. Doob, *Patriotism and Nationalism* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1964).

41. Max Weber, "Politics as a Vocation," in Hans H. Gerth and C. Wright Mills, eds., *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1946), 78. Regarding the state's monopoly on violence, see John Breuilly, *Nationalism and the State* (Manchester, U.K.: Manchester University Press, 1982); and Anthony D. Smith, *Theories of Nationalism* (London: Duckworth, 1971).

42. Giddens, *The Nation-State*, 219.

43. The notion of religion as a conceptual mechanism that brings order to the disorderly areas of life is a theme of such structuralists as Claude Lévi-Strauss and Mary Douglas and the adherents of René Girard's mimetic theory. For mimetic theory, see Jean-Pierre Dupuy, *Ordres et désordres: Enquêtes sur un nouveau paradigme* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1982); and Paisley Livingston, ed., *Disorder and Order: Proceedings of the Stanford International Symposium (September 14–16, 1981), Stanford Literature Studies* 1 (Saratoga, Calif.: Anma Libri, 1984).

44. Geertz defines religion as "a system of symbols which acts to establish powerful, pervasive and long-lasting moods and motivations in men by formulating conceptions of a general order of existence and clothing these conceptions with such an aura of factuality that the moods and motivations seem uniquely realistic." Clifford Geertz, "Religion as a

Cultural System," in William A. Lessa and Evon Z. Vogt, eds., *Reader in Comparative Religion: An Anthropological Approach*, 3d ed. (New York: Harper & Row, 1972), 168.

45. Robert N. Bellah, "Transcendence in Contemporary Piety," in Donald R. Cutler, ed., *The Religious Situation: 1969* (Boston: Beacon, 1969), 907.

46. Peter Berger, *The Heretical Imperative* (New York: Doubleday, 1980), 38. See also Peter Berger, *The Sacred Canopy: Elements of a Sociological Theory of Religion* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1967).

47. Louis Dupré, *Transcendent Selfhood: The Loss and Rediscovery of the Inner Life* (New York: Seabury, 1976), 26. For a discussion of Berger's and Dupré's definitions, see Mary Douglas, "The Effects of Modernization on Religious Change," *Daedalus* 111, no. 1 (Winter 1982): 1–19.

48. Durkheim describes the dichotomy between the sacred and the profane in religion in the following way: "In all the history of human thought there exists no other example of two categories of things so profoundly differentiated or so radically opposed to one another. . . . The sacred and the profane have always and everywhere been conceived by the human mind as two distinct classes, as two worlds between which there is nothing in common. . . . In different religions, this opposition has been conceived in different ways." Émile Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life*, trans. Joseph Ward Swain (London: Allen & Unwin, 1976 [1915]), 38–39.

49. Although I use the term "religion" (as in "the Christian religion"), in general I agree with Smith, who suggested some years ago that the noun "religion" might well be banished from our vocabulary because it implies a thing—a codified structure of beliefs and practices. He suggested that we restrict ourselves to using the adjective "religious." Smith, *The Meaning and End of Religion*, 119–153.

50. Weber, "Politics as a Vocation," 78.

51. Stanley J. Tambiah, *World Conqueror and World Renouncer: A Study of Buddhism and Polity in Thailand against a Historical Background* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976). For a useful overview of Theravada society, see Donald K. Swearer, *Buddhism and Society in Southeast Asia* (Chambersburg, Pa.: Anima, 1981). For the role of monks in Thai politics, see Somboon Suksamran, *Buddhism and Politics in Thailand: A Study of Socio-political Change and Political Activism of the Thai Sangha* (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 1982); and Charles F. Keyes, *Thailand: Buddhist Kingdom as Modern Nation-State* (Boulder, Colo.: Westview, 1987).

52. For the background of religious nationalism in Burma (Myanmar), see Donald Eugene Smith, ed., *Religion and Politics in Burma* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1965); E. Sarkisyanz, *Buddhist Backgrounds of the Burmese Revolution* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1965); and Heinz Bechert, "Buddhism and Mass Politics in Burma and Ceylon," in Donald Eugene Smith, ed., *Religion and Political Modernization* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1974), 147–167. For a somewhat opposing point of view—that there is relatively little Buddhist influence on Burmese nationalism—see the chapter on Burma in Fred R. von der Mehden, *Religion and Nationalism in Southeast Asia: Burma, Indonesia, the Philippines* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1963); and Fred R. von der Mehden, "Secularization of Buddhist Polities: Burma and Thailand" in Smith, ed., *Religion and Political Modernization*, 49–66.

53. Donald Eugene Smith, ed., *Religion, Politics, and Social Change in the Third World: A Sourcebook* (New York: Free Press, 1971), 11.

54. See Walter H. Capps, *The New Religious Right: Piety, Patriotism, and Politics* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1990); Randall Balmer, *Mine Eyes Have Seen the Glory: A Journey into the Evangelical Subculture in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989); and Bruce B. Lawrence, *Defenders of God: The Fundamentalist Revolt against the Modern Age* (New York: Harper & Row, 1989).

55. Tocqueville, *The Old Regime*, 11.

56. Arlie J. Hoover, *The Gospel of Nationalism: German Patriotic Preaching from Napoleon to Versailles* (Stuttgart: Franz Steiner Verlag, 1986), 3.

57. Carlton J. H. Hayes, *Nationalism: A Religion* (New York: Macmillan, 1960).

58. Ninian Smart, "Religion, Myth, and Nationalism," in Peter H. Merkl and Ninian Smart, eds., *Religion and Politics in the Modern World* (New York: New York University Press, 1983), 27. For another comparison of nationalism and religion, see Hoover, *The Gospel of Nationalism*, 3–4.

59. Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, 18.

60. W. Howard Wriggins, *Ceylon: Dilemmas of a New Nation* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1960), 169.