

RELIGIOUS NATIONALISM IN THE NEW COLD WAR

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Abstract: *Thirty years ago I published a book with the title, The New Cold War? Religious Nationalism Confronts the Secular State. At the time it seemed a startling proposition that religion could play a role in a new kind of anti-secular authoritarian politics. Now, thirty years later, the theme has returned with the potency of right-wing power, anti-immigrant hate and economic isolationism. Religion continues to be part of the equation in the current dichotomy between democracy and authoritarianism, where religion is often a way to connect a powerful state to the masses, as witnessed in Turkey, Hungary, Russia, India, and now the United States. This article will take several themes from my book and apply them to these contemporary examples. I will assess whether religious nationalism has changed and expanded, and whether it has a future.*

The recent political shifts on a global scale have led many observers to conclude that we are on the verge of a new Cold War. But it is not clear what the opposing sides are, nor how they are constituted. Some observers point to the rising tension between the United States and China as a new point of contestation. It is a conflict, to be sure, but it is essentially a bipolar one. To be a new Cold War, one would expect each side to have a global reach, and present opposing ideological bases for organising public life.

What is emerging at this point in the third decade of the 21st century as an opposition on a global scale is the conflict between democracy and autocracy. Like the old Cold War, the states on either side do not always agree with one another. The Soviet Union and China were uneasy partners in the Communist bloc. But they leaned on each other for support in times when they had to face their ideological opponents—democratic capitalism in the case of the Communist partners. In an eerie way, global politics seems to be lining up in a similar kind of mass dichotomy between two uneasy though warring camps.

The rise of authoritarian nationalism in recent years has been remarkable. The increasing control of Xi in China, the ascension of Putin as a Russian dictator, the emergence of Erdogan and al-Sisi as the strong men of Turkey and Egypt; the rigid regimes of North Korea, Iran, and Saudi Arabia; the dominance of Modi in India; and the authoritarian tendencies of the Trump administration in the United States provide a counterweight to what was once a near-global acceptance of democracy.

Though hounded by autocratic right-wing parties, the democratic spirit still thrives in the Center-Left coalition of American politics and in the democratic administrations in Japan and Europe, elsewhere in the Americas, and in much of Africa, Southeast Asia, and the Pacific. The autocratic and democratic sides are by no means united within themselves except in their persistence in the differing tracks on which they have traveled. And the confrontation is nearly global.

The stance of Trump in disdaining traditional European democracies in favor of the autocracies of Russia, Hungary, Turkey, and even North Korea is an example of these new alliances.. Perhaps nothing illustrated the emerging autocratic coalition more than the extraordinary lineup at the September 2025 meeting of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization. On the final day, China's Xi stood side by side with Russia's Putin and North Korea's Kim. Also in attendance were India's Modi, Egypt's al-Sisi, and Turkey's Erdogan.

What is particularly interesting to me, as someone who has observed the global connections between religion and politics over my now long career, is the role of religion in this new Cold War. The stance of religious leaders has been varied, and many have been critical of the rise of autocratic dictatorships. Yet many of the new autocracies are openly built on religious nationalism.

The drift towards autocratic religious nationalisms is a development that has been several decades in the making. But it is striking to see it emerge as a dominant force in many of the present confrontations. In Russia, for instance, Putin leans on the Russian Orthodox church and its Patriarch Kirill for support. The regime of Saudi Arabia has built its power on the religious network of Wahhabi Islam, just as Iran's theocracy is based on Shi'a institutions. In India, Modi wears his Hindu identity strongly, and his political party is based on an old Hindu nationalist movement that dates to the beginning of India's Independence movement. The support of Evangelical Protestant Christians in the United States has given Trump his strongest base. Religion is part of the emerging autocracies of the new Cold War.

At one time, I thought that it might be one side of a cold war, the conflict between religious and secular nationalism. Thirty years ago, I published a book with the title, *The New Cold War? Religious Nationalism Confronts the Secular State*.¹ At the time, it seemed a startling proposition that religion could play a role in a new kind of anti-secular authoritarian politics. Religion was, however, a significant part of the power politics of the Middle East, and religious nationalism was emerging as the rival to secular democracy in other parts of the world as well.

Fifteen years later, the book was completely rewritten and reissued with the title *Global Rebellion: Religious Challenges to the Secular State*.² The reason for the change in title was that the revised book covered a wide range of non-state movements, some of them transnational, such as al Qaeda. The role of religion in these oppositional politics was a potent force, but it was scattered among a broad range of movements. At the time, it seemed less like a global confrontation in the way that a Cold War would suggest, and more like a global rebellion.

Today's situation provides yet another context for thinking about the role of religion in global conflict. My original title, "the new Cold War," again appears to be prescient. It is not, however, the way that I originally thought, or as I later revised my thinking. It is not that religious nationalism itself is one side of the confrontation or that it foments rebellions, but that it plays a significant role in buttressing the power and providing the mobilising force of dictatorial regimes in the emerging global conflict of the present: the new Cold War between autocracy and democracy.

Hence, thirty years after I first published *The New Cold War?*, the theme has returned. Religion provides the potency to shore up right-wing power, anti-immigrant hate, and economic isolationism, and for that reason it is part of the equation in the current dichotomy between democracy and authoritarianism. For strongman regimes in Iran, Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Turkey, Hungary, Russia, India, and now the United States, religion is often a way to connect the masses to a powerful state.

Interestingly, some of the insights in my previous book continue to be relevant. Through a series of case studies and interviews, that book helps me explore answers to the question of why religion provides such a heady resource for political mobilisation.

The Loss of Faith in Secular Democracy

One of the reasons why religion plays a role in the confrontation between democracy and autocracy is that it replaces a faith in secular democracy. I use the term "faith" deliberately, since the idea of secular democracy requires a great deal of faith. Not faith in religion, of course, but faith in the promise of democracy itself: that the individual needs and wishes of a vast citizenry could be knit together by an "unseen hand," as Adam Smith described the workings of capitalism, to create a polity for the welfare of all. The problem was that invariably the system became used and abused in a way that profited the few at the expense of the many. Even so, it did a better job of equality than, say, an oligarchy might, which was exclusively for the benefit of the rich. Still, democratic nationalism appeared to be less than perfect.

Secular nationalists had tried to argue that faith in democracy was preferable to faith in autocratic religion. The words used to define nationalism by Western political leaders and such scholars as Hans Kohn implied not only that it was secular but that it was competitive with 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."³ 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."⁴

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."⁵ 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.” 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.”⁶

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 a particular form of political organisation: the modern European and American nation-state. In such an organisation, individuals are linked to a centralised, 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 religion. In the 1980s, the 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.⁷ Scholars such as Kohn and Emerson recognised this affective dimension of nationalism early on; they felt it appropriate that the secular nation adopt what we might call the spirit of secular nationalism.

The Religious Rejection of Secular Democracy

Democratic secular nationalism is “a kind of religion,” one of the leaders of the Iranian revolution wrote in a matter-of-fact manner that indicated that what he said was taken as an obvious truth by most of his readers.⁸ He went on to explain that it was not only a religion but one peculiar to the West, a point echoed by one of the leaders of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt.⁹ Behind his statement was the assumption that secular democracy fulfills the same needs for collective identity, ultimate loyalty, and moral authority that religion has traditionally addressed, and this parallel makes secular nationalism *de facto* a religion. Other Muslim thinkers said that secular nationalism in the West occupies the same place in human experience as does Islam in Muslim societies, Buddhism in Theravada Buddhist societies, and Hinduism and Sikhism in Indian society. Thus, it is a religion in the same sense as Islam, Theravada Buddhism, Hinduism, and Sikhism. One might as well call it Christian or European cultural nationalism, they declare, and make clear what seems to many Muslims, Buddhists, Hindus, and Sikhs to be perfectly obvious: that it competes in every way with religion as they know it.

Behind this charge is a certain vision of social reality, one that involves a series of concentric circles. The smallest circles are families and clans; then come ethnic groups and nations; the largest, and implicitly most important, are global civilisations. Among the global civilisations are Islam, Buddhism, and what some who hold this view call

“Christendom” or simply “Western civilisation.” Nations such as Germany, France, and the United States, in this conceptualisation, stand as subsets of Christendom/Western civilisation; similarly, Egypt, Iran, Pakistan, and other nations are subsets of Islamic civilisation.

From this vantage point, it is a serious error to suggest that Egypt or Iran should be thrust into a Western frame of reference. In this view of the world, they are intrinsically part of Islamic, not Western, civilisation, and it is an act of imperialism to think of them in any other way. Even before the idea of a “clash of civilisations” gained popularity, religious activists around the world asserted that their views about religious politics reflected basic differences in worldviews. They were anticipating the thesis that the Harvard political scientist, Samuel Huntington, propounded in the mid 1990s.¹⁰

One notable pre-Huntington adherent of the “clash of civilisations” thesis was the Ayatollah Khomeini, who lamented what in prerevolutionary Iran he and others referred to as “West-toxification” or “Westomania.” According to Khomeini, Islamic peoples have been stricken with Westomania since the eighth century, and partly for that reason they easily accepted the cultural and political postures of the shah. More recent attempts to capitalise on Westomania, he maintained, have come from the insidious efforts of Western imperialists.¹¹ The goal of the Islamic revolution in Iran, then, was not only to free Iranians politically from the shah but also to liberate them conceptually from Western ways of thinking.

When the leaders of some formerly colonised countries continue to espouse Western ideas—including especially the idea of secular nationalism—they are accused by other indigenous leaders of perpetuating colonialism. In some Middle Eastern Islamic countries, the injury of the colonial experience was compounded by the insult of having lost their connection with a great Islamic power, the Ottoman Empire. At the end of World War I, the old empire came under the jurisdiction of Britain and other European powers who carved the region into secular nation-states. Countries such as Iraq and Jordan were lines drawn in the sand. Hence, secular nationalism was for them literally the legacy of colonial rule.

Islamic revolutionaries in Iran have also regarded the secular government under the shah as a form of Western colonialism, even though Iran was never a colony in the same sense that many Middle Eastern and South Asian countries were. The heavy-handed role of the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency in Iranian politics and the force-feeding of Western ideas by the shah were regarded as forms of colonialism all the same. According to one Iranian leader, Abolhassan Bani-Sadr, the religious character of Western nationalism made it a competitor with Islam. He claimed that Western nationalism suffered from a pretension of universality so grand it had religious proportions, and this claim to universality made its cultural and economic colonialism possible by allowing a “national entity” from the West to assume that it had “prior rights to the rest of the world.”¹²

These leaders regard as especially pernicious the fact that the cultural colonialism of Western ideas erodes confidence in traditional values. For that matter, it also

undermines traditional religious constructs of society and the state. Concerns over both these matters and over the erosion of religion's influence in public life unite religious activists from Egypt to Sri Lanka, even those who are bitterly opposed to one another. A leader of the religious right in Israel and a spokesperson for the Islamic movement in Palestine, for instance, used exactly the same words to describe their sentiments: "Secular government is the enemy."¹³

Hence, the loss of faith in secular nationalism is part of a profound disappointment: the perception that secular institutions have failed to perform. Not only in the former colonised parts of the world but in the developed West as well, many experienced a disillusionment with the Enlightenment's faith in secularism. It appeared that the secular state had not lived up to its own promises of political freedom, economic prosperity, and social justice.

Some of the most poignant cases of disenchantment with secularism were found among educated members of the middle class who were raised with the high expectations propagated by secular-nationalist political leaders. Some of them were propelled toward religious nationalism after trying to live as secular nationalists and feeling betrayed, or at least unfulfilled. Many of them also felt that Western societies betrayed themselves: the government scandals, persistent social inequities, and devastating economic difficulties of the United States and the former Soviet Union made both democracy and socialism less appealing as role models than they had been in those more innocent decades of the 1940s and 1950s. The global mass media, in their exaggerated way, brought the message that there was a deep malaise in the United States caused by the social failures of unwed mothers, divorce, racism, and drug addiction; the political failures of various political scandals; and the economic failures associated with trade imbalances and the mounting deficit.

Among some followers, the hopes for religious politics have been utopian. Christian revolutionaries in Latin America have spoken of instituting the "kingdom of God" promised in the New Testament. The "dhammic society" that bhikkhus in Sri Lanka desired as the alternative to secular nationalism resembled a paradise. In a Halakhic society, Jewish leaders in Jerusalem promised, Israel would become more harmonious than it is, all its aspects integrated under religious law. "Man can't live by bread alone," one of the leaders reminded his supporters; "religion is more than just belief and ritual, it is all of life."¹⁴ The vision of religious activists has been appealing in part because it promises a future that cannot easily fail: its moral and spiritual goals are transcendent and not as easy to gauge as are the more materialistic promises of secular nationalists.

In many parts of the world, the profound disappointment in secular nationalism has led to a loss of faith in its relevance and its vision for the future. In their own way, these critics of secular nationalism have experienced what Jürgen Habermas has dubbed a modern "crisis of legitimation," in which the public's respect for political and social institutions has been deflated.¹⁵ The critique of secular nationalism fell on receptive ears in part because people no longer saw secular nationalism as an expression of their own identities or related to their social and economic situations. More importantly, they failed to see how secular nationalism could provide a vision of what they would like

themselves and their communities to become. Secular nationalism came to be seen as alien, the expression of only a small, educated, and privileged few. As both capitalist and formerly socialist governments wrestled with their own constituencies over the moral purpose of their nations and the directions they might take, their old, tired forms of nationalism seemed less appealing elsewhere.

The Synthesis Between Religion and Autocratic Nationalism

Secular nationalism as an all-embracing ideology does not easily accommodate a similarly expansive view of religion, one that reaches out beyond mosques, temples, and churches to embrace all of life. It would seem, then, that the two are incompatible. Yet religion can sometimes be hospitable to the idea of the nation-state—though on religion's terms. Religious activists are well aware that in the past, when a nation was based on the premise of secular nationalism, religion was made marginal to the political order. This outcome was especially unfortunate from many radical religious perspectives—including Jihadi militants, messianic Jewish Zionists, and Christian militia—because they regard the two ideologies as unequal: the religious one is far superior.

Rather than starting with secular nationalism, then, they prefer to begin with religion. In India, Hindu nationalists have been emphatic that Hindutva, as they call Hindu national culture, is the defining characteristic of Indian nationalism. Some Christian militants in the United States want to return to the country's Christian roots, perhaps unaware that the founders were not Christian but Deists. Nonetheless, some of these Christian nationalists insist on the authority of the Bible rather than the constitution. Others anoint the constitution with a religious aura, Christianising it. Messianic Zionists in Israel prefer "Toracracy" rather than democracy. Similar sentiments are echoed in movements of religious nationalism elsewhere in the world.

The implication of this way of speaking is not that religion is antithetical to nationalism, but that religious rather than secular ideologies are the appropriate premises on which to build nations—even the modern nation-state. In fact, virtually every reference to nationhood used by religious activists assumes that the modern nation-state is the only way in which a nation can be construed. The term religious nationalism, therefore, means the attempt to link religion and the nation-state. This is a new development in the history of nationalism, and it immediately raises the question of whether it is possible: whether what we in the West think of as a modern nation—a unified, democratically controlled system of economic and political administration—can in fact be accommodated within a totalising religious worldview.

It is an interesting question and one to which many Western observers would automatically answer no. Even as acute an interpreter of modern society as Giddens regards most religious cultures as, at best, a syncretism of "tribal cultures, on the one hand, and modern societies, on the other."¹⁶ Yet by Giddens's own definition of a modern nation-state, postrevolutionary Iran would qualify. The Islamic revolution in Iran solidified not just central power but also systemic control, a dominance over the population that in some ways was more conducive to nationhood than the monarchical political order of the shah. Ironically, it was Khomeini—with his integrative religious

ideology and his grass-roots network of mullahs—who brought Iran closer to the goal of a unified nation. But it did so in an autocratic way, buttressed by religion.

Does religion lose some essential aspects in accommodating modern politics? Some religious leaders think that it does. In favoring the nation-state over a particular religious congregation as its major community of reference, religion loses the exclusivity held by smaller, subnational religious communities, and the leaders of those communities lose some of their autonomy. For that reason, many religious leaders are suspicious of religious nationalism; some regard it as a theological heresy. Among them are religious Utopians who would rather build their own isolated political societies than deal with the problems of a whole nation, religious liberals who are satisfied with the secular nation-state the way it is, and traditional religious conservatives who would rather ignore politics altogether. Often, though, in religious-supported autocracies, these contrary religious voices are marginalised or silenced. Some of the new religious activists have thought of leading a religious empire with transnational dimensions, but they have lacked the political and military power to do so on their own. The Aum Shinrikyo movement in Japan, for example, imagined a global apocalypse in which their own movement's leaders would survive to become the rulers of a unified post-war world. The radical jihadi movement associated with Osama bin Laden also had a transnational agenda. For all its carefully orchestrated violence against what it regarded as evil powers—including the spectacular destruction of the World Trade Center on September 11, 2001, the subsequent attacks on the transportation systems of London and Madrid, and the many bombings in Iraq—no clear plans for alternative governments or politics emerged.

What has been successful for religious nationalists is their merger of support with politically ambitious autocrats. The Islamic Republic of Iran and the Taliban in Afghanistan are prime examples, as was the erstwhile Islamic State of ISIS in Syria and Iraq. In other autocracies, from Russia where the Russian Orthodox Church supports Putin to Saudi Arabia where the Saud family relies on its Wahhabi Muslim alliance, the role of religion is more in the background in a supporting role.

Modern movements of religious nationalism are subjects of controversy within both religious and secular circles. The marriage between those old competing ideologies of order—religion and secular nationalism—has produced an autocratic offspring of contemporary religious politics. This is an interesting turn in modern history, and one fraught with dangers, for the radical accommodation of religion to authoritarian nationalism may not be good for either religion or political order. The rebellious religious movements that emerged in many parts of the world in the late 20th and early 21st centuries have exhibited both the dangers and the possibilities inherent in religious activists' appropriation of the instruments of political power.

There are forms of autocracies that are not based on religion, such as in China. But even in that country, there is an ascription to Sino culture based on Han ethnicity that has virtually a sacral character and that buttresses the autocratic state. The forced re-education of Muslim Uighur people in Xinjiang province is an example. They are being trained to be more like Han Chinese.

Perhaps if we used the term “cultural nationalism” rather than “religious nationalism,” the phrase would be broad enough to encompass what seems to be a requisite cultural element to the rise of autocratic dictatorships. Non-autocratic societies may also have proud cultural elements, though the difference is the degree to which governmental control rests upon and is infused with the cultural base. Democratic societies are proudly neutral on culture. They do not privilege one over the other, and their mantra is inclusion, the notion that regardless of one’s cultural sensibilities, all are equal under the law. In Myanmar, for instance, the democratic government that came into being when the country then called Burma achieved its independence included Muslims and tribal Christians in its cabinet. Today the military regime is in league with the Buddhist monks who insist that Myanmar’s sovereignty is exclusively based on Burmese Buddhism.

At present the various forms of cultural nationalism and autocracies around the world are not united, though they often lean on each other for support when confronted with their enemy, secular democracy. The more that secular democratic societies can band together in the face of this new Cold War, the greater are their chances for their survival, and for the democratic future of this planet.

Notes

1. Mark Juergensmeyer, *The New Cold War? Religious Nationalism Confronts the Secular State* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993).
2. Mark Juergensmeyer, *Global Rebellion: Religious Challenges to the Secular State* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008).
3. Hans Kohn, *Nationalism: Its Meaning and History* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1955), 85.
4. Kohn, 89.
5. Rupert Emerson, *From Empire to Nation: The Rise to Self-Assertion of Asian and African Peoples* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1960), 158.
6. Emerson, vii.
7. Anthony Giddens, *The Nation-State and Violence* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985), 158.
8. Abolhassan Bani-Sadr, *The Fundamental Principles and Precepts of Islamic Government*, trans by Mohammad R. Ghanoonparvar (Lexington KY: Mazda Publishers, 1989), 40.
9. Interview by the author with Essam el-Arian, member of the Muslim Brotherhood, in Cairo, January 11, 1989.
10. Samuel Huntington, "The Clash of Civilizations?" *Foreign Affairs*, Summer 1993, 22-49.
11. Imam (Ayatollah) Khomeini, *Islam and Revolution: Writings and Declarations*, translated and annotated by Hamid Algar (Berkeley: Mizan Press, 1981), 270.
12. Bani-Sadr, 40.
13. Author's interview with Rabbi Meir Kahane, leader of the Kach Party, in Jerusalem, January 18, 1989, and an article by an anonymous author in *Islam and Palestine*, I leaflet 5 (Limassol, Cyprus, June 1988).
14. Interview with Kahane.
15. Jürgen Habermas, *Legitimation Crisis*, trans by Thomas McCarthy (Boston: Beacon Press, 1975), *passim*.
16. Giddens, *Nation-State*, 71.