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# The framework of large group identification: religion and nation<sup>1</sup>



## ABSTRACT

It is often the case that religious and national forms of self-definition are mutually reinforcing and intertwined (e.g. SMITH 1991, 2004; DANIEL – DURHAM 1997; FRIEDLAND 2001; HOPPENBROUWERS 2002; ANDERSON 2006, etc.). This process can occur in a variety of ways and contexts all over the world. In addition to attempts at defining religious and national identities, the following paper focuses primarily on three approaches: (1) how religious and national identification can be understood, (2) what is the relationship between religion and nationalist worldviews, what is the reason for this linkage, and (3) what is the mechanism and significance of the connection.

## KEYWORDS

nationalism and religion, collective identity, sacred nation

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It is often the case that religious and national forms of self-definition are mutually reinforcing and intertwined (e.g. SMITH 1991, 2004; DANIEL – DURHAM 1997; FRIEDLAND 2001; HOPPENBROUWERS 2002; ANDERSON 2006, etc.). This process can occur in a variety of ways and contexts. For example, the politically instrumentalised alliance between modern nationalism and orthodox Christianity, which historically builds on the Byzantine Empire's idea of *symphonia*, and which is extended by the power apparatus to an inalienable link to territorially expressed nationality, is well known (LEUSTEAN 2008; PUSZTAI 2009).

Another typical cross-sectional example is the resurgent nationalism of the non-Orthodox Central-Eastern European states after the fall of the Iron Curtain, in which not only Christian but also other religious elements are present (SZILÁRDI 2014, 2017).

Or, perhaps less thematised in Hungary, but another relevant example is the Indian nationalism linked to Hinduism, which emerged in the 19th century and codifies religious and national affiliation as the same, and which gained new emphasis with the rise of right-wing political actors in the wake of economic liberalisation in the 1990s (SZIVÁK 2017).

Both in a historical perspective and in a contemporary context, we can thus find several instances in which this alliance is established. The question of the role played by the parallel construction of national and religious identities can be answered in different ways by theories of religious and national self-definition and by the framework of historical considerations of religion and nationalism. Therefore, the paper focuses primarily on these three approaches: (1) how religious and national identification can be understood, (2) what is the relationship between religion and nationalist worldviews, what is the reason for this linkage, and (3) what is the mechanism and significance of the linkage.

## RELIGIOUS IDENTIFICATION

Issues of the process of self-definition are most closely related to modernity, because in a social structure rooted in tradition, where the individual's psychic capacities and desires are largely congruent with his social potential, the question of identity seems to be uncontroversial. Prior to the emergence of modern societies, the predetermined 'identity programme' (PATAKI 1997) was regarded by most people as a necessary fact of life, and to deviate from it in premodern societies was to turn against the whole environment. In other words, where the number of models of identification and the quantity of limited roles were few, identity formation did not encounter substantial obstacles.

In contrast, in more complex and rapidly changing societies, there are an almost infinite number of behavioural and normative models, so the search for identity becomes a mass problem with the the modern age, when individual existence loses its basis in tradition and finds itself in a contradictory set of alternatives. As a consequence, in post-industrial societies, individuals and groups have to construct and defend their identities in increasingly complex ways,

as they have less and less opportunity to influence public life and as the institutions of public life are less and less concerned with providing a system of meaning. The search for identity and, moreover, its preservation, is becoming increasingly challenging, especially because of the constant tension between environmental expectations and personal preferences.

The process in which the structures of the tradition were shaken, the relative harmony between autointerpretation and heterointerpretation was disrupted, and the uncertainty that was palpable at the beginning of the century became a universal experience by the middle of the century (MÁTÉ-TÓTH 2012). In religious identification, these issues have been/are multiplied, and the fragmentation of identity elements, individualisation and religious pluralisation have led to a fundamental change in the types of religiosity in the last few decades (e.g. GLOCK, STARK 1965; BERGER, LUCKMANN 1975; SMART 1968 etc.)

In particular, it should be stressed that in this study the concept of religious identity is interpreted as a social construct, and not in any way as a given in the sense of known religious traditions or conceptions of religiosity. In this sense, and in simple terms, religious identity is defined when an individual defines him/herself in a spiritual dimension (beyond the physical world, vertical). This spiritual axis is the point of reference against which he measures his life, his actions, his ethics and his outlook on the world, and thus has an essential ,organising' power at both personal and group level. In the case of clear religious self-definition, the elements of the horizontal dimension are clearly subordinated to the vertical aspects, i.e. the different parts of identity are defined in relation to this. It means that there is a hierarchical organisation in which religious self-definition unifies the parts of self-identification.

However, as a consequence of postmodernity and the effects of secularisation, this property of dependency is not always the case, i.e. religious, occupational, political, etc. sub-identities are often juxtaposed and often lack solid structures. This plasticity is most noticeable in the case of private religiosity, since at the community level the characteristics of collective self-definition – constructed by the group – prevail, i.e. the „self-conception” resulting from the interaction of the individual and the community may be more resistant to change.

## NATIONAL CONSCIOUSNESS

No less complex is the definition of national consciousness, the most obvious example of conscious social belonging, which owes its strength, among other things, to its own past events. The concept of nation is a relatively recent one; it was not spoken of before the 18th century, and as a phenomenon it is typically European, having become widespread throughout the world in the 19th and 20th centuries. Initially used to denote blood relationship (the original Latin word *nasco/nasci* means ,to be born'), by the 18th century the term was used to refer to the total population of a state. The meaning of the word gradually became intertwined with the concept of people or state, and this intermingling and interchangeability of meanings led to a confusion of meanings and terminology that can still be found in many places today (NAGY 1998).

The definition of the concept of nation is therefore as problematic as the approach to the general concept of religion. While Ernest Renan, for example, identifies a sense of common past and heritage and a desire for common unity as two factors of national community, Giddens

identifies the criterion of the nation in a unitary administrative system over the population of a given territory (HUTCHINSON – SMITH 1994). While Max Weber emphasises the aspiration to found a state as the main concept, Hobsbawm stresses the common past and the need for self-determination (WEBER 1967; HOBBSAWM 1992) These few examples only illustrate the complexity of the issue, but the common intersection of common culture, language and traditions, and the establishment and defence of a sovereign state, can be highlighted in the theoretical writings on nationhood.

There have been countless theoretical considerations of the emergence of the nation in the modern sense; the various approaches can be divided into three broad categories according to the ideas they consider about the birth of the nation.

The first set of theories consists of those that hold that the formation of the nation is the result of an organic, historical process and, as such, has a concrete (cultural entity) history over the past millennium(s).

In contrast, the modernist position sees the nation as a modern social construct, created by the dramatic changes in society that occurred with the advent of industrial society. The change can be captured in the way that the personal, kinship and informal relations of agrarian society are replaced by the multiplicity of impersonal relations characteristic of industrial society and the formal system of norms that regulates them. Theories stress that the qualities that define nations (such as tradition or religion) are the product of human thought. One of the main theorists of the concept, Ernst Gellner, argues that the elite plays the main role in the creation of the modern nation, with an interest in sharing culture with the strata over which it wishes to exercise power. In this sense, the concept of the nation has no antecedents in history.

On the whole, modernist theories claim that the emergence of the modern concept of the nation precedes the emergence of nations themselves, so nations cannot exist without nationalism. From this perspective, nations are the product of the emergence of nationalism and the nation-state. Such a notion is emphasised, for example, by Eric Hobsbawm, who accepts Gellner's assertion that the idea that the nation is a natural, God-given means of classifying humanity, with an innate political destiny, is nothing more than a myth. It is not the nation that creates nationalism, but the other way round. (GELLNER, quoted in HOBBSAWM 1992) Anderson, also in his modernist work *Imagined Communities* (2006), places 'print capitalism' (45) and the creation of literary language at a key position in the process of nation-building.

The literature shows dilemmas along these fractures, not only in terms of nation-building, but also in terms of national identity. Premodern theorists place the existence of national identity further back in time, and seek its formation in the loyalty of the individual. This loyalty links the individual, even unconsciously, primarily to groups that share similar cultural (linguistic, traditional, religious) characteristics (this presupposes the idea that common cultural characteristics already exist). This kind of identification, which is essentially unconscious and based on cultural elements, is the basis of ethnic identity. By contrast, national identity is already conscious of belonging to a group and seeks and finds means to exploit the cohesive force that this provides.

The modernist view, however, derives national identity from the emergence of nation-states, and while emphasising the common vision of the group, it does not consider the importance and continuity of traditions, rituals and symbols to be indispensable. It is precisely this problematic that has given rise to the ethnosymbolist school of theory, which in fact represents a compromise between premodern and modern theories.

The ethnosymbolist conception accepts that the difference between agrarian and industrial society is so radical that it has led to a radical change in the concept of the nation, but it also emphasises that the nation has antecedents. Anthony D. Smith identifies the formation, development and change of historical nations as unique, complex and heterogeneous processes, and identifies the antecedents of the nation in a chain of myths, symbols, memories and values passed down through generations. He calls this system of symbols the 'ethnic core', which includes the common name of the ethnic group, shared myths about its descent and origins, shared historical memories and common territory, elements of common culture, and a sense of solidarity (SMITH 2004).

In the context of the process of becoming a nation and the reference points of national identity, it is also worth devoting a few paragraphs to the concept of invented tradition (1983), as introduced by Eric Hobsbawm. Hobsbawm applies the notion of invented/constructed tradition to a set of formalised practices which, because of their ritual-symbolic nature, inculcate norms of behaviour through repetition, or which seek continuity with the past. Continuity in this interpretation is often illusory; rather, these traditions are adaptive responses to new situations that take the form of references to old situations (HOBBSAWM 1983).

Invented traditions reinforce (or create) group cohesion and in all cases use history as a means of legitimation. Their success always depends on the receptiveness of society. There can be different starting points as regards their origin: there are traditions invented by a single person (e.g. scouting), or introduced by an organisation/agency (e.g. Nazi symbolism), or there are cases where the tradition is only partly invented and in other cases spontaneously produced by social groups.

Hobsbawm traces the origin of the invention of traditions to rapid social change, where previous social patterns are destroyed, rendering old traditions inapplicable to the new system. The function of constructed traditions in a changing society is clearly to ensure social cohesion and self-identity (or separation from others) and to structure social relations. From a practical point of view, two forms of tradition-making are distinguished: the political form represents the variety of political and social movements organised within the state, while the social form is the product of informally organised groups.

Since, in Hobsbawm's argument, the emergence of modern nation-states was without precedent, much of the tradition is necessarily fictional. Such constructed traditions include, for example, celebrations or spectacular ceremonies organised from above, national anthems, national flags, but also the creation of semi-fictional or entirely fictional national mythologies. In this period, therefore, as the old forms of power disappeared, the new means of securing loyalty were new traditions, the construction of which was largely linked to state institutions and can therefore be seen as the result of a conscious process.

The question of invented tradition can ultimately be related to the theoretical contextualization of religion and nation in several ways, since in the intertwining, the topos of tradition-making in political form (in the form of the aforementioned elements such as the anthem, the national flag, national holidays or (quasi-)mythologies) are often emphasized, the national being imbued with the category of the *sacred*.

## RELIGION AND NATIONALISM

In addition to the fact that national and religious identity is a typical example of large group identification, a brief discussion of the reflections on the multifaceted relationship between the two horizons thus deserves a special mention in several respects. The separate discussion is not only induced by the topic of the intertwining of national and religious identity per se, but also by the large number of references in the literature to the structural and substantive comparison of the two concepts.

Benedikt Anderson points out that the experience of belonging in the imagined community of the nation replaced the universal sense of a vanished religious brotherhood in the 18th century. In the process of the philosophical revival, religious thought was increasingly displaced from the interpretative framework of the new scientific-rationalist approach, and the concept of the explanatory principle of redemption faded. This inevitably produced new, more secular forms of continuity (ANDERSON 2006), but because of the profound structural similarity with religion, national identification was able to provide a sense of brotherhood, even in a community of people who did not know each other. In terms of the national-religious analogy, Smith outlines the basic religious topics on which national identity is built. In narratives that draw on essentially biblical patterns, images of the ‚chosen people‘, the ‚holy land‘, the ‚golden age‘ and the ‚sacrifice of the hero‘ provide the structural durability of national belonging, and although the biblical narrative does not provide a universal basis for nationalist patterns of organisation, it is the reason why the idea of nationalism can be derived from the European cultural context (HATOS 2005).

In terms of interconnectedness, Roger Friedland argues that religion shares in the order of the nation-state, and thus that contemporary nationalism is religious in character (FRIEDLAND 2001). HOPPENBROUWERS *Religious nationalism in a Transformation context* (2002) states that religion has become perhaps one of the most important markers of national identity. On the relationship between religion and nationalism, the author divides the different theories into two types: on the one hand, maximalist explanations of the relationship assume that there is a causal link between the two, as they conceive of religion as inherently striving for social monopoly. On the other hand, and in contrast, the minimalist explanation denies that this relationship is substantial. While the conclusion of the former school of thought is that churches use nationalism as a necessary means to achieve their ends, the latter view is that the link is entirely contingent, accidental, and that the interconnection is almost exclusively the result of some kind of nationalist manipulation.<sup>2</sup>

Perhaps more importantly, the paper argues that there are some striking similarities between religion and nationalism, not only in structure and function, but also in content. First of all (from this point onwards the author is speaking specifically about Christianity), from the beginning to the present day, Christianity has viewed nature and culture as sinful forms with a certain suspicion, and it is precisely at this point that the path of Christianity crosses that of nationalism. Nationalist ideology focuses on language, customs, culture, contrasts the survival or strength of the nation with other nations, or sanctions certain practices, customs and objects for the individual, and sets up criteria of national loyalty and creed that the individual is expected to adhere to. In

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<sup>2</sup> Hoppenbrouwers clearly argues for a close link between religion and nationalism, and finds the explanatory principle of the minimalist movement weak, as it focuses only on describing a phenomenon and not on analysing it.

a similar way, the church is concerned about the path the believer chooses in order to reach the eternal beyond in safety, and also needs profane forms that make it ‚attractive‘, so that it takes on a somewhat mundane form and begins to emphasise elements such as indigenous culture, language and local customs or objects.

Moreover, nationalism and religion share several characteristics: in terms of social homogenisation (peace, order, unity), both claim to follow the example of their predecessors (saints, national heroes, possibly both). For both, social order is accessible through rites and mysticism. A further important similarity is that, because believers or members of the nation are considered equal, both religious and nationalist organisations advocate an egalitarian society, but at the same time their original conception of the world is paternalistic and hierarchical.

Both the churches and the nationalist movements mediate knowledge to the common man, while presenting themselves as the explicator, the holder and guardian of ultimate truth. This knowledge includes a religious or political variation of redemption/salvation and has a purely messianic or prophetic dimension.<sup>3</sup>

Hoppenbreuwers argues that faith and nation are structurally similar, both presupposing that they are determined by an internal force that is in opposition to some external force. The internal force needs an authentic, tradition-oriented interpretation from the revelation of the Church Fathers or indigenous culture. Both religion and nationalism thus provide a social and psychological guide and ideological motivation, thus uniting will, emotion and intellect in a holistic worldview and thus eliminating historical contingency.

It is not only the manner in which the interconnection is made, but also its intention that is of great importance. One of the advantages of linking nationalist ideology to religion is that it gives a certain transcendence to the origin and purpose of the nation and a divine origin to its representation. The most obvious way of doing this is the attempt to sacralise the nation, i.e. when the nationalist thought process endows transcendent qualities to places, times, persons and objects of honour closely associated with the nation. This same linkage on the part of religious organisations can be pragmatic (to gain support among the faithful or the powerful) or principled (the nation as a missionary vocation), or both.

Levente NAGY's study (1998), which argues that the ideology of nationalism can be treated as a secular or modern religion, provides further interesting insights into the similarities between religion and nationalism. The reasons for this are severalfold: first, nationalism as an ideology working for an ultimate goal has taken on a transcendent character, and second, the process of secularisation has created a vacuum in terms of the role of religion, and as a result this vacuum has been filled by the ‚masses‘ with nationalist ideas. Nagy characterises the people's turn to nationalism as religious in nature, and the role reversal has made it one of the main tasks of nationalist ideology to convince its adherents that its ideals will ensure a brighter national future, a more meaningful and happier life. While the focus of religion is transcendence, the focus of nationalism is self; in its homage to the nation, it invokes national traditions, historical events and persons rather than religious symbols, and treats them with religious reverence. Religious dogmas are replaced by nationalist dogmas, in which the drawing of the geographical and ethnic boundaries of a community, the belief and conviction in the naturalness of borders, the embrace

<sup>3</sup> raises an interesting point in the author's study: he applies the metaphor of the Christian life journey to the discourse of national history in the dynamics of suffering, evil forces, liberation/liberation

of the past and the treatment of history as a political instrument, and the unconditional belief that the state is the natural and rightful property of a single nation, are paramount, and that only in this way can the nation achieve prosperity.

## **THE MECHANISM OF THE LINK BETWEEN RELIGION AND NATION – THE VIEWPOINT OF SOCIAL PSYCHOLOGY**

The interconnection can be approached not only from a structural or substantive point of view, but also from a perspective of social psychology. On the one hand, man is a social being who lives in political orders, communities and groups, and group formation is a fundamental psychological endowment and an elementary behaviour, a fact that has been repeatedly demonstrated in psychology.

Issues of collective self-identity have been discussed in depth in social psychology, from how groups are formed through the minimal group paradigm (e.g. TAJFEL 1980), to nuanced approaches to intergroup relations (e.g. Within this, the importance of identification along the lines of the large group is also well known in the social science discourse, both in the social psychological context and in the sociological, anthropological and political science context (cf. SZILÁRDI 2017).

The thematisation of this is also very important because there are no other two verticals among the large group identification types that could involve such a large number of people who are unknown to each other in such a profound way. Moreover, precisely because of its social character, it needs this form of self-placement, not only along narrower micro-groups such as the family, but also along larger sets such as age, gender or even religious or national communities.

Overall, in contemporary academic discourse, the concept of social identity is understood as a multidimensional construct, saturated not only with cognitive but also with emotional content, rooted in the dual determinacy of identification along group values and of defining something against something. In other words, identification has to be understood not only as a turning towards values but also as a turning away from other values, in this sense it easily becomes a dichotomy (and this implies research on intergroup emotions).

Several theories on the mechanism of action of the merger can provide clues. It may be one of the starting points of a set of responses to secularisation, as FUCHS and CASE (1997) argue, whereby anti-modernist ideologies formulated in response to modernity and secularisation seek to justify the elimination of the possibility of the world by the salience and monochromaticity of the group itself, and to achieve this they need a strong control of group members and organisational symbols.

The socio-psychological significance of the interconnection between religious and national (ethnic) identity is that the stability of collective identification is particularly enhanced by the fact that religious „truths” can be underpinned from the national side and national belonging from the religious side, especially when the religious and national dimensions are intertwined with other subsystems (political, cultural, linguistic, etc.) in a complex and diffuse way. In other words, in this process, the various hybrid identity elements can be unified and the individual (and at the same time a large group of people) can remain homogeneous and congruent. This phenomenon can also be interpreted as a case of adaptation to the symptoms of a pluralistic society.



Overall, the why and how of the interconnection of religious and national self-definition is a rather complex issue. There are similarities not only in the content but also in the structure of the two systems of ideas, and historically, as religion begins to fade, identification with the nation grows, a kind of change of function takes place.

As secularisation and then (post)modern pluralism become more prevalent, individuals and groups are faced with increasingly complex challenges of self-definition and collective identification, and the two identifications may become intertwined. This coupling can be bidirectional and not without instrumentalisation of power. That is to say, the religious/church space may seek common ground in order to expand its own market, while on the other hand, political power may instrumentalise the religious power space in order to expand its own constituencies and legitimise its power.

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