

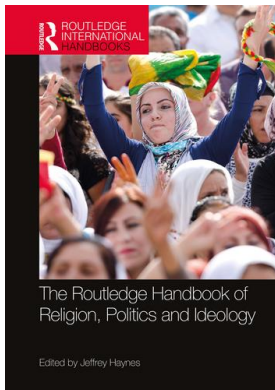
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Access details: *subscription number*

Publisher: *Routledge*

Informa Ltd Registered in England and Wales Registered Number: 1072954 Registered office: 5 Howick Place, London SW1P 1WG, UK



The Routledge Handbook of Religion, Politics and Ideology

Jeffrey Haynes

Nationalism, religion, ideology

Publication details

<https://test.routledgehandbooks.com/doi/10.4324/9780367816230-6>

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Published online on: 15 Aug 2021

How to cite :- Atalia Omer. 15 Aug 2021, *Nationalism, religion, ideology from: The Routledge Handbook of Religion, Politics and Ideology* Routledge

Accessed on: 24 Mar 2023

<https://test.routledgehandbooks.com/doi/10.4324/9780367816230-6>

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4

NATIONALISM, RELIGION, IDEOLOGY

Atalia Omer

“The sewage of European thinking”

Gush Emunim is a folk movement. It’s the pipeline that conveys the sewage of European thinking right into the core of Judaism. It’s taking classical European nationalism with all romantic, organic elements of the people’s attitude toward its homeland, the sanctity of land and transferring it into the core of Judaism.

These words were said by Jewish studies scholar Moshe Halbertal in an interview featured in the film *The Settlers* (2016). Shimon Dotan, the filmmaker, portrays not only the emergence and consolidation of religious messianic Zionism but also how both its enabling and eventual mainstreaming of the ideology can be understood only in terms of an analysis of secular Zionism and its ethos of security, physical redemption, and an always-selective reliance on Jewish histories, symbols, texts, and meanings. When Halbertal highlights the “sewage of European thinking,” he telegraphs the need to analyse the supposed religiosity of Gush Emunim or “Block of the Faithful,” the original designation of the religious Zionist settler movement in Palestine/Israel and subsequent manifestations of this movement in terms of European ideologies, especially those centered on romantic expressions of nationalism, as unchanged essences suddenly awakened in the nineteenth century. This romantic nationalism is inflicted by the “sleeping beauty” syndrome turned into Frankenstein’s monster (Minogue 1967: 7). Indeed, Benedict Anderson’s *Imagined Communities* analyses the modernity of nationalisms as involving their capacity to “turn fatality into continuity” (1991: 11) and rendering death and human sacrifice meaningful along different registers than theological ones, all along creating narratives of blood, martyrdom, and sacred topographies that intersect, cross-reference, and dialectically transform religious meanings and idioms. Zionism, as a modern political movement, is a thoroughly European development and, when it intersects with messianic and apocalyptic mythology, it explodes. This means its scaffolding constitutes the many ills of Europe, including anti-semitism, orientalism, settler colonialism, and romantic nationalist impulses, along with more liberal, humanist, and universal interpretations of nations and belonging. The messianic and explicit religious ideology of Gush Emunim is as modernist as colonialism and nationalism; thus, it also challenges explanatory frames that interpret its emergence and consolidation as hijacking, in this case, the “good old” Israel (Zertal & Eldad 2009).

The explosion of this ideological movement onto the scene, with its prioritization of the biblical commandment to settle the land, resolved some of the inherent contradictions of secular political Zionism. Zionism, as a romantic nationalism, was unique in its reliance on a land whose acquisition necessitated settler colonialism, along with biblical land titles and an underpinning orientalist imagination. This process is captured in the phrase “negation of exile,” which characterized the ethos of the pre-state “*Yishuv*” and the early decades of the Israeli state. Hence, Hebraism versus Judaism posed a contradiction, replacing the kibbutz as the fulfillment of the Zionist logic of settlement and recreation (which entailed the dispossession and depopulation of Palestinian communities), using increasingly religious rationales over and against universalist or nationalist discourses of self-determination and “normalizing” the Jews. The tension between a Jewish and democratic state is also something that, for later generations of settlers, became irrelevant as they promoted an unapologetic Jewish exclusionary scheme that does not try to hide behind democratic principles. For the political establishment, the entrenchment of the settlements as “facts on the ground” reveals a history of instrumental relationships between religious settlers and secular politicians and their invocation of a security ethos that always relied on the strategic use of human shields through settlements. The intricate topography of massive settlements in the occupied territories could not have been implemented without the active participation of governments through policies, building infrastructure, and military security. Halbertal’s labeling of the consolidation of Gush Emunim as the “sewage” of Europe tries to hold on to secular innocence that is not there. The case of Zionism is unique, certainly, but it also exemplifies the ways in which an explicit framing of political ideology in terms of exclusionary religious visions helps to normalize more “benign” nationalist expressions and to conceal their own ideological implications, underpinning exclusions and patterns of racialization and dehumanization from which Euro-Zionism emerged from the start.

At stake, therefore, are two dominant plots, both of which are flawed. The first is the “hijacking” narrative where religious extremism takes over the secular state infrastructures and transforms expressions of nationalism in its own image (e.g., “Frankenstein’s monster”). The second is the “archeological dig” approach, which reads secular nationalism in terms of a political theology, pretending something other than its theological grounds. As a result, if the hijacking storyline holds on to a naïve defence of secular nationalism’s liberal ideology, the archeological dig storyline does not concern itself with the messiness of policies and nation-state institutions of socialization and emergent alternative storylines. The one plot overlooks the ideological and religious underpinnings of secular articulations of nationalism; the other traffics with ahistorical discourse in reading nationalism only through a demystification of its ostensibly true theological and imperial essence. This reading of the political-qua-theological mutes a historically grounded, sociological approach to nationalism, religion, and ideology. To argue this point, I need to return to the basic categories of analysis. Therefore, the next part of this chapter tackles the issue of how the very categories of religion, nationalism, and ideology are implicated in enduring colonial legacies and unreconstructed secularist assumptions. I then analyse why race, gender, and class cannot be segregated from an examination of religion, nationalism, and ideology and why their sequestering in conventional framings itself reveals the endurance of the colonial legacies of these analytic categories. Finally, I challenge the broadening of the concept of political theology, which is currently in vogue as a way of encompassing the scholarly space through which to interpret the relationship of religion to political ideology. My analysis clarifies why an intersectional prism, identifying epistemologies from the margins, illuminates alternative scripts for the study of religion and ideology in nationalist discourse that neither the hijacking nor the archeological dig approaches provide.

The complicity of categories

The deployment of religion, nation, ethnicity, and race to interpret different sociopolitical and cultural phenomena conceals their modern interweaving with one another. In other words, it is important to scrutinize the construction of “religion” as an anthropological and comparative category and how it has been deployed as a colonial tool in the service of European colonial forces to map the human terrains of the expanding empire (Chidester 2014). This conversation is central to the academic study of religion, a field that grapples, like anthropology, with its own colonial legacy, especially pertaining to the comparative study of religion. In the nineteenth century, so the critical history of the discipline’s original sin goes, the study of religion as a comparative anthropological category participated in social evolutionary paradigms of human progress, situating some communities in more “primitive” or, to invoke Durkheim, “elemental” development stages, as people who are not coeval (Fabian 2002). Of course, this temporal distancing authorized enslavement, exploitation, genocide, and epistemicide (e.g., Mignolo 2011). These are the legacies of modernity, as is the emergence of the nation-state, which coincided with such developments.

So, the first step here is to challenge a secularist presumption that marks one form of nationalism as “secular,” and therefore “benign” or “good,” and another form as “bad,” “pathological,” or “religious.” In reality, as the transformation of political Zionism illuminates, secular liberal nationalism is neither non-ideological nor non-religious. This last sentence can easily lead us down a rabbit hole, generating a whole host of questions, such as what is meant by “religion”? While this definitional question is outside the scope of this essay, it is also very much within it because “nationalism” or, rather, “bad” nationalism is often narrated as the contested cultural and political site that is overtaken by religion-qua-ideology. Accordingly, one needs to interrogate the common genealogy of modern nationalism and the comparative study of religion.

Historians of religion, therefore, have helpfully exposed the orientalism underpinning the construction of “world religions,” the eventual ideology of pluralism and multiculturalism, and the participation of these inventions in multiple forms of epistemic, symbolic, cultural, structural, and genocidal violence. Tomoko Masuzawa (2005: 172–176), for example, examines the tension between Ernest Renan and Max Müller, juxtaposing Müller’s philological approach to classifying linguistic groups with the increased popularity of a blood-based and racial approach articulated by Renan’s account of the nation, one that also articulated a modern Christian supersessionism. Even if it is true that Müller, the “father” of the comparative study of religion, resisted the racial turn, he still trafficked through the discourse of philology with the valuation (and devaluation) of peoples according to their linguistic inheritances. The philological outlook of Müller, at least in the way Masuzawa reads him, allowed for a tension with what came to be a racialized, modernist, deterministic, and essentialist approach to people’s belonging, also articulated through the label of “ethnicity.”

As Max Weber (1979) pointed out, ethnicity, nationalism, and religion share “elective affinities” and the “nation” may be a descriptive designation, but it is also always about a narrative of what might be called “chosenness.” Here, Weber’s observation intersects with the work of Anthony Smith (e.g., 2003), a theorist of modern nationalism, who cataloged nationalist mythologies all over the world, exposing in each case their story of chosenness, martyrs, symbols, rituals, and sacred geographies whose sacredness is usually invested with blood sacrifice. The work of another theorist, Anthony Marx (2003), not only focuses on the study of national mythologies but also on how they are shaped dialectically by institutions. He pushes the narrative of the emergence of the modern nation back to 1492 rather than locating it later, as Anderson does, with the Industrial Revolution and the invention of print capitalism. Both are

critical developments, certainly, but Marx's redrawing of the periodization of the modern nation is particularly helpful because it exposes the nation's exclusionary logic, despite contemporary, liberal, democratic projections of values of tolerance through the ideology of multiculturalism and pluralism. To this extent, he also connects to Masuzawa's critique of the invention of "world religions" as highly convenient to the logic of European colonialism.

Hence, it is important to challenge pedestrian understandings of the key concepts in order to denaturalize their apparent commonsensical meanings and self-evident nature. The concept of ideology as a set of political beliefs and principles organizing or seeking to organize society carries with it a genealogy from Karl Marx that renders "religion," in particular, as a form of false consciousness especially useful for the formation of self-alienating socioeconomic and political structures, which intersect with the hijacking storyline. To the degree that nationalism manifests in exclusionary terms, this manifestation posits nationalism as a form of religious and/or ethnocentric ideology that authorizes the privileging of certain groups because of their supposed authentic embodiment of the "nation." Often this privileging does not translate into economic justice, but rather the deployment of a discourse of superiority that functions to elide economic disparities under the illusion of "nation" or a common belonging that also translates into the language of policing "our values" and "our cultural inheritance." Such patterns of rearticulating religio-cultural building blocks as cultural inheritance to be celebrated and conflated with the secular nationalist imagination and narrative of belonging and non-belonging (Zubrzycki 2016) recur in multiple Euro-American nationalisms. These discourses of authenticity and superiority also manifest economically as principles structuring intergenerational wealth and opportunities for human flourishing.

The point to stress here is that nationalism is always embedded within social scripts about the community whose boundaries are often drawn linguistically, culturally, religiously, and ethnically. The language of nationalism, in other words, can contribute to enduring exploitation and marginalization of non-normative citizens and inhabitants through the illusions or delusions of a community. Indeed, standing on the shoulders of many who came before, such as Angela Davis and James Baldwin, recent anti-racist struggles such as the one spearheaded by #BlackLivesMatter engage in a critique of American empire, exploitative capitalism, and militarism as central to their struggle against the enduring structures of White supremacy. This also reflects cross-learning with such movements as the South African #RhodeMustFall and #FeesMustFall, which deploy similar intersectional analyses and critical consciousness to challenge neoliberalism and the colonial legacies persistently informing structural injustice and knowledge production in South Africa.

Indeed, when marginalized communities articulate critiques of a nationalist discourse not only from the perspective of their aspiration for inclusion within the normative framework but also through linking their own conditions of oppression to other oppressed communities globally, they expose the complex ligaments that link domestic contestations of race, religion, gender, class, and histories of exploitation to global and international dynamics. Even if and when nationalism assumes the shape of multicultural diversity discourse, neoliberalism reveals a contemporary manifestation of a long history of global extraction, exploitation, and civilizational ideologies, initially grounded in the Christian cosmology of conversion and later through different grammars of "good news" (Grosfoguel 2015). For #BlackLivesMatter, therefore, the challenge is not one of inclusion but rather of disrupting the norms that persist in re-inscribing White supremacy.

The case of the enduring struggle of African Americans not to be killed by the apparatuses of the state (police, for example)—but also by other dehumanizing systems and forms of structural violence, such as the health care system, environmental racism, and underfunded

schools—underscores that bracketing the colonial history of transatlantic slavery, in this case, and leads to a skewed picture of root causes. The latter include the ascendance of explicit and violent White nationalism, an ideology that is also rooted in “White Christianity” or White European Christian history, philosophy, and theology. Even if some analysts bracket race in their interpretation of Christian nationalism in the US (Whitehead & Perry 2020), the photo opportunity of then American President Donald Trump in June 2020, standing in front of St. John’s Church in Washington DC, holding a Bible upside down, was orchestrated to assuage “his base.” This act occurred in the midst of an anti-racism uprising, which was primed by the COVID-19-related lockdown, with its disproportionate effects on Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC), and by the murder of George Floyd in Minneapolis. It signaled to “his base” that Trump (and later Trumpism) would continue to deliver on their agenda, which includes not only the further reduction of women’s rights to their reproductive health but also the White supremacy as conveyed through the language of “law and order” and signaled by the literal violent dispersal of peaceful protests in front of the White House in order to facilitate this photo-op. Regardless of criticism and to distract from its colossal failure containing the pandemic, this messaging continued through the Trump administration’s deployment, in the summer of 2020, of unmarked federal troops to Portland and other “liberal democratic” cities where they kidnapped “anarchist” protesters. Clearly, the “Christian” agenda is also thoroughly racialized and conveyed to the electoral base through a variety of dog whistles, subtle and not so subtle. This form of racialized Christianity found a grotesque and tragic expression in the insurrection of January 6th, 2021 incited by the promulgation of “big lie” concerning the supposed theft of the elections from Trump. The insurrection scene in the Capitol of the US displayed images of crosses, confederate flags, antisemitic expressions such as 6MWNE (‘6 million wasn’t enough’) on a White man’s sweater, and the occasional Israeli flag, denoting that Zionism and antisemitism can coexist and are not unrelated to White supremacy.

The exclusionary nationalist discourse is Christian, but Christianity figures more through an identitarian discourse that often bears little relation to real Christian piety and observance. Christianity, as Brubaker (2017) comments, is often empty of any actual content beyond an ethnic formulation of belonging. Indeed, it is Christianity. As in the case of Zionism, Christian nationalism or White nationalism reduces “religion” to “ethnicity,” as articulated through the idiom of nationalism. Therefore, it is not surprising that Richard Spencer, one of the ideologues of American White nationalism, is a longtime admirer of Theodore Herzl, the father of political Zionism. In fact, in an interview for an Israeli TV station, Spencer referred to his own nationalism in terms of “White Zionism,” holding up an ugly mirror in front of Israeli society (Kastenbaum 2017). Still, claims for Christianity outside the violence of Christianity bypasses an investigation of how the “original sins” of the slavery, colonization, dispossession, and liquidation of people cross-fertilized and coalesced with Christianity-qua-empire. Such bypassing once again reinforces the hijacking storyline and reaffirms liberal innocence.

A push to uncover secular ideological formations of modern nationalisms in general and on a case-by-case basis dispels a simplistic association of religion and ideology as one only manifesting through explicit appeals to religious warrants. White supremacy is an ideology, if by “ideology,” we mean the organizing principle of a society and its institutions. This ideology can assume different morphologies, including a multicultural mode. Instead of explicitly waving exclusionary claims to belonging around ethnoreligious identities, a multicultural variety of Christianity seeks to domesticate and privatize religiosity to ensure its exclusion from determining socioeconomic and public structures. This “capitalist” or “(neo)liberal” variety of ideology ensures, nonetheless, Christian and post-Christian politico-cultural hegemony (e.g., Shakman Hurd 2017). Further, the logic of multiculturalism entails racializing and minoritizing

religious communities, always an outcome of concrete policies rather than merely rhetoric, which reveals, once again, the modernist reshaping of religion within secularist ideological formations. The issue, for example, is not only persistent anti-black racism in the US but also specific “hard on crime” or xenophobic profiling policies.

But the rhetorical reconfiguration is critical to interpreting the racialization of religious communities and requires a challenge to the hijacking model. Jensen and Meer identify “the European ‘Christo-secular’ imagination” as pivotal to “reimagining the race-religion nexus” (2020: 7). Jensen and Meer, therefore, engage in an archeological dig to try to understand the nature of enduring relationships between anti-Muslim oppression and racism, on the one hand, and the legacies of Christian European (White) anti-semitism, on the other. Such an analytic effort to denaturalize the differentiation between “race” and “religion” in the production of European modernity—or exposing and reimagining “the race-religion nexus,” as Jensen and Meer (2020) articulate it—precisely dispels the myopic frame of the study of religion, ideology, and nationalism. Of course, modernity’s dark sides were also propelled by economic incentives for “primitive accumulation,” in Marx’s sense. This multivariable analytic prism prompts us to think not only about the race/religion nexus but also about further intersectionality along the economic axis and how people were dispossessed from their lands systematically, often through appeals to liberal constructs about property rights and titles (while other humans became property).

One of the central methodologies for the archeological dig approach is genealogical. It illuminates the constitutive relation between liberal nationalism, secularism, orientalism, and the cultivation of capitalist and consumerist sensibilities (e.g., Mahmood 2015). The archeological dig demystifies secular pretences and liberal innocence. Hence, all of these categories of nation, ethnicity, religion, culture, tradition, and so forth carry their own inheritances and are implicated in modernist narratives of “progress” on the back of colonial and genocidal practices. The issue at hand not only surrounds the economic principles according to which the state will be regulated but also those determining what the nation is, what its subjective boundaries are, and who gets to populate the cleavages, hybrids, and margins. This mode of analysis requires an exegetical excavation of the political theologies underpinning nationalisms; in the case of the US and Europe, this is White Christianity and/or the “Christo-secular imagination” and, in the case of Israel, this is Euro- or Ashkenazi Zionism. Such exegetical scrutiny is the necessary work of critique, or the archeological dig mode, which challenges the hijacking storyline also framed alarmingly as a “religious resurgence.” I argue below that exegesis, however, is not a sufficient scholarly practice for analysis of religion, ideology, and nationalism.

For now, it will suffice to stress that the categories deployed as identity markers and subjective boundaries share in common their presentation as self-evident facts and as ontological realities (expressing the things as they are supposedly inscribed in the nature of being) that seek political expressions. This is precisely what a historicist account of the study of anthropology, linguistics, and religion highlights. It is not beside the point that scholarship produced in the centres of colonial power mapped the world according to races, linguistic families, and religions where supposedly inferior varieties of each also coincided with the bodies of non-Europeans as well as, through a complex semiotics, the domestic “other” of Europe, the Jews, as the Inquisition’s concurrence with Columbus convey.

Identifying the intersections

One of the challenges of the contemporary study of nationalism, religion, and ideology is to unsettle this Eurocentric origin story or, rather, always expose its constitutive relation to

the projects of empire and colonialism. Nelson Maldonado-Torres (2014), for example, works within the tradition of scholars of coloniality to expose how race and religion are constitutive even before the very biological and scientific language of race became prevalent in the nineteenth century. While advancing a different disciplinary outlook than Anthony Marx, Maldonado-Torres likewise pushes modernity back to 1492, which is the symbolic, but also very real, mark of the launch of the Western Christian colonial project. Holding modernity and colonialism together as constitutive exposes how the project of modernity depended upon devising a system of dehumanization. Indeed, in the absence of “race” in the sixteenth century, “religion” as a comparative and anthropological category of classification functioned, in the words of Maldonado-Torres, “as a dispositive of the coloniality of power, knowledge, and being in the formation and solidification of ‘modern Western civilization (2020).’” Religion, in other words, determined the difference between the colonized and the colonizer who, concurrently in Spain, launched the system of the Inquisition, which was underpinned by the language of blood purity in a departure from classical modalities of Christian anti-Semitism (also see Anidjar 2014).

One key takeaway here is that thresholds drawn as supposed expressions of conceptions of peoplehood are not self-evident nor natural but rather always gesture toward a deeper history and power formations. These legacies cannot be interpreted outside a fuller analysis of modernity that also involves the colonial and the intricate logic of dehumanization and classification it generated as well as how such logic underpinned, indeed even offered, an ideological frame for dispossession, enslavement, and genocide.

This is where the “boomerang effect” (e.g., Mbembe 2003) connects the death factories of Europe and its fascism during World War II to what was already the practice in Europe’s colonies. Accordingly, World War II and the systematic liquidation of certain communities was not a departure, an aberration, from an enlightened Europe; instead, it was true to its legacy if we deploy a global analytic lens. Such a view is necessary in order to unpack the issue of religion, nationalism, and ideology in places as different as the US and Israel.

Hence, to scrutinize the manifestations of violent expressions of hatred to BIPOC and how such bigotries interlace with one another and with conceptions of the “authentic” national community, we have to expose the operative logic of whiteness and the long legacies of coloniality. The first decades of the twenty-first century compel such an analytic interlinking or an intersectional approach to the question of religion, ideology, and nationalism. It is clear, in various countries, including the US, Hungary, Poland, France, and England, that ideological exclusionary nationalist discourses rely not only on appeals to some real or imagined Christian inheritance, but also to an inheritance that is also White, and thus itself constitutes as an “ethnic,” or “ethnoreligious” marker, which results in the racialization of certain religious communities such as Muslim-Americans. In the US, former President Trump explicitly relies on, incites, and inflames White nationalist discourse, which finds its ugliest expressions in various violent movements such as the Ku Klux Klan and the more recent Boogaloo movement, which seemed to thrive during the Trump presidency (Allam 2020). Such movements, however, rely on the scaffoldings of White supremacy in the same way that the settler movement in Palestine/Israel relies on secular forms of Jewish supremacy. White supremacy or Eurocentricity alone, however, cannot explain such “hijacking,” nor should the analytic scope end with the “archeological dig” of the colonial logic and the Christo-secular imagination that underpins explicitly religious ideological nationalist discourses. Indeed, a citizenship discourse is not static or deterministic. Thus, it needs to be analysed on a case-by-case basis in terms of tensions between *jus soli* (birth) and *jus sanguinis* (blood) principles and thresholds of belonging, legally, culturally, and otherwise.

The challenge on the level of archeology, once again, is not only identifying and tackling the visible parts of the iceberg but also illuminating—through an analysis of ideological formations

and genealogical analysis—what is submerged under the water, what enables the most obviously grotesque and offensive expression of the very ideology of Christian White supremacy. This kind of analysis is both intersectional and decolonial. It is intersectional because coloniality, as Lugones (2007), Wynter (2003), and other feminist theorists have exposed, was not only about racialization, but also, integrally, about gendering. Gender metaphors of conquest, rape, and domination offered ontological certainty to colonial practices (see also McClintock 1995), just as they did to nationalist discourses, where concepts and metaphors such as rape and honor are often attached to escalating nationalist rage as well as central to the deployment of rape as a technique of war (Cohn 2013).

Gender continues to play a significant role in contemporary manifestations of sexual politics in exclusionary nationalist discourse and thus in the formation and reformation of national ideology. Sexual politics also intersect in complex ways with religion in constructing thresholds of national belonging or non-belonging. While Jaspir Puar (2007) exposes how the domestication of LGBTQI+ coalesces with the discursive operation of the war on (Muslim) terrorism and the deepening of the securitizing of Islam and Muslim bodies “at home” in the US, Sara Farris’s concept of “femonationalism” (2017) reveals how women’s rights are instrumentalized and leveraged by exclusionary, right-wing, neoliberal, European ideologues, such as Marine Le Pen in France. Femonationalism, often advanced and implemented by “femocrats” who depart in significant ways from feminist emancipatory politics, manipulate the orientalist discourse of gender equality to both stigmatize Muslim men and to exploit, through immigration and labor policies, migrant women (mostly Muslims), “liberating” them supposedly from their traditional shackles through the “opportunity” to plug into the care industry. Farris shows how anti-Muslim rhetoric is both racialized and gendered as well as enacted through long-term immigration policy and state infrastructures. In other words, the instrumentalization of women’s and LGBTQI+ rights is not mere rhetoric or façade. Instead, it reinforces White ethnonationalist populist discourses that, even if they differ in their degree of projecting “sexual progressivism” (e.g., France, The Netherlands) or outright attacks on so-called “gender ideology” (e.g., Hungary, Poland), entail “Christian,” “post-Christian,” or “Judeo-Christian” boundaries for inclusion or exclusion from the “imagined community” in their respective appeals to some purported “golden age.” Anti-Muslim oppression—sometimes explicitly, sometimes implicitly—connects intimately to the legacy of European Christian anti-Semitism.

Of course, the construct of the “Judeo-Christian” is a myth that myopically conceals what Anya Topolski (2020) calls, together with Jensen and Meer (2020), the “race-religion constellation” and that serves to mask Islamophobia and anti-Jewish oppression through a variety of orientalist civilizational discourses, including synonymizing it with secularism. Topolski highlights that, while “Judeo-Christian” is deployed “as a proxy for Christianity,” the co-imbriated concept of secularism constitutes “a form of post-Christianity.” Both terms, accordingly, “serve to obscure the reality of a continued Christian privilege, and in particular Protestant privilege, in European public spheres” (Topolski 2020: 85). Once again, an archeological dig model reveals an illusion of liberal and secular innocence. Dispelling the race-religion concealment through semiotic and discursive maneuvers, therefore, become critical for unpacking the question of religion, nationalism, and ideology. Exposing the functionality of the Judeo-Christian construct reveals the persistence of the privileging of Christianity as an underpinning of the organization of power in Europe (Topolski 2020: 86), that is, its ideological formations. These unfold, on a case-by-case basis, in various nationalist constellations where anti-Muslim oppression manifests as a phenomenon with roots in the long centuries of racializing Christianity, even if such racializing patterns are masked through the language of “values” or “cultural inheritances.” The latter

is then weaponized to exclude Muslims on the level of supposed incompatibility with European progressive values.

Topolski's intervention on the level of discursive politics, along with theorists who have directed their attention to sexual politics, confirms the need to re-approach the question of religion, nationalism, and ideology through an intersectional prism and with decolonial horizons. I finally want to address why, despite its own effort to demystify the race/religion nexus, the reconfiguration of the subfield of political theology as a variation of the archeological dig model presents a problem from a sociological and historical perspective.

Political theology or the exegesis of national ideology

In addition to the “sewage of European thinking,” other ideological currencies also mark Zionism as an internally plural European movement. As I have written elsewhere (e.g., Omer 2013), secular Zionism in whatever variety, including in its statist realities of Israel, cannot be understood without also grappling with the political theology underpinning them or bracketing the historical, sociological, and anthropological reconfigurations that cannot simply be analysed on the level of “ideology” as a political theology, always consistent with itself. By “political theology,” I refer to the (always selective) ways in which Judaism and Jewish history are retrieved, reinterpreted, and reproduced in the construction of peoplehood or nation. Neither liberal nor socialist Zionism could gain traction and coherence outside a teleological mode of reading Jewish history and destiny, one that negated and devalued Jewish diasporic lives over centuries. The genealogical shift in conjunction with a related subfield of secularism studies, mainly devoted to exposing the nefarious weaponization of religion in the service of constellations of power and ideology, also underpins emerging conversations that reflect more hermeneutically on enduring political theologies of nations. A shift in the academic focus that reflects an effort to reinterpret the concept of “political theology” outside its parochial theoretical and historical locations reflects a saturation of the genealogical and poststructuralist exposition of the grammar of the secular, thus redirecting the gaze to the “political theology” or the ways in which secular assemblages are authorized. This shift to political theology, therefore, is situated along a continuum with the genealogical turn informing secularism studies as exegesis of (national) ideology and the ideology of White supremacy.

The point behind my detour into political theology is that neither liberalism nor socialism can actually be intelligible within nationalist discourse without also specifically analysing the religio-cultural meanings and passions motivating people to (potentially) commit ultimate sacrifices (of their and their children's lives) to this construct of the “nation.” To this degree, this archeological exegesis of ideology reveals the limits of the hijacking model. Frankenstein's monster of Zionism, the messianic settler movement, was initially labeled extremist, yet it was always enabled by the secular government, which offered resources, infrastructure, and security for the settlement project in the territories Israel occupied in 1967. The success of the Greater Eretz Yisrael movement gradually marked by actual representation in the Knesset (e.g., The Jewish Home Party and the Kahanist Religious Zionism Party), its exclusionary discourse, and Jewish supremacist logic has indeed been effective politically because of its ideological links and continuity with secular Zionisms rather than any narrative about the good secular being somehow hijacked by religious ideologues.

This case is instructive because it exposes how ideological formations inform secular and “peaceful” varieties of nationalism. This is indeed within the scope of political theology as an exegesis of national ideology. I surround the word “peaceful” with scare quotes because obviously, the secular variety of Zionism and Israeli nationalism has been experienced violently by

indigenous Palestinian communities, starting with the immigration of Jews from Europe at the turn of the nineteenth century and accelerated since the collapse of the Ottoman Empire and the conclusion of World War I. To a different degree, Mizrahi and other marginalized Jewish communities, such as the Ethiopians, suffered from Euro-Zionism (Shohat 1988) and its “sewage of European thinking.”

In other words, what makes the analysis of the relationship between nationalism, religion, and ideology interesting is not only by identifying when such a link is obvious empirically, as actors articulate their political forms of violence through appeals to exclusionary religious claims. Instead, the analytical task is infinitely more interesting when it requires us to uncover and illuminate the operative force of ideological formations, such as White supremacy, antisemitism, settler colonialism, and secularism itself. Nationalism as a narrative of the legitimacy of the infrastructures of the state (or state-in-the-making) relies, by definition, on sets of exclusionary thresholds, whether linguistic, religious, ethnic, or cultural. All of these categories cross-fertilize, sometimes even overlap with, one another. The task of political theology is to interpret the construct of the nation in terms of its theology and selective theological imagination and to relocate this imagination within a broader storyline of modernity as coloniality. In particular, the disentangling of race and religion, which Topolski and others subvert, conceals and normalizes the operative force of White Christianity in Euro-America. In the case of Israel, the consolidation of religiously flavored colonization of the Palestinian territories occupied in 1967 in the form of the red-roofed settlements was never a departure from normalized and naturalized secular Ashkenazi Jewish supremacy that has organized social and political life within the Green Line of 1948.

Euro-Zionism, as noted, was incubated with all the ills of Europe, including an orientalism that played out in detrimental ways for Jews from Arab and Muslim countries (i.e., the Mizrahi groups) who were initially channeled to *ma'abarot* or refugee camps, sprayed with DDT, had their babies kidnapped, were subject to sterilizing practices and other medical experiments, and had their children funneled into vocational schools as they eventually were relocated, again as human shields, to “development towns” in the south or to neighbourhoods around “hostile” environments, implementing the familiar “facts on the ground” strategy. Arab-Jewish refugees or immigrants were often settled in Palestinian homes, standing empty due to the events of the Nakba. As critical Mizrahi scholarship and activism have exposed, the Ashkenazi-normativity of the Yishuv and the successive Israeli governments entrenched discrimination against Mizrahis, a sense of Israel’s supposed European superiority as well as its branding through the weaponization of anti-semitism and the mobilization of pre-existing orientalist frames that posit it as a “villa in the jungle,” in the words of former Prime Minister Ehud Barak. This self-representation once again illuminates the need to expose the ideological scaffolding and its ethnocentric location in Europe and its ongoing legacies in Israel (Mizrachi 2016). This is where the archeological dig model clarifies that the supposed hijacking of secular Zionism by settler ideology is no hijacking at all, but rather the unfolding of the very logic of settler colonialism-qua-messianic Jewish supremacy.

Yet is there a possibility for other syntaxes? While there are notable critiques of Anderson’s thesis, one dimension remains relevant and is contained in the very title of his book. Nationalisms are “imagined communities,” and any effort to analyse the nation should study how this imagination occurs; by whom; through which institutions, narratives, and memories; and how religious and cultural meanings, discourses, symbols, institutions, networks, and texts intersect in the production and reproduction of political meanings. In addition, a critical outlook asks whose stories are not included, whose imagination and meanings are excluded, why, and by whom.

These latter questions are important in my efforts to understand how and why nations are contested by those who inhabit the silences, the margins, and the spaces of counter-imagination or, in James Scott's words, the "hidden transcripts" (1990). This is where exegetical and archeological accounts seem to reach their limits. Unlike the exegetes of "secular" national ideology who now see themselves as expositors of "political theology," the archeological excavators/exegetes either demystify ideology or interpret prophetic interruptions of ideology. I am interested in moving beyond the mere exegesis of the scripts authorizing exclusionary interpretations of nation or, conversely, of the prophetic disruptions that, like political theology/ideology, are interpreted in abstraction from sociological realities and social movement praxis. The prophetic is said to reinterpret the past as a way of challenging the present (Lebovic & Weidner 2020), which precludes interpreting current counter-hegemonic resources and concentrates agency in the persons of virtuosos and exemplary actors rather than in grassroots organizing, critical praxis, or social re-scripting.

This level of exegesis of the political-qua-theological and a renewed focus on it through the broadening of the concept of political theology tends to focus on textual references and archetypes. As a result, they overlook the historical and sociological unfolding that is generative of "hidden scripts" or, in the words of Nadim Khoury, "counter publics of memory" (2019). By this, Khoury refers to the need to grapple in complex ways—rather than through what he calls "narrative partition"—with the events of the Holocaust and the Nakba. Khoury's argument, like Edward Said's (2006), challenges the compartmentalized, exclusionary reading and commemoration of the Holocaust and the Nakba. He relates this phenomenon to an intentional narrative partition, which "would leave the core of the Zionist narrative intact" (Khoury 2019:121). By challenging the partition logic of the Oslo Accords (between Israel and the Palestine Liberation Organization) as itself entrenched in an exclusionary ideology, grounded in ethnoreligious nationalism, Khoury's "counter publics of memory" reveals "the centrality of *both* historical injustices" (ibid, 124) associated with the Nakba and the Holocaust in any effort to reimagine cohabitation of Palestinians and Israelis outside an otherwise intact Zionist logic of separation. This constitutes an invitation for historical and sociological messiness, which a fixation on the archeology of political ideology-qua-theology precludes in its search for some deeper (theological) truth and a (colonial) logic.

Because of its continuous embeddedness within Europe as an ideological and political project, the case of Israel is particularly instructive for an analysis of religion and ideology in relation to the political construct of nationalism. To the extent that marginalized and oppressed communities such as the Palestinians, but also Mizrahi and Ethiopian-Israeli Jews, can identify how this ideology linked their differentiated conditions of marginality and oppression (Lavie 2018; Shohat 1988), they can also articulate alternative scripts, decolonized consciousness, and political futurity. The deployment of an intersectional lens and sociological methodologies can reframe this question regarding the relation between religion, nationalism, and ideology. This reframing entails critical sociopolitical action and the re-envisioning of nations and state practices along more inclusive and intersectional lines—lines that do not participate in the erasure of settler colonialism through a discourse of myopic liberalism but rather attempt to redress historical injustices.

Therefore, the study of nationalism, religion, and ideology cannot rely on national historiography alone. If it does, it becomes mere exegesis. If such an analysis takes religion seriously and seeks to trace how religiosity, religious meanings, religious symbols, religious texts, and so forth are selectively integrated into the (re)production of nation, together with processes of racialization, then this analysis constitutes mere exegesis under the renewed framing of political theology, which is renewed because of a concentrated effort to de-center (White) Christianity,

even though it is still lurking in the background and even in the foreground as the main target of critique. That is, regardless of what contextual particularity the political-theological exegesis focuses on, its target is the collusion between whiteness and Christianity, a basic storyline with multiple morphological manifestations.

This monochromatic frame delimits a scholarly discourse that remains reactive to the “sewage of Europe” rather than generative of new transformative, historical, and emancipatory scripts. This exegetical framing of political theology as a broad category under which one can engage in the comparative study of religion as if liberated from the traces of Christian- and Eurocentricity, is renewed because the explosion of writings subsumed under “political theology” in the second decade of the twenty-first century distances itself from Carl Schmitt’s domination of the concept as well as from the aforementioned colonial complicity of comparative religious ethics. Nevertheless, this subfield re-inscribes the nation-qua-theology as an ideology working over and against people, structurally but not substantially replacing religious authority through the discourse of secularism. Sometimes theology-qua-ideology appears to be inscribed within people’s bodies by virtue of their phenotypes, reflecting an ahistorical reading of political realities that people inhabit.

By operating merely on the level of critique, the archeological excavation of political theology underpinning secular nationalism offers no alternative futurity beyond demystification of the “secular” and “political” and persistently colonial realities that people inhabit. For example, the Mizrahis, as a community with a distinct identity at the margins of Israeli society—one created as an outcome of Israeli policies—constitute potential connectors to Palestinian experiences and to the possible horizons of the counterpublics. Their potential as a counter-hegemonic site of reimagining belonging or what I have called elsewhere the “hermeneutics of citizenship” (Omer, 2013) is occluded within a study of nationalism that simply assimilates Zionism into a global grammar of White supremacy. Hence, despite sociological and historical processes that have shaped Mizrahi and Ethiopian-Israeli political proclivity in support of Jewish supremacy, a focus only on nationalism-qua-theology risks ahistoricity and an oversimplified buttressing of the “sewage of European thinking.”

Political theology as a reinterpreted field now encompasses everything from settler colonialism and indigenous resurgence to the study of racism globally, but it does not de-center Europe.¹ Indeed, remove big constructs such as White supremacy and settler colonialism and political theology remains without a target, revealing a field submerged in the work of critique of modernity while nevertheless re-inscribing Christian theology as the main reference point. To this degree, the proliferation of political theology to frame the analysis of the relation between religion and nation is anti-empirical and anti-sociological. Thus, it constitutes mere exegesis on national historiography or a description of decolonial, queer, and/or indigenous forms of spirituality and religiosity, often revealing not sociological realities and concrete political visions but rather the elitist locations of those articulating them.

The main problem is that works under the rubric of political theology, even in their decolonial register, focus on epistemic contestations or power reductionist critiques at the expense of sociological and anthropological research. Thus, they traffic in abstractions and in poststructuralist critiques of power (now interlinking whiteness and Christianity) without opening up to hidden scripts or counterpublics as sites of alternative futurities. I embrace such a critique, but also the practices of “critical caretaking.” Critical caretaking (Omer 2013) illuminates both the critique of religion and ideology within the framework of nationalist contestations, but also the multiple ways in which people, through social movement dynamics and epistemologies from the margins, reimagine the meanings of political inclusion and belonging within the messiness of their historical locations. This reimagining is not an intellectual exercise in academic seminars

where proposals tend to reinforce Manichean binaries and prevent the consolidation of counterpublics of memory and futurity.

To conclude, this chapter challenges both the hijacking and archeological models. The former holds on to liberal innocence by rendering only explicit manifestations of religious political claims as ideological. The latter, reductively and ahistorically reads political ideology as theology persistently beholden to 1492, searching for the grammar of hegemony. Indeed, the constitutive dimensions of nation-making on the back of processes of dehumanizing in the colonies and through the mechanisms of exclusion “at home” is critical for my efforts to think in robust ways about religion and ideology through the core issue of nationalism. The colonial frame, of course, operates differently in the postcolonial contexts of India, Kenya, or the Philippines, to name just a few examples, but nevertheless, its traces are apparent in exclusionary ideological nationalist discourse, such as Hindutva in India or the cyclical, violent eruptions around elections in Kenya. The focus of this essay, however, reflects back on Euro-America and its postcolonial grappling with persistent colonial presences. The case of Israel and Zionism confirms the many afterlives of ongoing European legacies, as does Trump’s upside-down Bible photo-op in the midst of the anti-racism uprising that he violently dispersed. To only remain on this level of exegesis of empire and nation however is insufficient if one is also interested in counterpublics and their decolonial openings.

Note

- 1 To assess the reconfiguration of political theology and its expansion beyond Carl Schmitt’s framing, see the *Journal of Political Theology* and the Political Theology Network, <https://politicaltheology.com/>.

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