

Examination of the Religious Nature of Secular Nationalism

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Abstract. This study aims to explore whether secular nationalism can be considered as a type of religion. In the first section, the term "religious nationalism" is perceived as nationalism that generally demonstrates characteristics commonly associated with religion. In the second section, definitions of nationalism and religion are explained respectively. This study then draws parallels between the two, depicting religion as a good "metaphor" for nationalism, thereby describing basic concepts of religious nationalism with reference to some policies in Revolutionary France in 1790 as an instance. In section three, more specific overlapping characteristics possessed by both nationalism and religion are elaborated in which this study not only analyses similarities between the hierarchical structure of the government and the Church, but also compares the devotion of the "state" maintained by citizens to worship of "God" maintained by believers. Drawing inspiration by a variety of scholars ranging from Carlton Hayes to Friedrich Nietzsche, this study eventually reaches a conclusion that, despite variations in the intensity of national sentiments across different countries, secular nationalism is undoubtedly a type of religion supported by these similar characteristics described above.

1 Introduction

Is nationalism a type of religion? In other words, does nationalism resemble the concepts of religion? Questions regarding religious nationalism continue to captivate the minds of both philosophers and normal people.

First and foremost, the definition of religious nationalism needs to be clarified. There is a variety of interpretations of the phrase "religious nationalism". Some regarded it as the relationship of nationalism to a particular belief, while others argued that it is simply the fusion of religious and national identities of goals. This study interprets religious nationalism as a philosophical theory that posits nationalism as intrinsically a religion, as articulated by Carlton Hayes in his text *Nationalism: A Religion*. Hayes contended that nationalism fulfills certain functions traditionally associated with religion, such as providing a sense of identity, purpose, and belonging [1]. The emergence of nationalism had increasingly become a substitute for original religions. Arguably, this has turned out to be a common case in most countries although the degree of nationalism varies from country to country. In authoritarian countries that are full of propaganda and censorship, citizens have likely developed nationalistic thoughts that resemble the basic concepts of a religion. On the one hand, in real democratic countries, (in the absence of special considerations) nationalism seems to be relatively rarer and weaker. Regardless of which country this research focuses on, one thing that can be certain is that nationalism is, to some extent, a type of religion where "madmen" hold worship toward absolute authority.

2 The concept of religious nationalism

2.1. Definition of nationalism

Nationalism is, by definition, love of one's country. According to Renaud-Philippe Garner, it is "a set of beliefs about the nation, its origins, nature, and value" [2]. It refers to identification with one's nation and devotion toward its existence, which acts as a foundation for the stability of the country's society. Nationalism varies from person to person and from group to group. Some individuals favor the grandeur of the geographical landscape of their countries, and the culture and history of their civilization. Others admire the beauty of their language system, loving to explore the eminent art and literature of their country. Some simply feel a strong sense of belonging, believing that it is necessary for them to love their country since they are born there. The nature of this love also varies. Some people might develop complete loyalty and devotion toward their country, whilst others might dialectically confront existing problems and strive to find solutions. However, no matter how people interpret nationalism, one fact that should not be overlooked is that nationalism has indeed become a worldwide phenomenon which vitally affects both the material and the intellectual development of modern civilization.

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2.2 Definition of religion

Religion is generally interpreted as a social and ideological system, where believers develop morals and worldviews under certain moral principles and teachings. It usually involves worship and faith in a supreme being, a deity, or any external mysterious and powerful existence, which would provide individuals with a framework for understanding the purpose and meaning of life. This is supported by Thomas A Idinopulos's article "What is Religion" in which he defined religion as "the voluntary subjection of oneself to God [3]."

This study posits Christianity as a representative of "religion", where God is believed to be the omnipotent and omniscient creator, the greatest being that can be possibly conceived. Believers' faith in God as the greatest being is essential, as it lays the ground for the beginning of the religion, where all traditions and religious obligations are built upon it. To elaborate on this, the essence of religion can be understood as the amalgamation of various elements that stem from faith in God, encompassing doctrines, rituals, moral codes, spiritual practices (Prayers), and religious institutions (Church).

2.3 Secular nationalism as a religion

Nationalism, particularly secular nationalism (nationalism that is not associated with or influenced by religious beliefs), firmly denies religious convictions as a part of its political ideology or manifestation. This means that God's obligations such as the Ten Commandments are not taken into account in legislation. Actions that are forbidden in the Scriptures and the Church, like adultery, might be publicly regarded as immoral but not criminal. Secular nationalism itself, by definition, is primarily concerned with the promotion and preservation of a nation's identity, culture, and interests rather than spiritual and metaphysical beliefs. However, some secular countries are suspected of being constantly indoctrinating their citizens such that their opinions can be more easily manipulated based on the will of the government or a particular leader. In this sense, these citizens being "brainwashed" become disciples not of God but of a country, where they worship the leading class just like worshipping God. As explained in the definition of religion above, religion is characterized by encompassing doctrines, rituals, moral codes, and religious institutions. These characteristics are, in some sense, exactly exhibited in an immense secular nationalism.

Religion can be a great metaphor for distorted secular nationalism in certain countries. One example of this was the religion-like nationalism in revolutionary France in 1790. During that period, "nationalist propaganda became a fine art with the French revolutionaries" as proposed by Hayes in Nationalism: A Religion. Red-blue newspapers and pamphlets were flying around all day, evoking the public's anger toward the old era and sympathy toward revolutionaries [4]. Legislation was enacted imposing on all French citizens the "central language of France", that is French. The use of any other

language was to be penalized. Subsequently, privileged education that was thought to be voluntary and private before the Revolution had been fundamentally changed, as in the Constitution the National Assembly proposed a different nationalist education that is open to all the citizens concerning those subjects which are indispensable to all men. This approach appeared to contribute positively to preserving the right to education of the working class. However, the infiltration of nationalism within this education was tremendous, in the sense that all commemorative days were designated to remember the great French Revolution. As children are generally believed to have simple, immature, and underdeveloped perceptions of the world, the undisputed education of nationalism was indeed impactful not only in shaping their beliefs regarding their motherland but also in strengthening their loyalty and reverence for the government. This characteristic closely resembles the basic concepts of a missionary, where the priest in the Church preaches to the believers, and these believers, once convinced, would unconditionally become a Son of God, just like children under nationalist education becoming "devotional soldiers of the country." Apart from France, there were also numerous elements in other countries that made people associate them with the idea that nationalism is a quasi-religion. These elements will be discussed in the next section.

3 Overlapping characteristics between nationalism and religion

3.1 Government as the church

Since the dawn of Catholic history, theists have diligently organized communities for evangelism and establishing connections among individuals who share similar beliefs. These communities, ranging from the early disciples who followed Jesus to the later formalized Churches, have significantly influenced the foundational structure of Catholicism over the centuries, thereby inspiring a hierarchical system within the religion predicated upon the notion of authority. In this hierarchical framework, God possesses absolute power over all believers as the divine and primary source of religious authority, demanding unwavering obedience and nearly unquestioning devotion. (For example, "The LORD is the everlasting God, the Creator of the ends of the earth" [5].) This quote from Isaiah clearly demonstrates God's omnipotence in creating the universe, establishing Him the most powerful figure in Christianity) In addition to God, the Scriptures, particularly the Bible, hold immense value for believers, serving as a source for reading, interpretation, understanding, and inspiration. They also serve as the basis for establishing distinct religious denominations. It is generally believed that God and "God's words" (referring to the Bible, although this belief may be a subject of controversy as most Catholics perceive the Bible as the written and inspired word of God, free from error, while a minority regard it as a human creation) possess intrinsic supreme value transcending the earthly

realm. Under the unfalsifiable yet authoritative power of these entities lies the Catholic Church, within which the priesthood is structured hierarchically based on the level of authority. The hierarchical order includes the Pope, Cardinals, Archbishops, Bishops, Priests, Deacons, and the Laity.

In a certain sense, the structure of the Church, which has evolved to incorporate this clear division of power, can be compared to a minimalist form of government. The Bible represents the guiding political ideology of a nation, with God, the author of the Bible, analogous to the proponent of this political ideology. For example, the Communist Manifesto serves as a foundational document for many socialist countries, sharing a similar significance and role to that of the Bible in the Catholic Church. The author of the Communist Manifesto, Karl Marx, and other influential figures can be seen as godlike figures within this context. To be more specific, Vladimir Lenin, the founder of the Russian communist party, once stated, "The Marxist doctrine is omnipotent because it is true" [6]. While the term "omnipotent" is typically associated with describing God, Lenin employed it to emphasize the strength and importance of the Marxist doctrine, reflecting his personal worship toward Karl Marx. This provides further evidence to the fact that although some political figures are not truly omnipotent or omniscient, rendering them as weaker versions of God, they are revered as remarkable spiritual mentors, and their status is rarely challenged. Under the guidance of the Bible, or in other words, political ideologies, the Pope can be likened to the current president. They all possess uniqueness such that no individual can take over or share their positions without completely replacing them. Furthermore, the Archbishops, Bishops, Priests, and Deacons can be regarded as potential government officials, each possessing varying levels of power, while the Laity, the ordinary daily believers, are akin to ordinary citizens of a nation. The Laity regularly visits the Church for weekly prayers or communion, perceiving the Church as a sacred space deserving of devout respect. For certain devoted radical nationalists in a totalitarian country, government buildings may evoke similar sentiments. The similitude between the hierarchy of the Catholic religion and the country proves that secular nationalism can potentially be a religion.

3.2 Government as the church

Faith in religion is a way to manipulate believers' minds just like politicians using propaganda to manipulate their people. In the contemporary Catholic Church, apart from the many consistent debates about each belief of Christianity, it is undoubtedly true that believers who "believe in God" rather than "believe that God" are capable and willing to accept the rationalization of irrationals, by giving religious interpretation and religious meaning to these irrational events of which cannot be logically explained. Believers' allegiance to God, dependence on the Scriptures, sense of belonging to the Church, and personal concerns about their

destinies, all made up their devotional mind of the ultimate delusion: God. Their worship foreshadows some sort of blindness and the loss of autonomy, their actions demonstrate some possible religious characteristics in a sense that even themselves can hardly notice. Their excessive love for God eventually led them to serve their beliefs rather than controlling them. All these characteristics depicted above can be found in the Bible as their collective cause, "I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me" [7]. The quote from John precisely substantiates the arrogance, deception and manipulation in God's words. It convinced believers to acknowledge the importance of Jesus and wholeheartedly devote themselves to serve him.

Similarly, these nationalists, who are commonly associated with words like "radical" or "immoderate", are faithful warriors of the country regardless of whether their motherlands are worth being protected with blood and flesh. Their passion, love, and reverence for their countries can be assumed as religious worship, requiring no scientific or empirical evidence to justify it. "Derrida has argued that the state, like all forms of authority, indeed, of collectivity, depends on a faith that cannot be reduced to knowledge" [8]. Admittedly, religious faith is supported but does not necessarily require the support of logic and empiricism. Similarly, the fanatical, sincere, unconscious love of one's country can also be unadulterated and selfless. All it requires is simply government propaganda, school cultivation, and probably some actual statistics that can reflect the authentic power of the country, despite the fact that these statistics can be manipulated for certain political purposes.

"State is a lie" [9]. This assertion is put forth by Friedrich Nietzsche, a prominent German philosopher, in the chapter titled "The New Idol" from his seminal work, "Thus Spoke Zarathustra". Nietzsche contends that the state is fundamentally mendacious, deceptive, and assumes the role of an "idol", falsely claiming to possess the divine power of regulation. In Nietzsche's perspective, the state represents the "coldest of all the cold monsters," frequently appropriating the creations of inventors and the wisdom of sages, ultimately ascribing them to its own captivating culture. Furthermore, the state exhibits manipulative power, attracting numerous devotees who willingly sacrifice for its somber grandeur. The same applies to Christianity and other religions, despite the difficulties in verifying or guaranteeing the authenticity of believers' beliefs, and the fact that everything in these beliefs can only exist as so-called brute facts, "since God did not create himself and must thus constitute a brute fact" [10]. It still makes no difference for believers to love God the same way because an abiding faith can be maintained simply by rejecting or ignoring these criticisms. This closely resembles nationalists' unshakeable idolization of their country and ethnicity, exhibiting the common characteristic of blindness when pursuing the deity—God in Christianity and government in a state. This highlights the similarity between religion and

nationalism in terms of the intense love toward a particular image, figure, or impression that is to be worshiped.

4 Conclusion

Upon rigorous examination of the parallels between secular nationalism and religion, one can posit that secular nationalism constitutes a form of religion. The facets of secular nationalism, encompassing the provision of identity, purpose, and belonging, the promotion of moral values, and the elicitation of profound emotions, closely parallel those inherent in traditional religious belief systems. A pivotal aspect bolstering the argument for secular nationalism as a religious entity is the resemblance between the hierarchical structure of government and the organizational framework of religious institutions. Just as religious establishments adhere to a hierarchical order with a central authority, secular nationalism frequently operates within a similar framework, wherein the government exercises supreme power and authority over its citizens. This structural congruence further fortifies the contention that secular nationalism can be construed as a quasi-religious entity. Furthermore, the devotion and reverence exhibited by nationalists toward their nations bear remarkable resemblances to religious worship. Nationalists' manifest deep emotional attachment and unwavering loyalty to their countries, akin to the devotion and faith expressed by religious adherents towards their deities. This impassioned attachment can transcend rationality and precipitate blind devotion, mirroring religious fervor.

Nevertheless, it is imperative to approach the inquiry regarding secular nationalism as a religion with meticulous scrutiny, the potential pitfalls and constraints of nationalism should be acknowledged. Blind allegiance and uncritical faith in the government can engender the suppression of individual freedoms and the endorsement of discriminatory practices. Additionally, the interpretation of secular nationalism as a religion may vary contingent upon historical, cultural, and ideological contexts. The relationship between nationalism and religion is multifaceted and intricate, with divergent perspectives potentially emerging based on contextual factors.

In conclusion, while secular nationalism exhibits many characteristics associated with religion, it is vital to critically examine its potential drawbacks. Recognizing the complexities and variations in interpreting the relationship between secular nationalism and religion allows for a more nuanced understanding of this topic.

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