Religion, secularisation and nationalism in Quebec and the Basque Country: a comparative approach

JOSE SANTIAGO

Departamento de Sociología III, Facultad de Ciencias Políticas y Sociología, Universidad Complutense de Madrid-TRANSOC, Spain

ABSTRACT. This article analyses the relationship between religion, secularisation and nationalism in Quebec and the Basque Country using a comparative approach. I will first outline the ethnic-religious origin of these nationalist movements. Second, I will examine the extent to which the ‘new’ secular and violent nationalism (Euskadi Ta Askatasuna and Front de Libération du Québec) that emerged in the 1960s was fuelled in its origin by a transfer of sacrality. Third, I will address an aspect that has led some theorists to view religion and nationalism as analogous phenomena, in which nationalism is construed as a religion of blood sacrifice. Fourth, I will examine another aspect that leads to this view of religion and nationalism as analogous phenomena, as the latter also provides a framework of transcendent meaning through an imaginary of continuity between the different generations. The article concludes with a series of general considerations on the relations between nationalism, secularisation and religion.

KEYWORDS: Basque Country, nationalism, Quebec, religion, sacred, secularisation

Religion plays a central role in debates on the origin and foundation of nationalism and nations. Some authors highlight its importance in conforming ethnic and national communities, while others point to the eminently religious or sacred character of nationalism. The transcendence of the issue is such that Gellner (1994) indicated that the ‘problem’ of nationalism is its propensity to sacrilise nations. Many theorists explain the origin of nationalism from different perspectives by relating it to the process of secularisation and seeing it as a type of substitute religion, its functional equivalent, or even the religion of modernity (Anderson 1991; Durkheim 1964; Gellner 1983, 1987; Greenfeld 1996; Hayes 1960; Kapferer 1988; Llobera 1994; Marvin and Ingle 1999; Smith 1989, 2000; etc.). However, despite the wealth of these interpretations, the polysemic nature of the concepts of religion and nationalism has often caused the debates on these issues to be less fruitful than could be desired. To bring a degree of analytical clarity, Brubaker (2012) recently proposed four ways of...
fruitfully studying the relation between religion and nationalism. The first is to treat religion and nationalism as *analogous phenomena*. The second is to specify ways in which religion helps explain things about nationalism (its *origin*, its distinctive character, etc.). The third is to treat religion as *part* of nationalism, and to specify modes of interpenetration and intertwining. The fourth is to posit a distinctively religious form of nationalism.

This article explores some issues in the three first approaches proposed by Brubaker for the cases of the nationalist movements in Quebec and the Basque Country. The objectives are twofold: on the one hand, to offer an innovative comparative approach, in view of the scarcity of works comparing these two movements, and contribute to a greater understanding; and on the other, to evaluate certain general theories that relate nationalism with secularisation and religion. I will first outline the ethnic-religious *origin* of these nationalist movements, thereby challenging the theories that see the birth of nationalism as the product of secularisation. We will also see, from a comparative approach, how religion *intertwined* with traditional nationalism contributes to fixing the boundaries of the imagined national community. Second, I will examine the extent to which the ‘new’ secular and violent nationalism (*Euskadi Ta Askatasuna* [ETA] and *Front de Libération du Québec* [FLQ]) that emerged in both the Basque Country and Quebec in the 1960s was fuelled in its *origin* by a transfer of sacrality from religion. This, in turn, triggered a process of heterogony of ends whereby the nation became a *new absolute* – an end in itself – and not simply a means or path to salvation as it was in traditional nationalism. Third, I will address an aspect that has led some theorists to view religion and nationalism as *analogous phenomena*, in which nationalism is construed as a religion of blood sacrifice. To what degree can there be said to be an inexorable relationship between nationalism, violence and the sacred? The comparative analysis of the Basque and Québécois nationalist movements is an opportunity to problematise this thesis. Fourth, I will examine another aspect that leads to this view of religion and nationalism as analogous phenomena, as the latter also provides a framework of transcendent meaning through an imaginary of continuity between the different generations. I will analyse from a comparative approach how the Québécois and Basque nationalist movements have shaped this imaginary of continuity through the sacralisation of history and territory. The article concludes with a series of general considerations on the relations between nationalism, secularisation and religion deriving from the comparative analysis of the Basque and Québécois cases.3

‘Catholics above all’: the religious mission of traditional nationalism

The case of France after the Revolution (1789) has long been the benchmark for the study of the relation between secularisation, nationalism and religion (Durkheim 1964). The secularisation of Christianity left a void that was filled
by the new *religion de la patrie*. However, the criticisms of modernisation and secularisation as general theories have called into question the universal application of the French experience. Alongside this case, there are others in which nationalism emerged in a period of intense religious feeling, and it was precisely this backdrop that allowed the nation to be imagined based on the boundaries of religion. This was the case – with minor differences – of nationalism in the Basque Country and Quebec.

Nationalism in Quebec in its origins was conformed in a strongly religious context in which Catholicism was an important ethnic marker that contributed to defining the boundaries of the national French-speaking community. Even if *Canadian nationalism* proclaimed a secular ideology after the British ‘conquest’ (1760), there is no doubt that the Catholic religion was an essential element in defining the nation due to its deep roots among the population. After the defeat of the *Patriots* (1837–1838), the Act of Union (1840–1841) and the creation of a federal state (1867),

religion became an even more important element for the new *French-Canadian nationalism*. This nationalism considered that the political and economic development of the nation had been interrupted, and believed the only path to follow was that of *survival*; in other words, to safeguard what they had and dedicate themselves to the cult of the French tradition. Thanks to its control over social life, the Catholic Church was the only institution strong enough to take on this task and stand as the guarantor of the nation’s destiny (Balthazar 1986: 71).

The early decades of the last century saw the apogee of this French-Canadian nationalism, whose principal exponent was the priest and historian Lionel Groulx (1878–1967), who saw the nation and its Catholic faith as being inextricably intertwined. His nationalism was subordinate to his Catholicism, which needed the former in order to survive: ‘I am Catholic for reasons not due to my patriotism, but I am patriotic for many reasons that are due to my Catholicism’ (Groulx, cited in Arès 1968: 938). Surrounded by a ‘protestant ocean’, Groulx believed that the mission of the French-Canadian people was to guarantee the survival of the Catholic faith: ‘We believe the indications of Providence to be sufficiently clear. The destiny She has outlined for us in America, the heritage she has bequeathed us seems to us to be worthy of safeguarding at any price’ (Groulx, cited in Ferretti and Miron 1992: 94). The nation had contributed to the development of the Catholic faith, while at the same time Catholicism had allowed the nation to remain alive. Without Catholicism the nation was nothing (‘we will be Catholic or we will be nothing’), as it was its very essence and the main diacritical trait that allowed it to define the boundaries of the national community. The other traits that distinguished the French-Canadians, such as the French language and their French origin and tradition (assimilated to the idea of race) and the rural way of life, were not such determining factors in defining the nation. Thus, the language, which after the second half of the twentieth century would become the primary trait of the new national definition, was not for Groulx the ‘essence’ of the nation but rather the *guardian of the faith*: ‘our language can
only remain if our priests keep our beliefs, main support of our nationality (. . .) Language, guardian of French type, is the main guarantee of national life for our people (. . .) and the hope of survival for catholic people’ (Groulx, cited in Senese 1979: 168).

As in Quebec, nationalism in the Basque Country did not emerge as a substitute for religion. Quite the opposite: it cannot be understood without the religious climate from which it arose. It is true that late nineteenth century Basque society had shown signs of creeping secularisation. But the birth of nationalism was not the result of this process; rather it was the consequence of the difficulties it ran into attempting to flourish among sectors of Basque society governed by a deeply rooted mythical-religious tradition harking back to the sixteenth century (Corcuera 2001). Nationalism did not therefore replace religion but was instead largely the adaptation of religion to a new social context characterised by the onset of industrialisation and the influx of immigrants to the Basque Country. On this point, Sabino Arana (1865–1903), the founding father of Basque nationalism, could be said to have acted as a ‘prophet of renewal’ for an ethnic religion which was deeply entrenched in earlier generations and whose popularity had spread throughout the nineteenth century (Aranzadi 2000: 490).

The religious element was fundamental in the origins of Basque nationalism for confirming the boundaries of the imagined community, although – unlike Quebec – the ethnic groups (Basque and Spanish) in the Basque Country were not distinguished by religion, as both were Catholic. But this did not prevent it from becoming – like race – the trait used to draw the boundaries of the national community. For Arana, the racial purity of the Basque people was very closely linked to Catholicism, whose integrity needed to be preserved from the degradation – he maintained – it was suffering at the hands of the ‘maketos’5: ‘We Basques must avoid mortal contagion and maintain steadfast the faith of our ancestors and the solemn religiosity that distinguishes us and purifies our customs, which before were healthy and commendable and today are largely infested and threatened with corruption from outside influences’ (Arana, cited in Solozábal 1975: 362). Like Groulx, Arana also considered the nation and Catholicism to be inexorably entwined, as evidenced by his mottos ‘Jaunegoiko eta Lagizarra: God and the ancient law’ and ‘Gu Euzkadirenzatza ta Euzkadi Jaungoikoarentzat: We for Euskadi, Euskadi for God’. He also placed God above the homeland, although to serve him it was necessary to be a patriot: ‘Ideologically speaking, God comes before the homeland, but in practical terms and in time, here in Bizcaya it is necessary to be a patriot to love God, and it is necessary to love God to be a patriot; because He is an essential part of our patriotic motto’ (Arana 1995: 223). The ultimate goal for Arana was eschatological salvation and this informed his nationalism and his commitment to independence: ‘Saving our brothers, providing them with adequate means to achieve their ultimate goal: this is the only true nationalism, (. . .) and even independence itself (. . .) has no further value beyond that of a simple means, although final and necessary, to the same end (. . .) A Bizcaya
dependent on Spain cannot address God and cannot be Catholic in practice’ (Arana, cited in Corcuera 2001: 354–5). We can therefore see the *religious mission* Arana assigned to nationalism, which ‘had produced a greater number of more solid and enduring fruits than could be achieved by many groups of religious missions together in restoring faith to those who had gone astray and reaffirming faith in believers’ (Arana, cited in Corcuera 2001: 354). This was the religious mission of nationalism, and thus both the political objectives and the other traits of the nation were no more than means in the service of this mission. This is the case of language, which as in Quebec was the guardian of the faith and the race, but not the defining element of the nation which it was to become after the 1960s.

It can therefore be said that traditional nationalism – both Basque and French-Canadian – did not arise as a result of secularisation, nor did it play the role of a substitute or functional equivalent of religion, but rather that it acted in some way as a means that was regarded as being essential to achieving salvation. This is why nationalism originally took on the overtones of a *religious mission*. On this point, it is worth recalling the words of Weber (1978: 925): ‘The earliest and most energetic manifestations of the idea (of nation), in some form, even though it may have been veiled, have contained the legend of providential “mission”’. Both French-Canadian and Basque nationalist movements are founded on adaptations of the *myths of ethnic election* that have played a part in the genesis and development of ethnic and national communities, as – again according to Weber (1978: 391) – ‘behind all ethnic diversities there is somehow naturally the notion of the “chosen people”’. More recently, Smith (1999: 332) has demonstrated that nationalism ‘draws much of its passion, conviction and intensity from the belief in a national mission and destiny; and this belief in turn owes much to a powerful religious myth of ethnic election’. In Quebec and the Basque Country, we see two examples of the most widespread version of these myths, consisting of the belief that the divinity has chosen a particular ethnic group to carry out a *mission*, such as defending the divinity’s representatives on Earth, converting pagans to the one true religion, extending the kingdom of God, and so on (Smith 2003: 49). From this standpoint, and in line with Weber’s sociology of religion, Arana and Groulx can be considered as ‘emissary or ethical prophets’, ‘instruments’ of the divinity who believed they had been entrusted with a mission or mandate (Weber 1978: 447).

**From traditional nationalism to ‘secular’ nationalism: the transfer of sacrality and heterogony of ends**

The 1960s and 1970s brought major social changes both in Quebec and the Basque Country (industrialisation, urbanisation, secularisation, etc.), which saw the transformation of the national identity, and particularly the disappearance of the pivotal role of religion. The reference to the religious mission
in defining the nation was still in evidence in Quebec in the late 1950s, as seen from the ideology of *L’Alliance Laurentienne*, which claimed that its nationalism, ‘based on the love of the French-Canadian nation (. . .), is legitimate, as it conforms to the divine order. That love (. . .) is founded on the Catholic and French mission that has been bequeathed to us and that we must (. . .) perpetuate’ (*L’Alliance Laurentienne*, cited in Ferretti and Miron 1992: 121). With the arrival of the 1960s and 1970s, the processes of social change mentioned above and the influence of the *Révolution tranquille* gradually undermined the basis of the rural way of life, distancing the Québécois people from the Church, and thereby breaking the historic alliance between the nation and Catholicism. These years witnessed the emergence of new nationalist organisations with a secular, lay, progressive, socialist and revolutionary agenda, among others, as in the case of the *Rassemblement pour l’Indépendance Nationale*, the *Parti Québécois* (PQ) and the FLQ, for whom the French-Canadian race and Catholicism were no longer the defining traits of the nation, but had been replaced by the language (French).

As in Quebec, the 1960s and 1970s in the Basque Country were also a time for redrawing the boundaries of the imagined national community. Here too religion and race gave way to language (*Euskera*) as the defining trait of the ‘national we’.9 The Basque Country saw the emergence of a new generation of nationalists who rebelled against the Franco regime and served as the breeding ground for ETA (Basque Homeland and Freedom), whose objective was to re-establish and revitalise nationalism through violence.10 Its early ideological precepts reveal a continuity with traditional nationalism, but a rupture with its two fundamental principles: race and religion (Gurrutxaga 1985; Jáuregui 1981: 88). In the case of religion, in response to the postulations of Arana, the first militants of ETA considered that – in spite of the Basques’ deep-rooted links with Christianity – religion and homeland should not be conflated: ‘For the sake of the homeland, we cannot demand a religious position. This does not mean we deny the irrefutable transcendence of Christianity in Basque history, (however) we believe the Basque nation should be constituted as a secular state’ (ETA, cited in Jáuregui 1981: 131).

Nevertheless, both in Quebec and the Basque Country, this ‘new’ nationalism which proclaimed itself to be secular was fed by transfers of sacrality,11 which had their origins in religion. In the first case, as described by Rocher in 1973: ‘The resurgence of nationalism in Quebec in the last few years can be attributed not only to objective causes, but also – at least in part – to religious transfer. One part of religious mysticism that the Church has been unable to assume or absorb has extended beyond it to become invested with a new nationalist mystique’ (Rocher, cited in Couture 1994: 18). In a similar line, Zylberberg (1994: 96) indicates that the transfer of sacrality between religious and political spheres challenges the ‘apparent secularisation of issues in progressing from an ethnic vision which prioritises the Catholic faith of French-speakers, to a more pagan worldview based on the land, language and culture’. Similarly, various scholars of Basque nationalism have highlighted the transfer
of sacrality from religion to the nation that took place from the 1960s onwards: ‘Religious fervour in certain people has been distorted into extreme nationalist fervour. To schematise this, it could be said that the “cult of God” has given way to a wholesale transfer of its emotional charge to the “cult of Euskadi”’ (Elzo 1994: 545). Similarly, the sociologist Beriain maintains that ‘there has been a transfer of numinosity from the “absolute other” (God, Jaungoikoa) to the “generalised other” (the people of a nation); the presence of supernatural beings has been replaced by the sacralisation of the social construct of the “people of the nation”, and this emerges as the new secularised god of our time, the new object of cult, which will generate its own sacrificial altars’ (Beriain 2000: 19).

There are numerous testimonies from members of ETA particularly, and to a lesser degree of the FLQ, revealing that many of them previously held strong religious convictions which they abandoned when they took up the nationalist cause. Thus the anthropologist Alcedo, the author of some important fieldwork consisting of interviews with ETA militants, reports that ‘many of the respondents (say) their initiation in militancy marked the end of their religious practice and sometimes even of their belief (. . .) A sizable proportion of young people (in ETA) in the generation of the 1960s (. . .) were fervent believers who then became alienated to varying degrees from the influence of the Church’ (Alcedo 1996: 92–3).12 Similarly, in Quebec, the process of secularisation around this time caused the sacred to be displaced to the realm of nationalism, which received transfers of sacrality from religion (Couture 1994: 212). In psychoanalytical terms, it has even been suggested that ‘once the space became vacant, once the totality of the Church had been banished from the field of nationalism, the super-ego could not exist without another totality that would replace it’ (Lazure 1970: 32). Thus, according to this author, ‘there are vestiges of religion remaining lodged in the super-ego of young people that influence and colour their nationalism (. . .) The pro-independence super-ego of young people stems largely from the secularisation of religious nationalism’ (Lazure 1970: 27–8). Quite apart from the fact that it may be deemed controversial to explain nationalism by means of psychoanalysis, it is certainly true that some testimonies of Québécois pro-independence militants endorse this idea of the transfer of sacrality. By way of illustration, we could refer to the words of one of the ideologues of the FLQ, Pierre Vallières: ‘I wanted the Québécois to base their freedom on purely human values. But at the same time I was obsessed by a certain need for the Absolute, for human values based on some kind of transcendence, and to define this transcendence (. . .) even atheistic I was a believer, I was looking for God’ (Vallières, cited in Couture 1994: 151).

This process of transfer of sacrality that took place in Quebec and the Basque Country resulted in the creation of a new absolute: the nation. Compared to traditional nationalism in which the nation was in the service of religion, in the ‘new’ nationalism, it was religion that was subordinated to the new absolute, which no longer needed religion in order to prosper. We can see in the origin of both Basque and Québécois secular and violent nationalism a
process of heterogony of ends, similar to the one described by Weber in *The Protestant Ethic*. According to his famous thesis, the means or paths to salvation through which ascetic Protestantism sought the *certitudo salutis* became – as an unintended result – ends in themselves, thereby fuelling the ‘victorious capitalism’, which – once developed – no longer needs to be buttressed by religion (Weber 1930). Similarly, we see how, in secular nationalism, the nation, which for Arana and Groulx was a path to salvation, is transformed into an end in itself, a new absolute that no longer needs to be buttressed by religion. The cases of Basque and Québécois nationalism are a good illustration of the following observation by Greenfeld (1996: 181): ‘Even where religion was a crucial factor in the development of nationalism and a source of its initial legitimacy (…), even where it played midwife at the birth of nationalism and protected it in its infancy, religion was reduced to the role of a handmaiden, an occasionally used tool, and came to exist on nationalism’s sufferance’.

Following this line of analysis, traditional nationalism can be conceived as a *vanishing mediator*. Jameson (1974) used this concept to account for ancient prophecy and ascetic Protestantism within the framework of Weber’s sociology of religion. Both played the role of mediating between two opposing logics after which they disappeared, since their action triggered a permutation between means and ends. Likewise, traditional nationalism also acts as a *vanishing mediator* between religion and secular nationalism:

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**Nationalist violence, secularisation and the sacred**

According to Durkheim’s thesis (1964), the founding category of religion is the sacred, which originates from the social bond and whose function is the cohesion of the community. Following this theory, Marvin and Ingle, in their book *Blood Sacrifice and the Nation*, hold nationalism and religion to be analogous phenomena due to the fact that, in both cases, it is sacrificial violence, the hidden foundation of the sacred, that enables social cohesion: ‘The underlying cost of all society is the violent death of its members. Our deepest secret, the collective group taboo, is the knowledge that society depends on the death of these sacrificial victims at the hands of the group itself’ (Marvin and Ingle 1999: 21). In other words, sacrificial violence is the mechanism whereby nations are conformed.

In my opinion, although sacrificial violence may play a pivotal role in the conformation and development of nations, it cannot, however, sustain a
general theory of nationalism that is supported by this line of reasoning. Thus, the comparison of Basque and Québécois nationalism may be useful in examining certain important aspects of the relationship between the national community, nationalist violence and the sacred. Contrary to the theories that refer to the ‘violent essence’ of the nation, I consider it more productive to analyse both the material and symbolic backdrops against which the nationalist violence develops.

Previously, we have seen how the ‘new’ nationalism that arose in Quebec and the Basque Country in the 1960s and 1970s was fed by transfers of sacrality deriving from the secularisation process. This transfer of sacrality, which transformed the nation into a new absolute for which certain nationalists were prepared to kill and be killed, has sometimes been used to partly explain the violence perpetrated by ETA and the FLQ. However, the dissimilar thrust of the violence in the Basque and Québécois nationalist movements should give us cause to explore other factors in greater depth. It is evident, both for ETA and the FLQ, that violence has an instrumental dimension as a means to achieve political objectives. Here we need to look carefully at the different socio-political contexts in which the violence occurred in both cases. It should be noted that, at the outset, ETA’s violence was essentially viewed by its militants as a response to the violence perpetrated on Basque society by Franco’s dictatorship. Subsequently, in the democratic period, ETA conceived of the violence in more strategic terms as a means of achieving its political objectives. In the case of Quebec, the violence of the FLQ took place in a socio-historical context where there was a degree of legitimisation of political violence, inspired by Marxism and Third-Worldism. As we shall see below, after the 1970 crisis and the rise of the PQ, the ideologues of the FLQ came to believe that the use of violence was not an effective strategy for achieving their political ends. Considering the importance of the instrumental political dimension of violence and the ideological concepts whereby it is legitimised, what follows is not intended as an explanation of the origin and development of the violence in Quebec and the Basque Country that focuses on the ‘sacred dimension of nationalism’ (Smith 2000). My aim is simply to highlight the different material and symbolic contexts in which the nationalist violence developed in relation to the process of secularisation and with the sacred as an element of cohesion for the national community.

The process of secularisation in the 1960s and 1970s in Quebec and the Basque Country not only had consequences on the domain of people’s consciences but also on aspects of a material nature. Thus, in the case of Quebec, secularisation gave rise to a French-speaking middle class coming from Church institutions in the area of health, education, and so on, who felt thwarted by the social impediments that hindered their social mobility due to the scant development of the provincial administration and the English-speaking minority’s control of the private sector (McRoberts and Posgate 1976: 88). It is therefore no coincidence that these new middle
classes were the primary defenders of the Quiet Revolution which created the conditions of social change that enabled their social mobility (Guindon 1998: 65–6). This experience in Quebec serves to illustrate the hypothesis that ‘there is a close – although not deterministic – link between the accelerated process of secularisation and the emergence of middle-class nationalism’ (Waldmann 1997: 69). According to Waldmann (1997: 71), secularisation brings a considerable decline in ‘the appeal of a career within the ecclesiastical institutions, the classic route for advancement for ambitious intellectuals in the preindustrial age. The only organisation that can replace it, because it can offer similar opportunities for enrichment, is the public administration, which is why the aspirations of the new “secular” middle class concentrated on the creation of a new autonomous national State’. In other words, unlike what occurred in the Basque Country, the Quiet Revolution and the development of the administrative apparatus in the province of Quebec allowed the social mobility of important nationalist contingents who had become distanced from the Church, thus laying the ground for a less traumatic process of secularisation. The perception of lack of future opportunity and the hindrances to mobility as a result of the decline of what had been the core institution in the history of the French-Canadians were palliated by the development of an administrative apparatus that offered future prospects for the French-speaking community. In contrast, in the Basque Country of the 1960s, the centralism of the State under the Franco regime meant that culture in Euskera inhabited the ‘silent society’. With the onset of violence by ETA, one part of the nationalist community, which had formed into groups of Catholic militants under the protection of the Church, abandoned this institution and became visible in the public sphere.14 Zulaika (1990: 32) refers to this period of history thus: ‘ETA’s weapons have brought Basque youth out of the churches and the seminars’.

Let me now take a look at another issue of a symbolic nature that bears a close relation to the thesis of Marvin and Ingle. The idea is to analyse comparatively how sacrificial violence acted as an element of cohesion for the national community. In the Basque Country, one of the results of the processes of secularisation and transfer of sacrality we saw earlier was that the members of ETA came to conceive ‘politics as a sacrament’ (Zulaika 1990). In his book Violencia Vasca, Zulaika shows how ‘the desacralisation of religious symbols and rites led to an emphasis on the resacramentisation of life as a whole ( . . . ) Priests could become secular, but the other side of the coin was that everyone has a share in the priesthood that resides – in the final analysis – in the community of believers. The realisation of this sacramental commitment in the political sphere was illustrated unequivocally by the sacrifices of the members of ETA’ (Zulaika 1990: 325). Thus, ‘the nationalist population perceived the patriotism of their martyrs in ETA within a framework of transcendence originally learnt in the Church’ (Zulaika 1990: 308). The members of ETA were hence conceived as martyrs who laid down their lives for the community. According to Juaristi (1999: 114), ‘abertzalismo
(Basque nationalist movement) as a whole needed the violence of ETA to force the transfer of sacrality to the nation, the only means of rebuilding the nationalist community. From this analytical standpoint, this historian interprets the murder of the first deliberate victim of ETA, the civil guard Pardines, and the subsequent death of the ETA militant Etxebarrieta as follows: ‘The Basque-nationalist community rebuilt itself on a covenant of blood (let the blood of Pardines be on our heads and that of Echevarrieta on theirs). The bulk of Basque society gave their tacit consent to the death of the civil guard by construing the ETA member as an innocent victim’ (Juaristi 1999: 129). In line with the hypothesis of Girard, the sacred made its appearance around the death of an expiatory victim, who thereby became an essential element in the symbolic cohesion of the nationalist community. The emergence of ETA also played a central role in delimiting the boundaries of the ‘national we’, which had become blurred in comparison to traditional nationalism due to the abandonment of race and religion as ethnic traits, and their substitution by the Basque language, which had been significantly weakened. According to Aranzadi (2001: 514), it was in this problematic ideological scenario that ‘ETA inclined towards “armed struggle”: violence and death – a more powerful socio-symbolic mechanism than any ideology – burst onto the stage bringing blood and fire to brand the new “Basques” with a cohesive and differentiating mark’. It could be said on this point that, in the absence of traits of sufficient weight to mark the boundaries of the national community, it was violence that acted to reinforce these boundaries (Conversi 1994).

The case of Québécois nationalism is very different. In the first place, it is worth noting that no member of the FLQ died in confrontations with the forces of law and order. There was therefore no sacrificial victim to play the role of martyr for the national community. In second place, the entry on the scene of the FLQ did not take place in a ‘silent society’, as occurred in the Basque Country with ETA, but – as we have seen – came at a time when Québécois nationalism began to feel it was beginning to take control of its own national destiny. But on the matter of the cohesion of the national community, it is worth highlighting the role of the PQ as the primary symbolic reference. A highly significant element here is the decision of the erstwhile ideologue of the FLQ, Pierre Vallières, who in 1971 renounced terrorism and abandoned the organisation when he conceded that the existence of the PQ had rendered it superfluous.

In short, we can conclude that, in this symbolic dimension, the fundamental difference between the Québécois and Basque cases lies in the fact that, in the latter, nationalist violence played a key role in permitting the symbolic cohesion of the nationalist community, which had been repressed and silenced in the public sphere. In contrast, the nationalist community in Quebec was by then undergoing a process of expansion, with the symbolic reference of the PQ, and did not require the recreation of the national community through violence.
The sacralisation of history and the territory: the construction of an imaginary of continuity

Anderson (1991: 10) has indicated that ‘if the nationalist imagining is so concerned (with death and immortality), this suggests a strong affinity with religious imagining’. He therefore considers that nationalism must be understood by aligning it with other earlier cultural systems such as religion. As with religion, nationalism provides a system of meaning which makes sense of contingency through the secular transformation of fatality into continuity. Nationalism thus offers a framework of immortality and transcendence. This thesis is also shared by Smith (1989: 362): ‘only in the chain of generations of those who share an historic and quasi-familial bond, can individuals hope to achieve a sense of immortality in eras of purely terrestrial horizons. In this sense, the formation of nations and the rise of ethnic nationalisms appears more like the institutionalisation of a “surrogate religion” than a political ideology’.

If nationalism is a device similar to religion insofar as it provides a framework of transcendence,15 this is due to the imaginary of continuity it constructs whereby the nation is ‘imagined’ as a chain of generations stretching back into the distant past with its roots buried illo tempore. How is this imaginary of continuity created? Anderson (1991) has outlined the temporalities that make it possible to ‘imagine’ the nation. On the one hand, new time as a modern perception of time, and on the other, old time with which this new concept was conflated, thereby launching the ‘process of reading nationalism genealogically -as the expression of an historical tradition of serial continuity’ (Anderson 1991: 195). This old time is what makes it possible to establish a line of continuity with the roots of the nation that stretches back through the ages almost to time immemorial. These so-called golden ages play a pivotal role in the construction of this imaginary of continuity, as they allow all the generations who see themselves as descendants of the ancestors living in this golden age to be linked together, thereby creating a feeling of national identity (Smith 1997: 48–52). These glorious eras have come to represent essential elements in the sacralisation of the national history, as they furnish a narrative of the nation in spite of the transformations that may have occurred in the national identity.

In the case of traditional Basque nationalism, old time was conformed by appealing to a golden age characterised by a divine language (Euskera), laws based on nature (the Fueros), political independence, nobility, and racial and religious integrity. The touchstone for this golden age was the Basque society of the Old Regime, which was sacralised by the Catholic religion and peasant mythology (Aranzadi 2000: 491). But what of the case of this appeal to an old time in Quebec, given that the nation cannot hark back to a premodern age as distant as that of the nations of the old Europe? Or to echo the historian Bouchard (2001: 34): ‘How does one overcome the original impasse of the will to claim ancient roots in a collectivity which, by definition, is at point zero on
the timescale? In other words, how does one construct a long memory on the basis of a short history?” In Quebec, the search for this old time of the nation was built by referring to The New France, the golden age for the French-Canadian people that would ultimately be traumatically transformed with The Conquest, with which traditional nationalism returned the nation to a primordial time, a mythical time whose ‘roots reached back into the most distant past of France, the land of founding ancestors, in the great mother country. This link guaranteed the fragile nation an invaluable symbolic anchor’ (Bouchard 2001: 118). Groulx highlighted the imaginary of continuity of the French-Canadian nation thus: ‘The birth of a race in Canada does not in any way imply the rupture of that new race with its old French past’ (Groulx, cited in Bouchard 2001: 119).

As we see, traditional Basque and French-Canadian nationalism conformed their imaginary of continuity by appealing to a golden age which, concurring with the national definition of Arana and Groulx, was characterised by being a period of both racial and religious purity. But what happens to the imagining of national continuity in Quebec and the Basque Country in the 1960s and 1970s when the definition of national identity changes and the racial-religious concept of the nation is cast aside? In other words, how does it become plausible to ‘imagine’ a nation that has seen a transformation of the diacritical traits used to set down the boundaries of its community?

The ‘new’ nationalism therefore needed an imaginary of continuity which – due to the new secular and antiracist ideas – could no longer be supported by a golden age based on racial and religious purity. Thus, secular Basque nationalism began to ‘desecrate’ the medieval golden age of traditional nationalism by denying that Catholicism was an essential characteristic of the Basque nation: ‘due to its late Christianisation a certain tendency to natural religion can be observed among the Basques, with some ethnologists claiming that the Basques are only notionally Christian’ (Sarrailh de Ihartza 1973: 76). The championing of this pagan religiosity, which would be conserved as a result of the supposed late Christianisation of the Basque Country, would allow the Basque nation to discover its roots deep in its prehistory, in a period that came to be considered the new golden age (Aranzadi 2000).

In the case of Quebec, the reconstruction of an imaginary of continuity has been perhaps more complex insofar as the new nationalism – born of the Quiet Revolution – represents the ‘Québécois’ nation as ‘new’, thereby breaking with the very denomination of French-Canadian. But is the ‘new’ nationalism really represented to the Québécois nation as a new entity different from the French-Canadian nation? Emphatically not, as this nation is considered a link in a long historical continuum which allows the new time to be confronted by appealing to an imagined national continuity. To demonstrate this, it may be worth analysing the following passage from the PQ’s 1991 programme: ‘Canadians of the seventeenth century, French-Canadians of the nineteenth-century and now Québécois, rarely have we seen a people so yean for an identity, and

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thus embrace the essential with such persistence’ (PQ, cited in Ferretti and Miron 1992: 300). It is clear here that the PQ is appealing to the persistence of one people. However, the very mention of Canadians, French-Canadians and Québécois appears to refer to different identities. To what extent do French-Canadians, for whom race and religion were the inalienable traits of the nation, and the Québécois, who have broken with these characteristics as markers of the ‘national we’, belong to the same nation?

To respond to this discontinuity, both Basque and Québécois nationalisms need to sacralise history by showing that beyond the different diacritical traits that have delimited the boundaries of the national community throughout history, a line of continuity exists between the different generations. The changes in these boundaries must be confronted by appealing to the existence of the nation illo tempore. As clearly noted by Pérez-Agote (1995: 132), the nation ‘needs to sacralise the history of the production of the group as though it were the history of the group, by reasserting its original existence’. Given the discontinuities and interruptions in the boundaries of the national community, nationalism needs a foundation that enables the continuity between generations. And it finds it in the territory, whose role lies in being the recipient that allows the national subject to persist throughout time, despite the transformations in the national identity. As indicated by J. Anderson, ‘the territory is the receptacle of the past in the present’ (Anderson 1988: 24). It allows the temporal vertebration of the nation: ‘the time has passed but the space is still there’, thus making possible the imagined continuity (Anderson 1988: 24). As Smith (1998: 64) maintains: ‘To create a nation it is necessary to have a historic territory to love and defend, and whose “ownership” is recognised by all and sundry. This is essential to any ideology of nationalism. It is therefore logical that a significant part of any concept of “national” identity stems from the process of signalling, outlining and reinterpreting an authentic homeland linking the dead, the living and the yet unborn’. This is why nationalism sacralises the territory ‘as a unique and distinctive “historic territory” whose identity is linked to memory, and a memory embedded in the land. History nationalises a piece of land and imbues its most characteristic elements with mythical content and sacred sentiment. The territory thus becomes the receptacle for a collectively shared consciousness’ (Nogué 1998: 74). Much has been made of the importance of collective memory for the construction of national identity, but not enough attention has been paid to the fact that the national collective memory is confirmed with respect to a particular territory – what Smith (1996: 454) has termed the territorialisation of memory. The aim of nationalism is that the land – the homeland – is never forgotten; it has been ‘theirs’ for generation after generation. Thanks to this sacralisation of both history and territory, the nation is presented to us as a device of meaning with a transcendental character: ‘situating the community in an ancient and disjointed birthplace (. . .) is essential to evoke the primordial and transcendental features of the nation’ (Smith 1998: 64).
Conclusion

I will end by highlighting some questions of a general nature for each of the sections above on the theory of enlightened nationalism based on the comparative analysis of the relations between secularisation, nationalism and religion in the cases of Quebec and the Basque Country. In the first place, the ethnic-religious origin of the Basque and French-Canadian nationalist movements is a further example contributing greater complexity to the relation between nationalism and religion, and distancing it from general models derived from specific experiences such as the case of France. In this respect, I agree with Greenfeld (1996: 176), when she states that ‘the varied and complex history of the relationship between nationalism and religion cannot be narrowed to a linear sequence’ whereby nationalism was bound to emerge to replace religion once the secularisation process was underway. In contrast to these linear, evolutionist and teleological models, empirical analyses reveal the multiple forms of relationship between religion and nationalism, among which we would have to include the French case as a specific example (Rieffer 2003; Spohn 2003). In second place and in the same line, I would like to suggest that we should beware of these linear and ‘compensatory’ models which set out to explain the persistence of ‘secular’ and violent nationalism as the fruit of the transfers of sacrality that ‘compensate’ the void left by religion. As we have seen, we can indeed find in these transfers a considerable impetus for the origin of the secular and violent nationalism that emerged in Quebec and the Basque Country in the 1960s and 1970s. In this period, we see a large number of militants in ETA and the FLQ who transferred the sacrality of their former religious life to the new absolute of the nation. However, in contrast to the hypotheses of some authors (Elzo 1994; Sáez de la Fuente 2002), we cannot say the same of the new generations of militants in ‘radical’ Basque nationalism, where we find young people, most of whom have never been socialised in a religious context and have therefore not undergone the process of transfer of sacrality to fill the void of religion. Third, the comparative analysis of the relation between nationalist violence and the sacred in the cases of Quebec and the Basque Country leads us to problematise general theories such as that of Marvin and Ingle on the function of sacrificial violence in conforming a nation. As we have seen, the martyrs of ETA succeeded in playing a unifying role in the national community in the years of the Franco regime. However, in recent years, it has been precisely the violence of ETA which has broken the ‘symbolic continuum of (Basque) nationalism, by prioritising the internal dimension of the Basque conflict over the external’ (Pérez-Agote 2001: 134). The case of Quebec is a clear example of how the absence of violence has been a decisive factor in achieving the cohesion of the national(ist) community. Finally, the comparative analysis of the Basque and Québécois cases has revealed how nationalism is a powerful device of meaning thanks to its capacity to generate an imaginary of continuity through the sacralisation of history and the territory. This fact has led some authors to see the phenomenon of
nationalism as being analogous to religion as it provides a framework of transcendence. However, in response to the theories that consider religion as equivalent to nationalism, and see nationalism as the religion of modernity, we must take into account the specificity of religious and national communities. As Schnapper (1993: 158) points out: ‘A reference to matters transcendental will not hold the same meaning as an inscription in a historic community nor as a political project. The meaning experienced through religion is not that of a “secular religion” ’. In this respect, I agree with this sociologist when she concludes that ‘it is too simplistic to describe nationalism as “a substitute or supplement for supernatural, historical religions” or to state that nationalism has become a surrogate religion (. . .) A transcendental relationship is a different experience altogether from a political project, even when the latter takes on an emotional quality’ (Schnapper 1993: 158).

Notes

1 I would like to thank Alfonso Pérez-Agote for his friendship and generosity in these recent years when I have had the good fortune and pleasure to work with him on a range of research projects. I refer particularly here to project CSO2010-16148 from the MINECO (Spain), on which we worked within the Groupe Européen de Recherche Interdisciplinaire sur le Changement Religieux (GERICR).
2 For a critical review of these approaches relating secularisation and nationalism, see Santiago (2012).
3 An interesting line of research concerning the relationship between nationalism, secularisation and religion that is not explored in this article examines the nationalists’ view of the values (what degree of secularity) that should serve as the foundation for their nation. On this point, it is very interesting to study the debate sparked in Quebec by what was known as the Quebec’s Charter of Values.
4 The Act of Union joined lower and upper Canada under the same government, which included no French speakers. With the creation of the federal state under the name of Canada – thus implying the application of the term ‘Canadians’ to all the inhabitants of the nation-state – the former Canadian community came to be known as ‘French-Canadian’.
5 Derogatory term used by Arana to refer to the Spanish.
6 Arana put it as follows: ‘Not speaking one or another language, but the difference in language is the primary means of preserving ourselves from contagion from the Spanish and avoiding the intermingling of the two races. If our invaders were to learn Euskera, we would have to abandon it’ (Arana 1995: 301).
7 The other more minority version of these myths of ethnic election is the one based on the idea of the pact between the divinity and the chosen people (Smith 2003: 49).
8 The name Révolution tranquille (Quiet revolution) refers to the fact that, without any major convulsions, Québécois society was radically transformed in the economic, social and cultural sphere.
9 This was the view of Federico Krutwig (Sarrailh de Ihartza), the ideologist of ETA in the 1960s and 1970s: ‘There is no doubt that an individual with all his Castilian, Gascon and French surnames who speaks the Basque language fluently is more Basque than another individual, however “Euskaldun” (Basque) his surnames may be, who speaks often and ill of oppressive States but does not learn or use the Basque language in his daily life’ (Sarrailh de Ihartza 1973: 91).
10 To understand the radicalisation of Basque nationalism, it is vital to take into account the effects of the Spanish Civil War and the Franco dictatorship. See Pérez-Agote (2006: 55–118).
The historian Mona Ozouf (1976) uses this concept of transfer of sacrality to refer to the process that took place with the French Revolution, whereby the sacrality of the Catholic religion was transferred to the new religion of the homeland.


To understand the relationship between this public silence and violence as an expressive language, see Pérez-Agote (2006: 98–102).

In order to account this framework of transcendence and the affinity that exists between religion and nationalism, it is important to consider the concept of ‘civil religion’. Bellah described this civil religion as a collection of beliefs, symbols and rituals that sanctified the national community and conferred a transcendental purpose to the political process (Bellah 1970).

Rousseau was the first to use the term ‘civil religion’. He envisioned a religion of sociability, a religion of the citizen, whose contents were not the dogmas of traditional religions but rather the sentiments of sociability that all citizens should have (Rousseau 1973). For a critical review of the relationship between civil religion and nationalism, see Santiago (2009).

References


