

Praying to an Absent God: A Comparative Critique of Religious Nationalism

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The modern emergence of nationalism is often interpreted as evidence of the modern decline of religion. Nationalism can be understood as the defining of a political community in terms of a single territory or ethnic group, and as ruled by a single state that predicates itself on the legitimacy and consent of its nation. What has made this conception of human community so compelling, from the nineteenth century to the present, is the decentering of religious faith. The post-industrial world does not conceptually need God to function. Religious belief is an option among other worldviews that compete for adherents among modern consumers of meaning.

The nation and its myths therefore emerge to replace the communal and even metaphysical bonds once held fast by religion. Some versions of nationalism go so far as to define the national community itself as holy, thus merging the sanctity of a religious community with the political and coercive powers of the modern nation state. For the purposes of this essay I will define these forms of nationalism as “religious nationalism”: nationalist ideologies that define their nations as holy or sanctified in some way by God. Religious nationalism therefore reintroduces concepts of holiness and sanctity whose

eclipse helped spur the rise of ethnic nationalism in the first place. In doing so, however, religious nationalism does not actually reclaim the purity of some pre-national holiness or sanctity. Instead, it filters these concepts through the post-industrial political and social framework of nationalism.

When religious nationalism attempts to sanctify the nation, it does not actually reclaim a holy community. Instead, by attempting to use the coercive powers of the modern state to establish a holy community by force, it achieves only the subordination of the holy to the most truly earthly of all earthly phenomena: domination. The religious community cannot achieve holiness by means of a bargain with coercion. All that can be achieved is the subordination of the concept of God to the earthly concept of the nation.

What is it specifically that makes the concept of the nation “earthly” or “of this world”? I will use a comparative theological analysis of Russian Orthodox religious nationalism and Sunni Islamic religious nationalism to demonstrate the following assertion: defining the nation in religious terms means redefining God straight out of existence. The concept of “nation” is one of absolute limitation

and boundedness.¹ A nation can only be conceived as such if it is *limited*, either by territory, ethnicity, or state. A nation without boundaries or limits is simply inconceivable.

But the divine is precisely the opposite. God is the only entity that *cannot* possess any limitation whatsoever. If God becomes identified with the national community, this immediately introduces the concept of limitation and boundedness to God. To associate God with limitation in any way is to associate God with an attribute that negates God's very nature: it is to define God out of existence entirely. A God that is limited in any way is a God that is inconceivable, and thus simply absent. The very concept of this nationalist God is theologically invalid.

Religious nationalisms in modern Russian Orthodoxy and Sunni Islam exhibit this theological problem particularly acutely. These types of religious nationalisms share a common basis in anti-Westernism and anti-Modernism. The form of boundary they erect around their nation is a bulwark designed to exclude "the West" and "Western modernity." The ramparts of these nationalisms are fortified with the brick and mortar of exclusion and otherizing.

Because these nationalisms are based on a fixation with combating "the West," boundary and exclusion lie at the foundation of their concept of God. A true concept of the divine as limitless, inclusive, and sanctifying all creation cannot be erected on these foundations. Religious nationalism does not defend God from the West. Instead, it erects its battlements around the clear presence of a certain community, but in defining this human community in *opposition*

to other human beings, it forfeits the essence of God: an utter lack of limitation and an infinite openness to all being and its potential for sanctification.

Sunni Islamist Conceptions of Sharia

Islamism (or Political Islam) is one of the most influential ideological movements in the modern Muslim world. But its most distinguishing characteristic is its novelty. There exist no expressions in any pre-modern Muslim language for "Islamism" or "Political Islam," which are synonymous terms for modern Islamic religious nationalism. The most modern and novel argument of Islamism is that Islamic sacred "law" (the Sharia) should function as a fixed, codified legal code enforced by the coercive mechanisms of the modern state.

It is worthwhile to note that this use of the Sharia was not envisioned by most premodern Muslim jurists and scholars, who conceived of the Sharia as a way to interpret and to specify how Muslims should live their lives in accordance with God's will. It has traditionally been understood as a communal and individual framework for the practice of religious ritual duties, very similar in this way to Rabbinic sacred "law."

The vast majority of Sharia practice was therefore never intended to be enforced by legal coercion. Neglecting God's will was understood to incur punishment in the afterlife, not in this life at the hands of the state (except in a very small number of generally recognized offenses, such as murder and theft). This is why there is no single text of Sharia; there are rather endless discussions and interpretations of what it means

¹ Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, rev. ed. (London: Verso, 2016), 7.



Page from the Qur'an. Photo: crystallina, 2005, CC BY.

to follow God's will and path, with the expectation of wide diversity in practice.

Why then did Islamists redefine Sharia as a state project? This redefinition occurred precisely as an alternate political project to Western modernity. The most famous slogan of Islamist movements, "Islam is the solution," summarizes this point: instead of liberalism, communism, socialism, and so forth, Islam redefined as a *political* system (and not a sacred path with flexibility in its temporal interpretation) is understood to be the only effective answer to the social and political problems of the post-nineteenth-century world. In the words of the most influential Islamist ideologue of the twentieth century, Abu'l-A'la Mawdudi (1903–79), "the West" and Islam constitute "radically different schemes of life" that cannot be reconciled.²

Islamism argues that the essential holiness of the state, and thus the essential holiness of society, differentiates Islam from Western modernity. Islamism makes the radical claim that God's ontological sovereignty

as Lord of all being means that God is also directly sovereign over the state in a *political* sense, not merely an ontological one. Recognition of this divine sovereignty in political terms is meant to achieve the essential holiness of society that, according to Islamism, has been destroyed by Western modes of governance. This is why Muslim sacred practice must be reinterpreted by Islamists as a totalizing legal code: in Mawdudi's words, the Sharia is "a complete scheme of life and an all-embracing social order—nothing superfluous, nothing lacking."³

This form of religious nationalism is thus based first and foremost on a specific conception of the West. Because Islamist conceptions of Islamic theology and practice are formulated in reaction to the threat of Western influence, a concept of "the West" must first be clearly delineated for the actual theology of Islamism to have any meaning or content. Moreover, this delineation of the West is what enables the unique theological argument of Islamism: that God's ontological lordship means God's political sovereignty over the state.

² Abu'l-A'la Mawdudi, "The Islamic Law" (January 1948), in *Princeton Readings in Islamist Thought: Texts and Contexts from al-Banna to Bin Laden*, ed. Roxanne Euben and Muhammad Qasim Zaman (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009), 90.

³ Mawdudi, "The Islamic Law," 94.

Russian Orthodox Nationalist Conceptions of Holy Rus

As is likely already clear, twentieth-century Sunni Islamism has much in common with late twentieth- and early twenty-first-century Russian Orthodox nationalist conceptions of “Holy Rus.” Like Islamism, this ideology was elaborated on the basis of a conception of the West as the essential Other of Russian Orthodoxy. The contemporary political ideology of “Holy Rus,” fostered by both the current Russian government and Patriarch Kirill of Moscow, argues that the Russian nation possesses an essential identity that is entirely distinct from the West. This Russian identity is defined by the values of Orthodoxy and automatically excludes any political conception perceived to be “Western,” such as liberal democracy or global standards of human rights.

Instead of succumbing to “spiritual colonization” by the West, to use Patriarch Kirill’s words, the Russian nation, conceived as “Holy Rus”, presents its own vision of a modern political community, one based on autocratic governance and the cultural dominance of Russian Orthodoxy.⁴ The basic definition of the nation in this ideology is clear: Russian Orthodox Christianity is understood as the basis of the holiness of the Russian state and Russian society, in explicit contrast with Western secularity. According to Patriarch Kirill, it is Russian Orthodoxy that gives Russia its own unique and purely non-Western religious identity. Like Islamist notions of Sharia, Orthodoxy is here understood as a political project whose values must be enforced by the state in order to ensure the holiness of the nation.

This theology is therefore extremely similar to the Islamist theological understanding of God’s lordship. In both of these religious nationalisms, affirm-

ing God’s ontological lordship means appealing to God’s direct control over the state and its legislation. In both theological projects, the concept of God legitimizes the coercive force of the state as a necessary means for establishing holiness in this world. Islamist reinterpretations of Quranic concepts of God’s lordship are therefore extremely similar to Kirill’s reliance on I Peter 2:9–10: “But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s own people.”⁵ In both of these nationalisms, conceptions of ontological sanctity and holiness are politicized by being filtered through the modern concept of the nation.

It is also of course clear that both of these nationalisms are fundamentally predicated on the exclusion and otherizing of the West and Western modernity. None of the basic theological arguments of these two ideologies makes any sense without the positing of the Western other. Like all nationalisms, these ideologies are built first and foremost on a foundation of boundary and limitation. Any theology built on this foundation automatically excludes any real conception of God, who cannot ever be meaningfully associated with the concept of limitation. It is therefore not opposition to the West per se that makes these theologies deficient: it is their basis in concepts of limitation, exclusion, boundary, and finitude that fundamentally compromises their conception of God.

Alternate Orthodox and Sunni Theologies of Modernity

Natalia Naydenova aptly summarizes the theological danger inherent in these projects: “The Russian Orthodox Church risks reducing the richness of . . . Orthodox culture to its alterity used as an element of the self-defense mechanism.”⁶ Ashley Purpura offers a similarly powerful insight when she criticizes

⁴ Mikhail D. Suslov, “‘Holy Rus’: The Geopolitical Imagination of the Contemporary Russian Orthodox Church,” *Russian Politics and Law* 52.3 (May–June 2014): 71.

⁵ Natalia Naydenova, “Holy Rus: (Re) construction of Russia’s Civilizational Identity,” *Slavonica* 21.1–2 (2016): 43.

⁶ Naydenova, “Holy Rus,” 43.

some Orthodox theological responses to modern social issues that fixate on “identity maintenance” rather than on the deifying energy of divine power, which by nature remains unbounded by history or human identity.⁷

In fact, theologies exist in both modern Sunni Islam and Russian Orthodoxy that avoid grounding their understanding of the divine in notions of limitation or otherness. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the “New Theology” movement in Sunni Islam argued that Muslim thinkers should understand and utilize advances in Western science and philosophy both to enrich and to defend their own tradition.⁸ While criticizing Western materialism and imperialism, theologians such as Muhammad ‘Abduh (1849–1905) and Muhammad Iqbal (1877–1938) argued that Islam possessed dynamism and creativity precisely because of the infiniteness of the one God. These Sunni Muslim theologians also vocally advocated for the implementation of liberal democratic governance in Muslim societies on this basis. Such theologies of democratic reform have experienced a dramatic resurgence in the years after the Arab Spring, and are again becoming a standard feature of modern Sunni theological discourse.

A similar kind of dynamism is evident in the Russian Religious Renaissance that took place during the same time period, as theologians such as Sergei Bulgakov (1871–1944) argued that the potential for deification inherent in hu-

man nature meant that individual human freedoms must be respected by the modern state. For Bulgakov, the sanctification of all creation by the incarnation meant that the relationship between God and creation was dynamic. The salvific deification of the individual presupposes the sanctity of the individual person, and this means that institutions that respect the human individual, such as liberal democratic governance, can play a vital role in God’s economy of salvation. Contemporary Orthodox theologians have begun to re-engage with modernity along these constructive lines. Aristotle Papanikolaou, for instance, eloquently makes this point in *The Mystical as Political: Democracy and Non-Radical Orthodoxy* (2012).

My critique is therefore not aimed at anti-Westernism or anti-modernism per se. There is of course much to critique about Western modernity. Instead, what this comparative critique reveals is that authentic theologies cannot be based on conceptions of exclusion or limitation. This is simply because such concepts are entirely foreign to the divine nature. Theological discourse should reflect as far as possible the openness and unboundedness of the divine nature: “To God belong the East and the West, therefore wheresoever you turn there is the face of God” (Qur’an 2:115). And though the door through which they enter is narrow, “men will come from east and west, and from north and south, and sit at table in the kingdom of God” (Luke 13:29).✳



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⁷ Ashley Purpura, *God, Hierarchy, and Power: Orthodox Theologies of Authority from Byzantium* (New York, NY: Fordham University Press, 2018), 164-5.

⁸ “The New *Kalam*,” meaning a creative renewal of traditional Islamic dogmatics.