

Borders, Boundaries, Backdrops

An Introduction to the Special Issue on Christianity and Nationalism

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This issue of the *Svensk Teologisk Kvartalskrift* constitutes one of several capstone projects for Lund University's research platform on Christianity and Nationalism, housed at the Centre for Theology and Religious Studies. Alongside an international conference in Lund at the end of October 2022 – titled *Christianity and Crisis in European Contexts* – this research platform has interrogated the relationship between its two central concepts in a series of academic and public-facing blogs, lectures, seminars, and podcasts.

Any serious research trajectory is dangerous, for worthy prey – with cunning or strength or even simply sheer mass – can fight back. So it is with Christianity, so it is with nationalism, and so it certainly is with the intersection therebetween. What is nationalism, and what are the markers of its manifestation? Is nationalism a modern phenomenon, or is it as old as nations (if, indeed, any such things exist)? What are the limits of Christianity? What distinguishes Christianity from something that is not Christianity? Are Christianities conducive to nationalism? Are they opposed, neutral, or are the concepts themselves linked only by the gossamer of questions such as these? To step into these lines of inquiry means exposure to dangers

from the history of nationalisms, and the history of Christianities. And to wield such concepts, even in honest and courageous pursuit of clarity, can risk perpetuating the harmful dynamics of each. So what can be said about Christianity or nationalism that is new, true, and of use? And what avenues might take us there?

This issue has recruited contributions that approach the intersection of nationalism and Christianity with diverse points of departure and different methods than those which nationalism studies often deploys. We, the editors, have done so on the hypothesis that research on nationalism (much of which is rooted in social science methodologies) has room to grow further, based on insights from theology, philosophy, religious studies, and the history of science. We have envisioned this special issue as an opportunity to reach across disciplines, and in several cases, back through intellectual and political history, to see what possibilities there are for enhancing conversations about nationalism and Christianity for nationalism studies proper. In this way, this issue is an experiment: By pulling on threads at the borders of nationalism studies, we hope to determine whether something unravels that might occasion higher-order questions (sometimes indirectly) *about the very questions* we often put to the study of Christianity and nationalism.



Before addressing each of the special issue's articles, a survey of the field of nationalism studies is in order, so that each piece's contribution to the ongoing academic conversation about nationalism – and Christianity's involvement with it – can be properly framed.

Scholarly conversations about the origin of nations and nationalism – which constitute the field of nationalism studies – have drawn together cross-disciplinary accounts of the formation of nation-states and research on the social, political, and economic implications of modernizing structural transformations. The so-called *modernist* camp of nationalism studies links the emergence of the nation to events of the late eighteenth century: the French and American Revolutions, the creation of the modern state, and continued economic developments that resulted in the rapid progress of capitalism, improved technologies for communication, upward social mobility, and the reduction of religious influence.¹

The argument of the rival *primordialist* camp proceeds quite differently: If a nation is understood to be “a historical community, more or less

1. See Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, London 1991; Ernest Gellner, *Nations and Nationalism*, Ithaca, NY 1983; Eric Hobsbawm & Terence Ranger (eds.), *The Invention of Tradition*, Cambridge 1993.

institutionally complete, occupying a given territory, or homeland, sharing a distinct language and culture”,² then several key patterns determine and characterize nationhood: history, culture (be it institutional or in the form of a system of shared values), territory, and politics. However, so the argument goes, nations are distinct from preceding collective entities. Anthony D. Smith has dubbed these pre-national collectives *ethnies*. *Ethnies* share various features of nationhood (for example, certain types of solidarity, shared myths of ancestry, common historical memories, and links to a territory) but have neither territorial borders nor a resolute institutional culture, as nations do. Smith’s ethnosymbolist approach dissociates the categories of culture and politics: *Ethnies* passed down shared memories, certain customs, and symbols to inheritor nations,³ but *ethnies*, which predated nations, already involved an emotional attachment between their inhabitants and territory, biology, memories, myths, symbols, and/or specific shared values.⁴

According to modernists, modern nations needed neither primordial ethnic origins nor “ancestor”-like ethnic communities to become nations; nationalists could indeed invent the elements of nationhood (myths, symbols, and links to sacred territories) *ex nihilo* and legitimize them through various means.⁵

Echoing the modernist camp, sociologist Jonathan Hearn identifies nationalism as “the making of combined claims, on behalf of a population, to *identity*, to *jurisdiction* and to *territory*”, where these (nationalist) claims are usually articulated via mass communication (be it printed, electronic, or other modes of information exchange) and via educational systems.⁶ In order to avoid presenting nationalism as a purely political ideology, Hearn rightly mentions that a collective claim to identity may include “religious beliefs or language, or notions of shared biological substance, or of

2. Will Kymlicka, *Multicultural Citizenship: A Liberal Theory of Minority Rights*, Oxford 1995, 11, <https://doi.org/10.1093/0198290918.001.0001>. See also John A. Armstrong, *Nations Before Nationalism*, Chapel Hill, NC 1982; Anthony D. Smith, *National Identity*, Reno, NV 1991; John Hutchinson, “Cultural Nationalism”, in John Breuilly (ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of the History of Nationalism*, Oxford 2013, 75–94, <https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199209194.013.0005>.

3. See Smith, *National Identity*.

4. See Slobodan Drakulic, “Whence Nationalism?”, *Nations and Nationalism* 14 (2008), 221–239, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1469-8129.2008.00315.x>; Philip S. Gorski, “The Mosaic Moment: An Early Modernist Critique of Modernist Theories of Nationalism”, *American Journal of Sociology* 105 (2000), 1428–1468, <https://doi.org/10.1086/210435>.

5. See Gellner, *Nations and Nationalism*; Ernest Gellner, “Reply to Critics”, *Poznań Studies in the Philosophy of the Sciences and the Humanities* 48 (1996), 623–686.

6. Jonathan S. Hearn, *Rethinking Nationalism: A Critical Introduction*, New York 2006, 11. Italics in original.

inherited historical experiences, but it can also invoke more abstract qualities such as core values (for example, egalitarianism, liberty, and democracy).⁷ Thus, when referring to the concept of nationalism, we do not only mean it to be a “political principle, which holds that the political and the national unit should be congruent”, as Ernest Gellner (1925–1995) suggests.⁸ We also recognize that the cultural elements that define the character of nationalism exert a political *force*. A natural question to ask – indeed, a question raised by some of the articles that follow – is: In light of these political forces, are some nationalisms more inclusive, indeed more ethically or morally justifiable, than others? Why? How?

Literature divides nationalism into two ideal types – civic and cultural. Civic nationalism is relatively inclusive by nature and liberal in its manifestations, unlike ethnocultural nationalism, which is more exclusive and illiberal in articulating its demands. Civic (political) nationalism was a product of the French Revolution and the Reformation. It emerged in socio-economically and politically developed societies that historically had well-established “legal” and “political-cultural” traditions.⁹ Civic nationalism was a political phenomenon that was either simultaneous with, or subsequent to, the establishment of the modern sovereign state. Besides its political character, civic nationalism is characterized as culturally thin and more receptive to allowing “others” (whoever might be categorized as such) to belong to the nation. The sense of nationality (or nation-ness, as it were) in the civic model has been characterized largely as voluntaristic rather than ascriptive; in other words, nationality is not something simply given, but is open to acquisition. Rogers Brubaker identifies the principle of *jus soli* (the right of soil, or, birthright citizenship) as one of the key determinants for one’s belonging to a civic nation.¹⁰ Others argue that loyalty to state institutions and adherence to social values might determine membership, rather than their ethnic, racial, or religious background.¹¹ Such framings treat nationality as determined by merit, rather than factors outside the individual’s control.

Matters are slightly different with ethnocultural nationalism. It emerged and progressed in nations which, at different periods in their histories, struggled to acquire their own statehood, but their nationalist

7. Hearn, *Rethinking Nationalism*, 11.

8. Gellner, *Nations and Nationalism*, 1.

9. See Hans Kohn, *The Idea of Nationalism: A Study in Its Origins and Background*, New York 1944; Michael Ignatieff, *Blood and Belonging: Journeys into the New Nationalism*, New York 1993; Liah Greenfeld, *Nationalism: Five Roads to Modernity*, Cambridge, MA 1992; Rogers Brubaker, *Citizenship and Nationhood in France and Germany*, Cambridge, MA 1992.

10. See Brubaker, *Citizenship and Nationhood*.

11. See Greenfeld, *Nationalism*; Ignatieff, *Blood and Belonging*.

sentiments preceded the realization of this goal; elements of culture and ethnicity rather than institutional development were primarily what mattered. The ethnocultural model of nationhood was also closely linked to belief in the collective cultural distinctiveness of the nation. It was turned to the historical past, concerned with ancient myths of nations' historical struggles for self-survival, protection, and preservation of culture. This gave nationalism a robust emotional power and sometimes (if not always) led it to quite illiberal articulations of nationalist claims. According to this model, nation-ness (that is, belonging to the nation) is more determined by ethnic, linguistic, or racial grounds – not to mention the perception of threats to ethnic features of identity – which together functioned as pillars of social mobilization. Hence, ethnocultural nationalism tends towards exclusivity, and is less apt to accommodate “others”. Even when threats (or the perception of threats) to national culture vanish, such nationalists still define the nation in exclusively cultural terms, thus alienating non-members of the culture from becoming members of the nation.¹²

Though these above typologies prove heuristically useful, they are ideal types (in the Weberian sense).¹³ Even in histories of institutionally, politically, and economically advanced states – such as the UK, Spain, or Canada – the cultural elements of nationalism have been and often remain at play. The situational character of nationalism has led some scholars to conclude that – regardless of whether nationality is understood ethnically or civically – people are usually born into their nationality. Both their political and cultural traditions represent part of this inherited “package”. Civic identity may thus be “no less an inherited cultural artifact than [...] ethnic identity”.¹⁴ Both cultural and civic nationalism might imply or contain aspects of one another, depending on situation and context.¹⁵ The question, then, is when and why one component of nationalism achieves sufficient hegemonic status in discourse or practice to create the emotional power necessary for a social movement. It is in the particularity of expressions of nationalism – be they liberal or illiberal, and neither necessarily civic nor ethnic – that helps us better understand the character of nationalism in general. Those who define the criteria (whether cultural, political/institutional, or some

12. See Kohn, *The Idea of Nationalism*.

13. See Max Weber, “Objectivity in Social Science and Social Policy”, in Edward A. Shils & Henry A. Finch (eds.), *The Methodology of the Social Sciences*, New York 1949, 49–112.

14. Bernard Yack, “The Myth of the Civic Nation”, *Critical Review* 10 (1996), 193–211, <https://doi.org/10.1080/08913819608443417>.

15. See Tornike Metreveli, “An Undisclosed Story of Roses: Church, State, and Nation in Contemporary Georgia”, *Nationalities Papers* 44 (2016), 694–712, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00905992.2016.1200021>; Tornike Metreveli, *Orthodox Christianity and the Politics of Transition: Ukraine, Serbia and Georgia*, Abingdon 2021.

admixture of the two) turn out to be the nationalist groups themselves, who direct nationalism on the liberal–illiberal axis through ongoing interpretations of the outsider or “other” as belonging (or not) to the nation.

The pioneering works recounted in this section are largely top-down accounts, which focused on the structural features of transformations, underestimating and sometimes even ignoring bottom-up trajectories, including the role of individual agency, in the making of nations and nationalism. This gap has been addressed by recent accounts, which attend to bottom-up elements and attempt to theorize the “here” and “now” of nationalism. In light of Michael Billig’s concept of *banal nationalism*, we learn how nationalism operates as a hidden discursive practice.¹⁶ Nationalism manifests when people produce and reproduce it; willingly or not, the idea of the nation-state is legitimized through routine (seemingly “banal”) activities. Hearn and Marco Antonsich distinguish between banal and everyday nationalism. If banal nationalism is more concerned with “subliminal discursive forms”, then “everyday nationalism focuses more on the ‘practical accomplishment of ordinary people doing ordinary things’”.¹⁷ If these scholars are correct about the (re)production of nationalism, further questions emerge: What are the implications of banal and everyday nationalism on macro-sociological processes? In what ways do *I* (an individual among others, a member of communities) reinscribe, indeed co-create nationalism, and ought I do so, or do otherwise?



The role of Christianity (conceived as narrowly or broadly as the reader chooses) in these dynamics is as incontestable as it is complex, at least throughout a significant portion of the world. It is clear that religious and national identities interweave, but how they usually do – as well as how best conceptually to frame the interactions between them – is not so obvious. Here we will introduce our contributions, each of which approaches Christianity and nationalism with different tools and against different backdrops.

Our first article, “When We Fail to Understand Ourselves: Reflections on Theology in the Crisis of Representation”, is authored by Ragnar M. Bergem, Associate Professor of Systematic Theology at the MF Norwegian School of Theology, Religion and Society. Bergem’s question is occasioned both by the ever-increasing seismic waves reverberating from the fault-lines

16. Michael Billig, *Banal Nationalism*, London 1995.

17. Jonathan Hearn & Marco Antonsich, “Theoretical and Methodological Considerations for the Study of Banal and Everyday Nationalism”, *Nations and Nationalism* 24 (2018), 594, <https://doi.org/10.1111/nana.12419>.

running through today's liberal democracies, and by the observation that a "crisis of representation" – and, deeper still, a problem of social unintelligibility – lie underneath them. What is theology's role, asks Bergem, in analyzing and responding to this problem? What repositories are available within Christian traditions and communities for critiquing liberal democracy (including its false starts and failings), and for critiquing itself when it needs to? One of Bergem's crucial claims – shared, of course, by liberation and other theologies – is that the semantics of God's relationship to humanity (the "vertical") is never removed from the shape of relationships between creatures (the "horizontal"). Bergem concludes by offering several reflections on what it would mean for theology to approach a crisis of representation, attentive to the fact that theology itself is always entangled with its object of critique.

Second, we have Julia Reed, an instructor in History of Science at Harvard University, whose piece is titled "Sovereignty, Sedition, and Sacrament in the Affair of the Placards (1534–1535)". Here, our author uncovers – occasioned in an acute but textured theological controversy in sixteenth-century France – one possible window into the unique dynamics of the origin of the early modern French state's religious identity. The thread running through her analysis of the affair concerns theology, state theatricality, and the public: the monarchical response to challenges to sixteenth-century French Roman Catholicism may not indicate, without doubt, the real presence of nationalism *per se*, but implicitly we see both church and state reaching for, grasping at, and in the end, efficiently wielding theological tools to craft and reinscribe narratives of French religious exceptionalism in opposition both to the theology of the radical placards and to moderate reforms. When the monarch has consolidated power – well, what just happened? It is tempting to see portents of late modern, even twentieth-century forms of nation in the brew, but Reed cautions against this, remarking on a "specifically Gallic" and a "particularly French anxiety" about the connection between sacrality, sovereignty, and a public sense of national belonging. The crucial meta-question we ask of and with Reed concerns the limits of generalizability, indeed the limits of history: When do these particular things (indeed, the fragments of this historical document I hold in my hands) teach me about myself, when do they teach me about themselves, and on what grounds can we tell the difference?

Jason Hoult, an instructor at St. Jerome's University in Ontario, offers no apologies for the thrust of his article, made clear in its title: "The Freedom of Religion Is a Divine Idea". With agility, Hoult springs between biblical texts and several titans in the history of religious thought – Baruch

Spinoza (1632–1677), Immanuel Kant (1724–1804), and Jacques Derrida (1930–2004) – to leverage an argument about the origin and characteristics of the idea of religious liberty: namely that the features of that very idea preclude a merely natural origin, yet while simultaneously refusing the ascription of the supernatural. Here, we find Hoult’s move analogous in structure to so-called “trademark” arguments for God, such as that of René Descartes’ (1596–1650) third meditation.¹⁸ Readers may have difficulty classifying Hoult as an author; his piece resists the label of confessional theology yet adopts some interests, positions, and methods associated therewith. If there is such a thing as a religion of philosophy or morality – and if, indeed, it is fair to dub this piece a representative thereof – then we might recognize Hoult’s argument as issuing us a challenge about the ways we adapt, adopt, and divide our own explicit or implicit commitments: Which canons (philosophical, theological, political) can, indeed *must*, we embrace, then critique, yet ultimately transgress in order to critique, then transgress, yet ultimately embrace the once-hidden ideas espoused therein? If we do not recognize that democratic ideas are fundamentally distinct from nature in some crucial way, Hoult argues, then we risk losing them, or abusing them. A further challenge emerges, then, for those studying nationalism: If we grant Hoult’s conclusion, then what would it mean to study human beings – and their attempts at realizing democracy – empirically (as political *animals*, whose habits can be observed, theorized, explained, and perhaps predicted to some degree)?

The final contribution to the special issue is by Lucilla Pan, Assistant Professor of Philosophy at Manhattanville College. Pan offers a reframing of a widely taught work by Søren Kierkegaard (1813–1855). Her interpretation exemplifies one of myriad possibilities for invoking the history of philosophy and religious thought to shed light on contemporary problems – and in turn, to have light shed on the history of religious thought *by* contemporary problems. As *Fear and Trembling* (1843) – a work whose political ramifications are understudied – may have something critical to say about the constitution and identity of a nation, so might the study of nationalism have something to say about *Fear and Trembling*, a text which, with its whirlpool of concepts, archetypes, and characters, exposes itself – so Pan argues – as both interlocutor about, and potential participant in, a project of national

18. See René Descartes, “Meditations on First Philosophy”, in John Cottingham, Robert Stoothoff & Dugald Murdoch (eds.), *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes*, vol. 2, Cambridge 1984, 35: “The whole force of the argument lies in this: I recognize that it would be impossible for me to exist with the kind of nature I have – that is, having within me the idea of God – were it not the case that God really existed. By ‘God’ I mean the very being the idea of whom is within me.”

identity. Here, Pan asks whether Kierkegaard's Abraham might be a surprising (but subtle) figuration of resistance against certain political formations we observe today and have observed before, while serving as the father of a "nation" in a very different way. While Pan ascribes to *Fear and Trembling* a formulation of nationalism's relationship to Christianity that our research platform has attempted, in the past, to complicate – namely that nationalist movements unilaterally coopt well-meaning or apolitical Christianity for political ends – it is perhaps expected for research on Kierkegaard to argue that he privileges, in just this way, the supposed purity of Christianity in opposition to corrupting political forces.



As we have previewed above, this issue's articles will offer views into the conditions of *nation* and *nationalism* from outside contemporary nationalism studies, or perhaps from a position that straddles the boundaries of the inside and outside of nationalism studies. We hope that they contribute in unexpected ways to focused research – sociological and beyond – on nationalism, and on nationalism's and Christianity's interlocking braids throughout history. ▲