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Continuity and the Emergence of Nationalism: Recognizing the Political Dimension of Church-State Relations

In *Imagined Communities*, Benedict Anderson argues that nations, which have emerged over the last two centuries as the fundamental ordering principle of the international system, are “imagined communities.” Imagined not because they are a fabrication or essentially false but because, despite the fact that citizens will never meet most of the fellow members of their nation, somehow “in the minds of each [member] lives the image of their communion”(6). Here I argue that, although the idea of an imagined community is provocative and memorable, Anderson's over-reliance on the importance of “imagining” becomes a gimmicky, catch-all explanation for the very complex historical process of nationalism. The contributions of Smith and Garrard-Burnett help to fill-out Anderson's explanation. Garrard-Burnett does so by turning our attention to issues of agency and resistance. Smith, on the other hand, convincingly highlights the importance of persisting “ethnic-mosaics” and the exclusionary characteristics of ethnic identities. Still, what is lacking from all the readings is a clear recognition of the fact that nationalism is a *political* solution to states' problem of achieving legitimacy and control over the masses. It is in this sense that religion plays an important role. Rather than mark the “dusk of religious modes of thought”(Anderson, 11), the nationalist age is defined by state elites' attempts to co-opt religion and thus fuse culture with the bureaucratic and administrative elements of state control.

According to Anderson, the advent of capitalism, massive advances in the technology of communication and the spread of literacy and “vernaculars” gave rise to nationalism. He claims that this “half-fortuitous, but explosive” interaction “assembled” and “gave a new fixity to language” in such a way that, despite being spontaneous, organic and unselfconscious, made the imagination of new national communities possible. Yet just how spontaneous or fortuitous are these processes? Who was it exactly that provided the educational services necessary to spread literacy and propagate the vernaculars that then ignited nationalist sentiments? While Anderson mentions the importance of the

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Reformation and the “colossal religious propaganda war that raged across Europe for the next century”(40), he fails to mention how political leaders, such as Elizabeth I of England and/or Henry the IV or Catherine De Medici of France handled and often attempted to capitalize on these wars to bolster their own authority. Were the absolutest leaders of early-modern Western Europe somehow oblivious to the fact they needed to temper the political role of the church and establish the loyalty of the masses to preserve their positions? The historical record suggests they were not. Because Anderson builds his argument from a largely structuralist view point, he is unable to explain why people mobilize around and come to “imagine” a secular national entity rather than something else, for example their religious community.

Here the article on indigenous resistance by Garrard-Burnett is relevant. Whereas Anderson appears to simply assume that anyone and everyone with a shared language will somehow come to fortuitously accept a language-based national identity, Garrard-Burnett turns our attention to what happens when the masses refuse to embrace the nationalizing efforts of the state. “The creation of an imagined community,” writes Garrard-Burnett “is dependent in large part on the voluntary association of citizens with the state rather than their forced allegiance”(52). The question thus becomes: what exactly cultivates this “voluntary association” with the state? This is where I would argue that the role of the Church, and the contentious relationship between the Church and the state, is often of central importance. When the state is able to use the Church (with which most citizens are already voluntarily associated) to legitimate its own objectives while simultaneously relegating it to a role of secondary importance in terms of political power and influence, a national identity is able to develop.

It is Smith's assessment of the importance of religion that renders his work more convincing than Anderson's. First, Smith acknowledges the durability of “ethnic mosaics” and correctly recognizes that religious factors are “the pivotal element in crystallizing and maintaining ethnic identity”(124) over time. Rather than view the death of religion as the inevitable result of modernization and a prerequisite for the emergence of nationalism as does Anderson, Smith contends

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that because modernization processes were uneven across societies “religious organizations within those societies reacted in different ways” (159). This variation created a “wide range of accommodations between religion and the state” that exist still today. Furthermore, I believe Smith is correct in his emphasis on the exclusionary nature of *ethnies* and the national sentiments that develop around these *ethnies* in the modern era. Whereas Anderson considers nationalism to be an inclusive phenomenon built around the printed-word, Smith highlights the role that salvation religions play in forming the mythic and symbolic fodder of nationalist passions. Far from inclusive, these religious traditions are “exclusive and dominant”, seek “a monopoly of control in a given territory”, and “reject syncretism”(123). Given the sheer number of wars and conflicts that have taken in place in the name of defining the boundaries of the nation, including the issue of who is eligible to be a part of the nation, Smith's emphasis on the exclusionary element of *ethnies* is much more convincing.

Still what even Smith's argument lacks (or at least the chapters we read) is a depiction of how elites, whether dynastic and absolutist or modern and liberal, work to legitimate their own rule and the centralization of the state administrative apparatus by co-opting religious symbols and myths. Here it is worth noting that what these elites chose *not* to include when propagating their idea of a national consciousness is often as powerful as those ethnic/religious elements that they do include. For example, although the elites who nationalized the Turkish state created an exclusionary national identity based around “Muslim-ness”, they went on to re-write the history of the Turkish War of Independence as a secular, national and territorial struggle rather than the religious war that it really was. I would argue that this dual approach to religion, co-opting it as mechanism for developing a collective identity while simultaneously working to undermine its political importance, is a tool that has been used in various forms from the early-modern period to the present day and thus should be recognized in theories that seek to explain the evolution of nationalism. Just because nationalism emerged in the modern era does not mean that modernization caused nationalism. More convincing would be an argument that focuses on how elites tried to solve the problems of centralizing state authority with respect to the cultural and

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religious realities of the territories they hoped to consolidate.