1 Faith and Flag

Religion has a powerful hold on the nationalist imagination. Many a nationalist struggle has come to be inflected, even appropriated, by religious discourses and authority figures. At the same time, the rise of nationalism and the emergence of nation-states have also produced nationalizing effects on religious communities. Either way, it is clear religious identity and conceptions of nationhood cannot be understood divorced from the social, cultural, and historical contexts of societies and their interactions with power. This contention is premised on the view that "nationalism is a field of debates about the symbol of the nation, and national identity is a relational process enacted in social dramas and 'events' as well as in everyday practices."[1] It is bearing this in mind that the following proposition is made: in Southeast Asia, the role of religion in political conflicts and contestations is best understood in the context of national identity formation and contestation that continues to define much of post-independence politics in the region.

Before proceeding to see how this plays out in the study of religious conflicts in several cases drawn from Southeast Asia, it is necessary to first consider the theoretical literature in terms of the political aspects of religion and the religious impulses of nationalism. Towards that end, this chapter will introduce and discuss the current literature and debates that define the fields of religious conflict and nationalism studies, and how they intersect and speak to each other, before making its case for a view of religious nationalism that accounts for the dynamic and intimate relationship between the notions of religious faith, identity, rights, and belonging.

Religion

Until recently, scholarly study of religion – whether in its monotheistic or polytheistic forms – as a sociological phenomenon had been for the most

[1] Genevieve Zubrzycki, "National Culture, National Identity, and the Culture(s) of the Nation" in Laura Grindstaff, John R. Hall, and Ming-cheng Lo (eds.), *Sociology of Culture: A Handbook*. London: Routledge, 2010, p. 514.

part relegated to the backwaters of social sciences. With the emergence of modernization and rationalist theory as dominant paradigms in the field after the Second World War, interest in religion as a phenomenon that impacted on social, political, and economic developments diminished considerably.[2] Consequently, its study was largely confined to the disciplines of theology and religious studies. Yet today, it is readily and ironically apparent that religion continues to shape social and political affairs in many parts of the world. The most evident example of this, of course, can be found in the field of terrorism studies, which experienced something of a resurgence after the September 11 terrorist attacks. This has in turn triggered widespread interest in the role of confessional faith as a cause of political contestations in societies that have witnessed conflict.[3]

The intent here is not to examine the whole tangle of issues associated with religion in society. Rather, it is to find a path through which observations on religious violence and conflict can be made and interrogated against the social and historical contexts in which they have emerged. To that end, any attempt to explain the salience of the factor of religion in contemporary politics will have to come to terms with that most provocative school of thought, which resonates as strongly as ever today, that posits a causal relation between religion and violence.

Religion as a Source of Conflict and Violence?

A vast literature on the relationship between religion and political violence emerged immediately after the terrorist attacks of September 11, although there was some scholarly interest in the topic prior to the tragic events of that day. A major school of thought that emerged from this literature proceeds from the premise that religion is in essence predisposed to conflict and, in extreme cases, violence. While arguments hypothesizing a correlation between religion and conflict are varied, they essentially turn on one main point: religion causes violence because it inherently promotes identity politics of the most conflictual kind by way of establishing truth claims that its adherents maintain are infallible and

[2] Jeffrey K. Hadden, "Towards Desacralizing Secularization Theory," *Social Forces*, Vol. 65, No. 3, 1987, pp. 587–611; Daniel Philpott, "The Religious Roots of Modern International Relations," *World Politics*, Vol. 52, No. 2, 2000, pp. 206–245.

[3] To that end, it is worth noting that a rudimentary survey on conflicts driven by religious nationalism since the 1980s has identified that such conflicts are on the rise. See Jonathan Fox, "The Rise of Religious Nationalism and Conflict: Ethnic Conflict and Revolutionary Wars, 1945–2001," *Journal of Peace Research*, Vol. 41, No. 6, November 2004, pp. 715–731.

transcendent. This implies an epistemological rigidity that is given to rejection of nuance or alternatives.

To scholars such as Mark Juergensmeyer, the debate over religious violence is polarized between two camps. On one side, non-religionists argue that religion is "the problem" due to its propensity for a militant brand of politics. Proponents of this view point specifically to Islam's complex relationship to politics, for instance, as the central causal factor for violence that has plagued the Middle East.[4] On the other side stand those who argue that in cases where violence was perpetrated in the name of religion, what actually transpired was that confessional faith had been hijacked by militant groups to justify other objectives. Religion, then, was but a veil that concealed insidious yet mundane intentions. With respect to how religion might be instrumentalized in this fashion, the point is made that such groups are more often than not driven by secular motivations, and religion is only tangentially implicated by way of being used as tropes to legitimize their cause. This latter interpretation has been particularly prevalent in discussions of extremism in Southeast Asia, where scholars and policy-makers have dismissed the actions of militants as being those of "misguided" Muslims who had been "led astray" by rogue clerics. For Juergensmeyer, the susceptibility of religion to instrumentalization by such political actors is a result of "the involvement of religion in public life" where "a strain of violence . . . may be found in the deepest levels of the religious imagination."[5]

Juergensmeyer further suggests that acts of religious violence take the form and logic of symbolic performance and are often conceived of as cosmic wars where the struggle is perceived as a defense of basic identity and dignity, hence losing the struggle would be unthinkable even though the struggle ultimately cannot be won in any real sense. Central to this conception of religious violence as cosmic conflagrations is the fact that they are often fought on a symbolic plane and are not given to immediate resolution because their timeline extends far into the distant future (i.e., the return of Christ or the Mahdi, the attainment of Nirvana, God's eternal judgment), unlike secular political violence which tends toward a utilitarian and strategic endgame.

Another fact about the emphasis on the symbolic is that it also effectively delineates boundaries, thereby lending itself to conflictual depictions of identity and difference defined in religious terms. This idea is developed by Wellman and Tokuno, who opine that "the symbolic

[4] See, for instance, Bernard Lewis, *The Crisis of Islam: Holy War and Unholy Terror*. New York: Random House, 2004.

[5] Mark Juergensmeyer, "Is Religion the Problem?" *Hedgehog Review*, Vol. 6, No. 1, Spring 2004, pp. 4–5.

boundaries of religion provide a powerful engine for individual and group identity formation."[6] These boundaries shape individual and social identities and inspire group formation and mobilization, in the process engendering and entrenching communal identities and establishing in- and out-groups. As the two authors explain, the symbolic and social building blocks of religion allow "religious communities to gain their identity through conflict and tension with out-group cultures."[7] In this regard, conflict is not merely a function of social interaction; rather, it forms the basic sustenance of religious identities. It is this divisive quality to religion – particularly in the monotheistic Abrahamic faiths one is often reminded – that lends it to conflict. As Talal Asad cautions, religion is "the source of uncontrollable passions within the individual and dangerous strife within the commonwealth. It could not, for this reason, provide an institutional basis for common morality – still less a public language for rational criticism. . . . Religion is what actually or potentially divides us, and if followed with passionate conviction, may set us intolerantly against one another."[8]

The work of religious conflict scholars bears striking similarities with each other. The point about religion fomenting discord and being prone to violence because of its propensity to establish truth claims that are infallible and transcendent – namely, the absolutist and non-rational nature of religion – is reinforced to varying degrees in the scholarship of Hector Avalos, Charles Kimball, R. Scott Appleby, and Charles Selengut. According to this train of thought, religion is prone to violence because its claims are unverifiable (Avalos), rely on blind obedience (Kimball), premised on the defense of the sacred (Appleby), and beyond scientific understanding (Selengut).[9] To interrogate the details of every assumption underlying these works would take this study too far afield. Rather, the pertinent point here is that the "religion is prone to violence" argument casts a harsh light on religion by depicting it as a transhistorical and transcultural phenomenon on the basis of any combination of the aforementioned points. Yet such over-simplification tends however to obscure more than illuminate, for, as the rest of this chapter intends to

[6] James K. Wellman, Jr. and Kyoko Tokuno, "Is Religious Violence Inevitable?" *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, Vol. 43, No. 3, September 2004, p. 292.
[7] Ibid., p. 292.
[8] Talal Asad, *Genealogies of Religion: Discipline and Reasons of Power in Christianity and Islam*. Baltimore, MD.: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993, pp. 205–207.
[9] See Hector Avalos, *Fighting Words: The Origins of Religious Violence*. Amherst, N.Y.: Prometheus Books, 2005; Charles Kimball, *When Religion Becomes Evil*. New York: HarperCollins, 2008; Scott Appleby, *The Ambivalence of the Sacred: Religion, Violence, and Reconciliation*. New York: Rowman & Littlefield, 2000; Charles Selengut, *Sacred Fury: Understanding Religious Violence*. New York: Rowman & Littlefield, 2008.

illustrate, religious conflicts have to be properly contextualized according to culture and historical circumstances that give rise to it.

There are two crucial points that stand out from this discussion thus far on how religious violence has been theorized in the field. First, as suggested earlier and as scholars like William Cavanaugh have persuasively argued elsewhere, far from being transhistorical and transcultural, the role of religion has to be contextualized, particularly in relation to conceptions of identity since the element of "othering" plays such an important part in conceptualizing religious conflict.[10] Second, it is the matter of intent behind violence and not merely the act itself – the "why" rather than "how" question – that should be subjected to closer scrutiny. While it is reasonably clear from this literature how communities read and understand their faith in a way that may provoke violence in the name of religion, why they chose to do so is arguably less apparent.

In terms of our interest in conflictual interactions over the nature of national identity that might lead to contentious politics, the point needs to be made that violence in the name of religion is not merely an expression of "othering" as noted above but, more to the point, the politics of exclusion that defines the process of the conceptualization and building of the nation. This is a particularly salient point in many instances because religion is often inextricably linked to other facets of identity and by virtue of that plays an important role in the construction and collective mobilization of these identities, where the symbolic and social building blocks of religion allow religious communities to reinforce their identity through conflict with the out-group.[11] It is for this reason that, as Amy Gutmann explains, "the enduring power of religion over people's sense of identity can scarcely be doubted."[12]

In the main, explanations of conflicts based on arguments about religion's inherent propensity toward violence thence do not take us far in explaining why groups and communities chose religion through which to frame their collective action, let alone the many instances when confessional piety has not triggered conflict. In order to obtain a clearer picture of the identity construction, exclusion, and "othering" effect of religiously defined conflicts and contestations, it is apropos to first have a sense of religion as a social phenomenon and ascriptive identity, and

[10] See William T. Cavanaugh, *The Myth of Religious Violence: Secular Ideology and the Roots of Modern Conflict*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2009.

[11] Consider, for instance, the burning of churches in Malaysia in the wake of the controversy over the rights of non-Muslims to use the word "Allah" in reference to their own God, which can be interpreted as an act to reinforce and defend the boundaries of the Malay nation, defined in religious terms, against encroachment by the non-Malay, non-Muslim "others."

[12] Gutmann, *Identity in Democracy*, p. 153.

the social, political, and cultural dynamics that both generate, and are informed by, it. For those who study the non-Western world, it can be argued that colonialism has played a pivotal role in constructing these ascriptive elements to religious identity. Hence, it is to this that we now turn.

Religion and Colonialism

In terms of the importance of context to understanding religious conflicts, a major epistemological problem with the scholarship on religious violence cited above is the tendency to overlook how religion is often imbricated with the configurations of power and authority of the day. In response, a poignant note of caution has been sounded by William Cavanaugh, who in his study of the etymology and history behind the term "*religio*" concludes that the concept in fact developed different meanings and understandings over time so as to encompass, among other things, civic oaths, family rituals, and even habituated disciplines of body and soul. Of particular relevance for current purposes is his point that even in Western societies, religion was traditionally never separated from politics, culture, family obligations, devotion to God or gods, and civic duties. In other words, rather than an abstract transhistorical and transcultural concept that is devoid of any sort of context, religion was, and remains, highly contextualized in how it relates to and reflects culture, history, and society of the circumstances around which it emerged.[13]

On this matter of religion as an ontological reality, a further note of caution should be sounded. At a more fundamental level of etymology, as a concept religion is a decidedly Western concept, born of Western civilization and superimposed onto Asian societies. The tendency to view religion as separate from secular politics is indeed a facile demarcation that can be traced to two monumental developments in Western civilization from the early 16th through to the late 17th centuries – the Reformation and the Renaissance.[14] Briefly, the period of the Reformation in Christendom sought to reform the doctrines and ecclesiastical structure of the Roman Catholic Church. This precipitated a break from the Roman Catholic Church's dominance and sole authority, and the forceful challenge against corruption in Rome subsequently undermined the link between religion and the political structure in a way that eventually

[13] Cavanaugh, *The Myth of Religious Violence*, p. 61.
[14] Consider the essays in Ira Katznelson and Gareth Stedman Jones (eds.), *Religion and the Political Imagination*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010.

gave rise to many "new (Christian) religions" in the form of Lutheranism, Calvinism, Anabaptists, Gnosticism, and so on. The age of the Renaissance, on the other hand, set great store by the advance of scientific rationality and the birth of a new political economy across Western civilization. This development in the late 17th century triggered something of a retreat of religion as it was cast in contradistinction to the secular. By this token, the Renaissance proved a midwife to a secular order premised on the purportedly neutral, factual, and quantifiable, where natural laws could be derived through scientific rationality. In this novel conception of the world, scientific knowledge was construed as a product of natural human processes distinct from "revealed" religious knowledge. Consequently, religion was relegated to the realm of personal piety and the private domain of belief and practice. With this, the separation of church and state came into being. Not only that, this materialist prism through which religion came to be viewed would also influence social scientific study of the phenomenon in time to come.

What transpired in Europe was soon transplanted elsewhere. The imperialist expansion of the Western worldview through the vehicle of the European colonial enterprise into Africa, the Middle East, and Asia transformed this ideological division of religion from the secular into a tool of domination in these societies. Specifically, the attribution of religion to backward traits of indigenous people, as compared to European rationality, served as a way to depoliticize their cultures, whereby the demarcation of native practices as "religious" allowed the colonizer to relegate them to the realm of superstition and irrationality, after which they (both the religions and those who practiced them) could be dismissed as inconsequential artefacts of the past. Even when indigenous religions were engaged, they were interrogated through the lens of Christian religiosity via the discipline of comparative religion, which predictably resulted in local religious beliefs registering at the lower end of the evolutionary scale of Enlightenment logic.[15]

In this manner, colonialism provided both the mechanism and vehicle through which the Western conceptualization of religion was imposed onto non-Western cultures, which they then labeled and reified. This scientific process combined with the military power of imperialism

[15] Typifying this scholarship is E. B. Tylor, Max Muller, James G. Frazer, etc. See Joan Leopold, *Culture in Comparative and Evolutionary Perspective: E. B. Tylor and the Making of Primitive Culture*. Berlin: Dietrich Reimer Verlag, 1980; Jon R. Stone (ed.), *The Essential Max Muller: On Language, Mythology, and Religion*. New York: Palgrave, 2002; Timothy Fitzgerald (ed.), *Religion and the Secular: Historical and Colonial Formations*. London: Equinox Publishing Ltd, 2007.

ensured that there was no closely equivalent concept that approximates religion in any culture that has not been influenced by Western intellectual tradition.[16] What the colonial enterprise refused to acknowledge or accept was the fact that while forms of "religious systems" did exist in the colonized worlds, each community's religious system was neither identified as, nor were they conceived as, something that was distinct from other facets of society: "it (religion) was not a distinct entity in the lives, or in the minds, of the people."[17] For the non-Western world, religion was – and remains – very much a part of their identity, their society, and their modernity.

A central premise behind colonial conceptions of identity was the primordialist view of how claims of collective exclusivity and inherent tendencies tend toward xenophobia and intolerance, which, primordialists would in turn argue by extension, are predictable outcomes of the uncivilized (or natural) human condition and their pathologies. Indeed, one example of such gratuitous racialized thinking is the English word "amok" – which has become a recognized scientific term today for an apparently diagnosable psychological condition in the field of clinical psychology – which was derived from the observed and recorded (by the British) tendency of Malays to be given to unpredictable and violent frenzied behaviour.[18] On the other hand, this primordialist focus on inherency tends to overlook peaceful relations between communities which otherwise have significant cultural differences.[19]

More to the point, these primordial explanations are flawed since "they fail to make the distinction between cultural identity and politically relevant cultural identity" and merely assume that all cultural markers lend themselves to exclusionary claims that may incite extremism and violence.[20] In contrast to this view, it is contended here that it is not

[16] Wilfred Cantwell Smith, *The Meaning and End of Religion*. Minneapolis, MN.: Fortress Press, 1991.
[17] Cavanaugh, *The Myth of Religious Violence*, p. 54.
[18] See John E. Carr, "Ethno-Behaviorism and the Culture-Bound Syndromes: The Case of Amok," in Ronald C. Simons and Charles C. Hughes (eds.), *The Culture-Bound Syndromes: Folk Illnesses of Psychiatric and Anthropological Interest*. Dordrecht: D. Reidel Publishing Company, 1985, pp. 199–223; S. Mohamed Hatta, "A Malay Crosscultural Worldview and Forensic Review of Amok," *Australian and New Zealand Journal of Psychiatry*, Vol. 30, No. 4, 1996, pp. 505–510.
[19] See Beverly Crawford, "The Causes of Cultural Conflict: An Institutional Approach" in Beverly Crawford and Ronnie D. Lipschutz (eds.), *The Myth of "Ethnic" Conflict: Politics, Economics, and "Cultural" Violence*. Berkeley, CA.: University of California-Berkeley, 1998. She elaborates on this using the example of Bulgarian Muslims and Christians, and Germans and French in Alsace-Lorraine.
[20] Ibid., p. 16.

the identity marker itself that triggers conflict and violence, but the fact that these identities can become politically charged through processes of ascription, as when cultural identity interacts with context and becomes a criterion, for example, for discrimination and privilege in the distribution of resources. In addition to that, primordialists tend to "ignore the role that the institutions of the state play in easing, perpetuating, or triggering cultural conflict by structuring incentives in ways that either exacerbate or attenuate the political relevance of cultural identity," meaning to say that institutions and incentives – oftentimes associated with the modern state – are just as culpable for religious conflicts.[21]

Over time, the colonial enterprise and politics of (colonial) state building laid the foundations upon which new polities were to be structured as political leadership changed hands from colonial administrators to an indigenous elite. This had two effects. First, this transition bequeathed not only institutions of modern statehood, but social and cultural constructions of identity as well, the ubiquitous *national census* being a foremost example. Coupled with the emergence of a global political economy, this ensured that colonial structures of governance, in particular the dissociation of religion from politics, remained, at least in theory, entrenched within newly independent nation-states. Second, the process of colonization had arbitrarily demarcated territorial boundaries within which a novel form of "modern" identity – civic brands of nationalism as Ernest Gellner termed them – was meant to trump indigenous loyalties based on ethnicity and religion.

The efficacy of the colonial enterprise, however, barely masks a critical conceptual tension. At the heart of this conceptual tension is the fact that when concepts such as "politics," "nationalism," and "religion" are analyzed, the tendency is to objectivize by presupposing the meanings they carry to be self-evident and clearly compartmentalized. Hence, extending this logic, what constitutes the "political" is supposedly distinct from what constitutes the "religious." As Ralph Nicholas points out, the Western notion of the "political" relies on the dichotomy between the sacred and secular, spiritual and temporal, and this explains why religion is often not taken seriously in the study of political phenomenon, or if it is, it tends to be reified as a destabilizing and anti-modern phenomenon, a tendency the preceding discussion on the themes of religion and political violence has already identified.[22] By this token, the political as a secular and instrumentalist pursuit is somehow different from, or even contrary

[21] Ibid., p. 12.
[22] Ralph W. Nicholas, "Social and Political Movements," *Annual Review of Anthropology*, Vol. 2, 1973, pp. 63–84.

to, religion, which lies deep in the realm of the sacred;[23] furthermore, the obsession with the secular state as "the epitome of political modernity, where religion is seen as anti-modern and off the political map" has tended to "deny or play down, even in the face of contrary evidence, the importance of religion in the daily lives of citizens and the state."[24]

The crux of the matter is that when modernity as defined by the West is confronted with very different notions of the political, they have difficulties explaining them. It is in the attempt to resolve this tension that Nicholas suggests concepts such as "culture" and "religion" are invoked to explain many aberrations from the expected patterns and conventions of political development rather than treated as fundamental to an understanding of what politics is conceived to be in different social and political contexts.[25]

The Intersection of Religion and Politics

All this is to say that, contrary to popular belief rooted in Western conceptions of the separation of church and state, religion can be a highly charged political phenomenon, and one that exists in a mutually constitutive relationship with modernity. This occurs when political entrepreneurs and actors define politics as a religious obligation, and legitimacy claims are articulated using religious vocabulary. In the event, not only does religion provide a sense of community and ascriptive identity, as well as moral and ethical direction, for many in the world, but also it can potentially translate to an alternative political order. This is perhaps most profoundly, though not exclusively, demonstrated today in Islam, or more specifically Islamism, where, contrary to the claims of some scholars, the ideological belief that in Islam lies the panacea to the social, economic, and political problems confronting the Muslim world today appears to be on the rise.[26] Indeed, Peter van der Veer acknowledges this when he criticizes secularization theory for transplanting presuppositions

[23] In this regard, consider Ernest Gellner's claim that the agrarian world was "far too well provided with religions" for them all to survive "even in transmogrified form, as ethnic units." See Ernest Gellner, *Nations and Nationalism*. Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1983, p. 72.

[24] Judith Nagata, "Open Societies and Closed Minds: The Limits of Fundamentalism in Islam," *ICIP Journal*, Vol. 2, No. 2, March 2005, p. 3.

[25] Nicholas, "Social and Political Movements," p. 67.

[26] The French scholars of Islam, Olivier Roy and Gilles Keppel, have both offered arguments in favor of the decline of Islamism. See Olivier Roy, *The Failure of Political Islam*. Cambridge, MA.: Harvard University Press, 1994; Gilles Keppel, *Jihad: The Trail of Political Islam*. Cambridge, MA.: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2002; Olivier Roy, *Globalized Islam: The Search for a New Ummah*. London: C. Hurst & Co., 2004.