Over the past years, the various forms of intersection between religion and nationalism have increasingly been invoked as potent forces in framing and perhaps driving national and international conflicts. Accordingly, observers have examined the impact of these intersections on national and international conflicts – particularly in regard to political violence, and specifically as it relates to non-state actors. State politics, when determined by or framed in terms of nationalism fused with religious claims, have the potential to provoke protracted conflicts, infuse explicit religious beliefs and theories into politics and modes of governance, legitimize the exclusion of groups – including of fellow citizens – on the basis of interpreting sacred texts, and condone or instigate violence in the name of religiously embedded claims. In this introduction, we will examine the workings of such politics and discuss their implications for domestic, regional, and international conflicts. In this chapter, we define such politics as religiously legitimated or framed politics of sacredness.

Our central concern here (and in this volume as a whole) is not the relationship between religion and nationalism per se. We are interested in the influence of religion and religious claims, through their intertwining with nationalism, on state policies – domestically, regionally, and internationally. What stands at the center of our inquiry is the impact of the intertwining, particularly when religious claims and nationalism are fused to the extent that religious claims bestow sacredness on the state’s working of power. Examples include establishing the state’s identity; determining regime type, including governmentality and the questions of democracy and equality; codifying laws accordingly; defining the politics of state territoriality; endorsing particular perceptions of the “self” and the “other”; engaging in strategic and policy planning; and sanctioning state violence in the service of all of the above.

Scholarly discussions on the relationship between religion and nationalism and the emergence of the secularization paradigm and its critique have been exhaustive. Views range from suggesting that modern nationalism is distinctly secular, epitomizing modernity’s replacement of religion – what is known as the secularization
paradigm (e.g., Anderson 1991; Gellner 1994; Hobsbawm 1990; Taylor 1998) – to the view that nationalism has always been intrinsically religious (e.g., Asad 2003; Casanova 1994; Connolly 2011; Friedland and Moss 2016; Mahmood 2017; Norris and Inglehart 2010; Spohn 2003). The literature delves into the origins of the secularization paradigm, its historical determinants and influence of modernity, its functionality, impact on identity and conflict, and other implications. Many scholars have convincingly argued that modern nations and nationalisms are interwoven, albeit to very different extents and in diverse forms, with religious myths, narratives, symbolisms, or rituals (e.g., Brubaker 2012; Friedland 2001; Friedland and Moss 2016; Perica 2002; Shenhav 2007; Soper and Fetzer 2018). The views that divorce nationalism from religion, reject the possibility that religious elements are integrated in nationalism, or consider nationalism as modernity’s total replacement of religion have long been challenged in the literature on religion and nationalism.

We share the argument that has been broadly accepted in postcolonial literature that secularist and Eurocentric biases have shaped the view that nationalism replaced religion and became a distinctive category, as also highlighted by some contributors to this volume (e.g., Chapters 2, 4, 9, 10, and 13). Yet, while we accept this view, we also concur with Brubaker (2012, 16) that there remains the case that “the fundamental point of reference of nationalist politics is ‘the nation,’” and that political claims are made in the name of the nation and its distinctive doctrine of sources of legitimacy and political authority. This is why Brubaker argues for approaching the two – religion and nationalism – as fundamentally different despite their discursive intertwining. We therefore argue that it is important to examine the impact of the fusion between religion and nationalism upon the state’s ideological framing and its ensuing actions, because, in practice, it is the state that embodies the identity of the nation and acts on its behalf.

The term “fusion” of religion and nationalism that we use and that makes religious impact on state policies inevitable is similar to the term “intertwining” as defined by Brubaker (2012). It describes a relationship between religion and nationalism in which religion simply becomes so interwoven to the extent that the two fuse. This takes place when the boundaries of religion and nationalism coincide or when religion supplies “myths, metaphors and symbols that are central to the discursive or iconic representation of the nation” (Brubaker 2012, 9). In many cases of fusion between religious claims and nationalism that we study in this volume, like Zionism and the Hindutva, the religious substance not only shapes and highlights the distinctiveness of the group’s identity, history, and destiny (Smith 2008); the fusion

1 For some reviews, see Beshara (2019); Cragn, Manning, and Fazzino (2017); Ebaugh (2002); Gorski (2000); Gorski and Altunordu (2008).

2 Brubaker (2012) proposes four overlapping and non-exhaustive ways to study the relationship between religion and nationalism. In addition to the intertwining mentioned above, he suggests religion and nationalism as analogous phenomena – religion as an explanation of nationalism rather than an antithesis to it, and religious nationalism, which represents an alternative to secular nationalism.
of the two also provides the state with nationalism that integrates the vitality of foundational sacred texts, the assertions that the land is sacred (both in the political and religious sense), religio-national collective myths and symbols, and the very legitimation for state policies derived from religious claims embedded in this fusion.

At the same time, given the vast literature on the interactions, juxtapositions, and interlocking effects between religion and nationalism, we should address the question of what makes this intertwining or fusion different than other forms of interaction. This is particularly important in light of what we stated above – that we agree that all nationalisms have some sort of religious elements, roots, or traces. In this regard, narrowing this question to the inquiry posed by Brubaker (2012, 11) can help us: “What counts as religious message and imagery as opposed to religiously tinged or originally religious but subsequently secularized language and imagery?” This is a critical question, but one that is hard to address fully, because the answer, given the diverse historical contexts and multiple cases, often becomes a matter of interpretation influenced by power dynamics, including Western-centered intellectual and political predispositions and interests. Our answer goes to the heart of our concern and sidesteps the possible problematic of subjective interpretations: What counts as fusion is when religion and religious claims interact with nationalism in ways that are used to frame and/or legitimize the state’s political ideologies, decisions, and governance. This is why, in our view, when it comes to the impact of religious claims on state politics, lumping all cases of nationalism together by arguing that “all nationalisms have religious influence” misses a potentially major theoretical input. It leads to overlooking cases in which religious claims or the invocation of religious text and interpretations have a vital hold on nationalism in ways that become apparent in framing state policies. A distinctive feature of the state in such cases, as detailed below, is sacralizing politics embedded in religious claims and sacred religious texts.

Thus, in many instances (particularly before the recent rise of populism in the US and some European countries), modern nationalisms have traces of religious-like influence on state policies – for example, in the US and Europe (e.g., Bellah 1998; Brubaker 2012; Gorski 2017). In other cases, the politics and political works of religion and religious claims come to play a major role in the state by, for example, legitimizing state ideologies, strategies, and policies, because religion fuses with nationalism as in Sri Lanka (DeVotta 2007), India (Kamat and Matthew 2003; Nigam 2006; Sarkar 2002), the former Yugoslavia (Perica 2002; Sells 1999), and Israel (Bishara 2005; Chapters 2 and 3 in this volume). This also applies to some states with regional stature, such as Iran (Chapter 10 in this volume; Moallem 2005) and Saudi Arabia (Chapter 11 in this volume; al-Rasheed 2014). The nuances of the political impact of religious claims in these (and other) sites are not put always into productive conversation with one another.

Witnessing the rise of this kind of sacralization in world politics, our substantive line of investigation is inquiring to what extent do religious claims, texts, and
narrations regulate and legitimize state politics and shape state governance. To open the conversation, we take a comparative look at the contextualized role of religion and religious claims, analyze their impact on present hierarchies of power, and examine the resulting policies of ruling, control, and violent practices.

RELIGIOUS CLAIMS AND THE SACRALIZATION OF POLITICS

Our analysis seeks to examine how, through hegemonic nationalism, states invoke religious claims as being foundational for political and national claims in domestic and international politics, thus sacralizing the political. This sacralization bestows the certainty of religious sanctification even when invoked by nonreligious and secular actors. The emphasis on state policies in this regard is important because, as we show in this volume, states’ reliance, often explicitly, on religious claims or texts for justifying and legitimizing contentious policies is on the rise, although it is rather the non-state actors that have occupied political attention and academic research.

The concept of sacralized politics has been almost exclusively reserved to secular politics in the sense of conferring religious-like forms and significances (but not religious legitimation) to the political. For example, Demerath (2007, 66) defines sacralization as “the process by which the secular becomes sacred or other new forms of the sacred emerge, whether in matters of personal faith, institutional practice or political power. And sacralization may also occur gradually or suddenly, and may be sometimes temporary and occasionally reversible”; for example, sacralizing shared heritage in the form of “civil religion.” Similarly, in his study of the relationship among totalitarianism, secular religion, and modernity, Gentile (2004, 327) defines sacralization of politics as “the formation of a religious dimension in politics that is distinct from, and autonomous from traditional religious institutions.” This process happens all the time and becomes apparent when a political movement confers a sacred status on a political entity, such as the nation, the state, or the party (Gentile 2005). While Gentile studies the extreme manifestations of this process in totalitarian regimes, others discuss its prevalence in modern politics, including in democracies that developed their own “holy scriptures,” such as the constitution and “prophets” in the form of founding fathers, foundational myths, and symbols (Augusteijn, Dassen, and Janse 2013; Beshara 2019; Burrin 1997). Similar definitions with a tinge of religious substance penetration into the process of sacralization are offered by scholars examining other cases such as Moallem (2005, 124), who defines sacralization in her study of Iranian politics as “the convergence of religious and political agendas.” Similarly, examining the case of Turkey and the Justice and Development Party, Yabanci (2020, 95) shows that right-wing populism “spirals into sacralization of politics, particularly when populist actors fuse religious and nationalist appeals.”
In his comprehensive work on religion and secularism, Beshara (2019), while tracing the process of sacralizing the political space – the space of the state and the statist values – alerts us that sacredness is not equivalent to religion and emphasizes that in these instances, sacralization (of secular values, institutions, or leaders) does not equate to religion:

This applies to sacralizing individuals, institutions, or worldly values. Sanctification in itself does not produce an alternative worldly religion in this case. In addition, a minimum level of ritual worship is required . . . As for the feelings of people towards the sanctity of the homeland or the sanctity of human life, as in some charters and constitutions, these are human characteristics, which bestow sacredness and elevation to some values. (Beshara 2019, 65)

It is precisely here that our intervention seeks to revert to the original meaning of religious sacralization and investigate how religious claims confer sacredness, in this original sense, to the policies of states and how they bring to the forefront the invocation of religious legitimation of such policies. Our emphasis on sacralization, by which we mean religious legitimation or framing, of official state policies is an effort to contribute to highlighting the dangerous impact of sacralization on national and international politics. Indeed, often when religious legitimation of state policies is examined, one finds either references to rhetoric that has historically religious traces but is now fully secularized – at least for its “consumers” – or openly religious legitimation efforts led by social or religious organizations that are acting in non-governmental capacities outside the state’s official domain.

When religion is discussed as a force of legitimating social power, it has often been assumed that it does so as “a sphere of activity where efforts are deliberately made to influence, manipulate, and control people’s thoughts, feelings, and actions in accordance with various religious values” (Beckford 2017, 58) but in the social and not official sphere by religious groups. The direct actions of religious groups, particularly among the religious right, point to another way of political influence. This is done through political activities such as lobbying, legislative efforts, intervention in public discourse, and so on. Indeed, after reviewing the literature, Billings and Scott (1994, 178) conclude that “there is little doubt that religious activism currently influences the legitimacy of certain policies, the shape of constituencies and coalitions, levels of participation, cultural climates, and the social definitions of public and private spheres in the United States.” This activism seeks to influence public policy on related issues such as abortion, pornography, and violence in the media. In this sense, therefore, religion as a force of legitimation is mainly a reference to religious activists seeking to have their competing moral claims influence the public sphere (Gorski 2017).

Bellah (1987) maintains that religion and politics, both public and sacred, often needed each other for legitimation. In some cases, historically, “the political institution needed ideological justification and the assurance that its rule was legitimate or
at least preferable to the alternatives from the church” (Bellah 1987, 89). Taking Japan and the US as his case studies, he argues that in many contemporary societies, this mutual legitimation is no longer effective. In both cases, religion and politics were privatized and secularized and therefore lost their ability to provide legitimacy. Thus, religion influenced public life in the US by using religious but nonsectarian discourse, through social movements motivated by moral convictions. He concludes that religious influence in the US or “the religious superstructure of the American Republic . . . has been provided mainly by the religious community itself entirely outside of any formal political structure” (Bellah 1987, 197). This religious superstructure finds numerous ways to influence domestic policies, internal politics, and international policies. Riis (1998) provides a very similar European perspective in which the religious legitimation of states and their rulers is confined to European history. In recent history, when churches in Western Europe withdrew from the political space altogether, they tried to exert influence on issues related to the private sphere such as laws on divorce and abortion. The main sphere of visibility for religion in politics is within the private space, by the church itself. But even these attempts to influence policies do not often meet with much success, as demonstrated by the recent overturning of the long-standing prohibition on abortion in Ireland (Earnor-Byrne and Urquhart 2018).

Gorski (2017) decries that some in the religious right in America want to “make America Christian again” (or at least it should be governed by Christians) out of the belief that America was founded as a Christian country. But this is an ideology of one religious group, not even a political or governing party (notwithstanding its influence and intimate political relationships with power centers in the US and elsewhere). It is not a state ideology. ³

One area that has attracted considerable attention in the study of religious legitimation and justification of political behavior is political violence. But, with few noticeable exceptions in the field (such as Demerath 2007b; Perica 2002; Sells 1998; van der Veer 1994; and to a lesser extent Hall 2013⁴), the focus has been on non-state actors. For example, in the forty chapters of The Oxford Handbook on Religion and Violence (Juergensmeyer, Kitts, and Jerrynson 2013), not much attention is paid to state religious legitimation of violence. Similarly, major scholars in the field have given little attention to religiously based state violence (see, for example, the works of Appleby 2000; Hoffman 2006; Jones and Smith 2014; Juergensmeyer 2003; Shah, Stepan, and Toft 2012; Stern 2004), even though many share the view pointed out by

³ Gorski (2017) believes that the American democracy’s goal of balancing unity and diversity can be achieved by dedication to “a civic unity” based on the ideals of “liberty,” “equality,” “union,” and the “general welfare.” This unity, he argues, should be based on the shared status of American citizenship. He then says that civic unity is not based on religious identities, although it need not conflict with them. Gorski is not even talking about religious values but rather of values of American citizenship based on the secular ideals he discusses.

⁴ Hall (2013) had to go back to the Crusaders to demonstrate religiously legitimated state violence, but he also discusses the role of religion in colonization policies.
Toft (2012) that religiously motivated political violence can be more deadly and intractable.5

Both Lusthaus (2011) and Omar (2015) decry the neglect of state-sponsored violence when examining the religion and violence nexus, particularly by major scholars in the field. Each of the above researchers provides three examples of state violence with religious foundations. Omar examines three convincing cases: Bosnia-Herzegovina (1992–95); South Africa (1948–94); and the Gujarat state of India (2002). And Lusthaus examines Israel, Iran, and the US. While engaging with the particular arguments of each paper is beyond the scope of this chapter, the effort to refocus some attention on state violence is a welcome effort.6

Abulof (2014, 2016), who studies both Zionism and the concept of legitimacy, argues that Zionism has increasingly been using religion for the political legitimization of the (Jewish) state itself. Religious claims to legitimatize the very establishment and existence of the state fit well with the theme of this volume and with the chapters that examine similar cases. Like Aboluf, some chapters in this volume examine the roots and workings of the legitimation process, but we go further to examine how this legitimation in Zionism and other cases inevitably leads to a broad range of domestic governance and regional policies.

THE WORKINGS OF RELIGIOUSLY FRAMED SACRALIZED POLITICS

We do not claim that the religious discourse used in the process of sacralizing politics is simply a pretext or a ploy for achieving social and political goals, even if in some cases it might be. Furthermore, we maintain that the process of sacralizing politics is not considerably affected by whether religious claims represent sincere commitment emanating from religious convictions or is employed for purposes of political manipulation. Like Peter van der Veer (1994), in his study of religious nationalism in India, we maintain that the discourse as well as the use of religious claims in politics become constitutive and a defining feature of the political identity. Obviously, such discourse and its constituted identity enter a mutually reinforcing process. The performativity of the process itself, in the sense that it turns into a “discursive practice that enacts or produces that which it names,” creates political realities and promotes discourses that become part of social consensus (Butler 1993).

5 In studying the Israeli context, specifically the violence of “Price Tag” vigilantism, arrests of Palestinian children, and what she defines as the occupation of the senses, Shalhoub-Kevorkian (2015, 2017) suggests that state violence is legitimized by religious claims of biblical rights and chosenness.

6 For example, in the Iranian case, Lusthaus (2011) fails to connect any of his general arguments about Islam to one single action undertaken by the Iranian state; and in the case of the US, the connection he makes to religiously legitimated state violence is based on rhetoric that can be traced to remote religious roots such as the term “crusade” or the term “axis of evil.” Although important to investigate such rhetoric, it should be noted that the state actors who use it do not justify it with religious references, nor do the recipients of such rhetoric – the citizens – necessarily recognize it as religious.
Following Butler (1993, 13), we emphasize the extent to which the discourse gains “the authority to bring about what it names through citing the conventions of authority,” considering that in this case it is religious authority, such as the biblical, that is at play. The various chapters show that this religious authority can be employed to justify state domination, as in the cases of India or Israel, or to resist domestic domination and Western intervention, as in Iran under the shah, or to defy military occupation.

In making the claim that some forms of the interaction between religion and nationalism lead to sacralization of politics, we are aware of and agree with the body of research that criticizes the total separation between religion and nationalism and that underscores nationalism’s underlying religious components (Asad 1993, 2003; Friedland and Moss 2016; Norris and Inglehart 2010). Indeed this volume’s chapters share this view, and some contributors (e.g., Chapters 2, 4, 10, and 13) elaborate on why in the cases they study it is important to keep this perspective in mind. Yet there are cases of nationalism or national movements that represent or seek to create a full fusion of nationalism and religion, such as Zionism, the Hindutva, and Sinhalese Buddhist nationalism. The fact that all nationalisms have some sort of underlying religious components that were integrated into them during different historical processes should not blind us to the variance in the extent to which these components influence politics in each case, or to the fundamentally different types of nationalism in which religion or religious claims are not simply residues of a historical process, but are defining features of nationalism itself.

Religiously based sacralization of politics (hereafter sacralized politics) is the practice of appealing to religious claims, religious text, or religious beliefs to justify and legitimize policies, in any area, explicitly or in coded manner, regardless of the political actors’ religious or secular worldview. In its various forms of political encounter with national, religious, or ethnic groups in the same homeland, the sacralization of politics serves to sanction the power of one group and establish not only its exclusive sovereignty (even in multiethnic states) but also its exclusive political authority and belonging to a homeland. The sacralization of politics helps understand the way religious or ethnic affiliations become a racialized marker of difference and not a signifier of a particular theological interpretation or just cultural difference. It creates a matrix of power within which political life can be lived or articulated through racialized religiously based national or ethnic affiliation, and therefore it constructs discriminatory practices that can constitute an identity of

7 Indeed, the literature has extensively studied the “double function” of religion as a means of protest and galvanizer of liberation or as an apologetic force for an unjust status quo or even an instigator of communal violence (Appleby 2000; Berger 1967; Billings and Scott 1994). Turner (1991, 226) notes that “[o]n a global scale . . . religion often assumes renewed vitality as the cultural medium of political protest against internal colonialism by subnational cultures or against external colonialism by subordinated nationalism.”
privilege and the innumerable tangible and intangible advantages that can then flow from it.

The deployment of racialized discourses of sacredness and its religious distinctions are there to reaffirm the politics of religious exclusivity. Sacralized politics, we argue, depends upon particular racialized narrations that frame some as Others, confining them in spaces of difference – legally, culturally, and politically. Racialization, in this case, is an ongoing process reflected in structural relations of power, producing and maintaining the self and the Other – be it the non-Jew, non-Hindu, etc. – whose political rights can then be framed as violatable. Revealing the racialized contours of the sacralized politics and its governance and management can also show how resistance to it becomes inevitable.

Sacralization operates politically through numerous modes. To trace the matrix of power that sacralization of politics mobilizes, and when looking comparatively at the various case studies examined in this volume, we point to three main (among other) modes of sacralization’s profound impact on politics. The first operates through managing consciousness, including the construction of self-identity in relation to others; the second, through territoriality and the politics of land; and the third via political governance, using violence and a necropolitical regime of control. While each mode can operate separately, all operate through mutual reinforcement and each with elements of sacredness, resulting in an emergent power structure that is self-sustaining and resistant to change. In what follows, we briefly describe the workings of each mode.

1. Managing consciousness and the construction of self-identity in relation to others. We here refer to the construction of politically and ideologically motivated imagination, embedded in religious claims to maintain the “purity” of the nation and its culture (see, for example, Chapters 4, 7, 8, and 9 in this volume), its religiously justified perception of “chosenness,” its fulfilling the word of the Deity, or using religious texts to legitimize political acts – even if by secular agents. Such processes engage communities and nations in dynamics that not only rationalize and legitimate prejudiced ideologies that support privileges for one’s own group vis-à-vis others, but also rationalize constructing a collective self that internalizes supremacy and exclusivity – at a minimum to justify the privileges endorsed by the sacred – and makes it commonly narrated and socially shared.

Narrations of exclusivity founded on sacralized accounts function to produce affects, patterns of acting, and modes of thinking that consolidate a collective self-perception of being “chosen.” Narrating exclusivity to construct the self in relation to the Other can be found in the case of the Hindutva in India, for example. As discussed in Chapter 7, the Hindutva, as apparent in the language, writings, and rhetorical passion used by Savarkar, not only makes Hindu and Indian synonymous, it also aims to construct Muslims as seeking to
destroy the Hindu faith, and argues that non-Hindus may stay in the country only if they accept being subordinated, as non-deserving Others. Building an entire narration that constructs the sacred Hindu body as having been injured by non-Hindus, Hindutva accused Muslims of violence, including demolishing Hindu temples, killing cows (which are sacred to Hindus), abducting and raping Hindu women, and so on. This sensational narration against Muslims, aimed at searing the public consciousness and legitimizing racialized ideologies, positions the Hindu as superior and the Muslim as inferior. Hence, performativities of sacralized politics are not only about acting, speaking, using sacred scripts, and participating as having intrinsically been born with power. Such performativities are also about using sacralized politics to reproduce dominance and dominant structures.

In much the same way as supremacy comes to define the settler colonial, or as Memmi (1991, 56) maintains that “[t]he colonial situation manufactures colonialists, just as it manufactures the colonized” – supremacy can come to define the groups, ideologies, or powers that sacralize politics to govern, as described in this volume in the cases of the Hindutva in India, Sinhalese Buddhist nationalism in Sri Lanka, and Zionism in Israel/Palestine. This can help explain how and why individuals, communities, and states maintain a sense or even entrenched conviction of “chosenness” and, by definition, of entitlement to privileges and superiority over others.

The processes of narrating exclusivity and accumulating privileges develop with time and come to affect the individual and collective selves, as well as the belief system. As Lloyd’s Chapter 12 on Northern Ireland shows in reference to Ulster’s Unionists, “What begins then as no more than ‘an identification with British social and political institutions’ devolves into a constitutive claim to what Edward Said termed positional superiority.”

In this sense, managing and regulating consciousness affects both groups, the dominant and the dominated. Construction of superior rights with the help of religious claims leads to portraying the dominated, their collective voice, and their struggle in ways that serve the self-perceived moral superiority of the dominant (such as when they claim that Others are violent, savage, or terrorist) and their political superiority. This process is encouraged when the larger global politics is indifferent or even supportive. The dominant tries to manage and regulate the mode of thinking, the belief systems, the symbols, and even the existence and destiny of the dominated in such a way that they all become subordinated to a supreme, divine narrative.

Narrating exclusivity becomes a powerful political tool, including in land and territorial policies, as described next. But it is worth noting that the authority of narratives – religious or otherwise – becomes codes for power

8 For the Israeli context, see Rouhana and Sabbagh-Khoury (2006).