Over the years, there have been increasing intersections between religious claims and nationalism and their power to frame and govern world politics. When Politics Are Sacralized interdisciplinarily and comparatively examines the fusion between religious claims and nationalism and studies its political manifestations. State and world politics, when determined or framed by nationalism fused with religious claims, can provoke protracted conflict, infuse explicit religious beliefs into politics, and legitimize violence against racialized groups. This volume investigates how, through hegemonic nationalism, states invoke religious claims in domestic and international politics, sacralizing the political. Studying Israel, India, the Palestinian National Movement and Hamas, Sri Lanka, Saudi Arabia, Serbia, Iran, and Northern Ireland, the fourteen chapters engage with the visibility, performativity, role, and political legitimation of religion and nationalism. The authors analyze how and why sacralization affects political behaviors apparent in national and international politics, produces state-sponsored violence, and shapes conflict.

Nadim N. Rouhana is Professor of International Affairs and Conflict Studies and Director of the Fares Center for Eastern Mediterranean Studies at the Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy, Tufts University. His most recent (edited) volume is Israel and its Palestinian Citizens: Ethnic Privileges in the Jewish State (Cambridge, 2017).

Nadera Shalhoub-Kevorkian is the Lawrence D. Biele Chair in Law at the Faculty of Law–Institute of Criminology and School of Social Work and Social Welfare at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, and Global Chair in Law at Queen Mary University of London. Her latest book is Incarcerated Childhood and the Politics of Unchilding (Cambridge, 2019).
When Politics Are Sacralized

COMPARATIVE PERSPECTIVES ON RELIGIOUS CLAIMS AND NATIONALISM

Edited by

NADIM N. ROUHANA
Tufts University

NADERA SHALHOUB-KEVORKIAN
The Hebrew University of Jerusalem
Queen Mary University of London
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Contributors

Ali Banuazizi is Professor of Political Science at Boston College and Director of the Program in Islamic Civilization & Societies. After receiving his PhD from Yale University, he taught at Yale and the University of Southern California before joining the Boston College faculty in 1971. He has held visiting appointments at the University of Tehran, Princeton, Harvard, Oxford, and MIT. He has served as the founding editor of the Journal of Iranian Studies, President of the Association for Iranian Studies (AIS) and the Middle East Studies Association (MESA), and Associate Editor of the Encyclopedia of Islam and the Muslim World (2016). He is the author of numerous articles on Iranian and Middle Eastern politics, society, and culture; coauthor (with Ahmad Ashraf) of Social Classes, the State, and Revolution in Iran (Nilufar Publications, 2008) and coeditor (with Myron Weiner) of three books on politics, religion, and society in Southwest and Central Asia.

Neil DeVotta is Professor in Politics and International Affairs at Wake Forest University. His research interests include Asian security and politics, ethno-religious nationalism, ethnic conflict resolution, and democratic transition and consolidation. He is the author of Blowback: Linguistic Nationalism, Institutional Decay, and Ethnic Conflict in Sri Lanka (Stanford University Press, 2004) and editor of Understanding Contemporary India (Lynne Rienner, 2010, second edition) and An Introduction to South Asian Politics (Routledge, 2016), in addition to authoring numerous articles. He has also consulted for a number of organizations, including the United States Agency for International Development, Freedom House, and Bertelsmann Stiftung.

Khaled Hroub is Professor of Middle Eastern Studies and Arab Media Studies at Northwestern University, Qatar. Previously, he taught history and politics of the Middle East at the Faculty of Asian and Middle Eastern Studies, University of Cambridge, where he founded and directed the Cambridge Arab Media Project (CAMP) between 2003 and 2012. He authored Hamas: Political Thought and Practice (Institute for Palestine Studies, 2000) and Hamas: A Beginner’s Guide
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(Pluto Press, 2006), and edited Political Islam: Context versus Ideology (Saqi, 2011) and Religious Broadcasting in the Middle East (Hurst, 2012). In Arabic, he published Fragility of Ideology and Might of Politics (Saqi, 2010), In Praise of Revolution (Saqi, 2012), The Anxious Intellectual versus the Intellectual of Certainty (al-Ahlia, 2018), and three prose and poetry collections between 2008 and 2017. He obtained his PhD in international relations from the University of Cambridge, in addition to three masters in various fields from other universities.

Yagil Levy is Professor of Political Sociology and Public Policy at the Open University of Israel. His field of research is the theoretical and empirical aspects of relations between society and the military. Levy has published eight books, in addition to a coauthored work, textbook, and four edited volumes. His most recent book is Whose Life Is Worth More? Hierarchies of Risk and Death in Contemporary Wars (Stanford University Press, 2019). Levy served as President of the European Research Group on Military and Society (ERGOMAS) and Vice President of the Israeli Sociological Society. He serves on the Board of Editors of Armed Forces & Society. He has held visiting posts at Georgetown University, the New School for Social Research in New York, and the European University Institute. Levy also regularly publishes op-ed articles in Haaretz.


Liam O’Dowd is Emeritus Professor of Sociology at Queen’s University, Belfast. He has published widely on borders, ethno-nationally divided cities, the sociology of intellectuals, and the Northern Ireland conflict. His most recent book (coedited with Martina McKnight) is Religion, Violence and Cities (Routledge, 2015). He is currently working on a coauthored book with James Anderson on a comparative analysis of ethno-nationally divided cities in contested states.

Vjekoslav Perica is a Croatian-American historian, author of, inter alia, Balkan Idols: Religion and Nationalism in Yugoslav States (Oxford University Press, 2002; Biblioteka XX vek, 2006), and Professor of History at the University of Rijeka,
Croatia. He is currently writing a book about using religious resources and institutions for postwar symbolic reconciliation of the faiths and peoples in the Western Balkans. Perica holds a PhD in history from the University of Minnesota – Twin Cities. He is a former Fulbright scholar (Belgrade) and research fellow at the Netherlands Institute for Advanced Studies (NIAS). Before coming to the United States in 1991, Perica was a basketball player, jurist, and journalist in the former Yugoslavia. He now lives in Baltimore and Croatia. In between, he spends time with his grandsons in New York.

Amnon Raz-Krakotzkin teaches at the Department of Jewish History, Ben-Gurion University of the Negev. He was a fellow at the Wissenschaftskolleg zu Berlin (2003–2004) and the Center of Advanced Judaic Studies, Philadelphia (2006, 2009–2010). He studies both early modern Christian-Jewish discourse and Zionist historical consciousness. His publications include The Censor, the Editor and the Text: Catholic Censorship and Hebrew Literature in the Sixteenth Century (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2007) and Exil et Souverainete (La fabrique, 2007).

Nadim N. Rouhana is Professor of International Affairs and Conflict Studies and Director at the Fares Center for Eastern Mediterranean Studies, the Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy, Tufts University. His current research includes work on settler colonialism, collective identity and democratic citizenship, the questions of reconciliation, decolonization, and transitional justice. His research and writing focuses on the conflict between Zionism and the Palestinians and on Israeli and Palestinian societies. His publications include Israel and Its Palestinian Citizens: Ethnic Privileges in the Jewish State (Cambridge University Press, 2017, edited) and numerous academic articles. He has held various academic positions in Palestinian, Israeli, and American universities including at Harvard University, Boston College, and at Tel-Aviv University. He was a cofounder of the Program on International Conflict Analysis and Resolution at Harvard’s Weatherhead Center for International Affairs where he cochaired the Center’s seminar on International Conflict Analysis and Resolution from 1992 to 2001.

Tanika Sarkar is a retired professor of modern history at Jawaharlal Nehru University, Delhi. She has also taught at St. Stephen’s College, Delhi, and as a visiting professor at the universities of Chicago, Yale, Göttingen, and the Witswatersrand. She was invited as a visiting fellow at Trinity College, Cambridge, Keele University, University of Washington, University of Pavia, Dublin University, and Zentrum Modern Oriental, Berlin. Sarkar has published several monographs on political and cultural nationalism in India, gender, and Hindu extremist movements. She has coedited, with Sumit Sarkar, Unravashi Butalia, and Sekhar Bandyapadhyay, several volumes on caste in India, social reform in India, women of the Hindu Right, and on colonial Calcutta. Her latest
monograph is Rebels, Wives and Saints: Designing Selves and Nations in Colonial Times (Permanent Black, 2009). She is also writing a volume called Gender in Colonial South Asia: India, Pakistan and Bangladesh, Late 18th Century to the 1980s (Cambridge University, forthcoming).

Michael A. Sells is Emeritus Professor of the History and Literature of Islam and Comparative Literature at the University of Chicago. His research interests include pre-Islamic and classical Arabic poetry, the Qur'an, Sufism, comparative mysticism, and religion and violence. His works on religion and violence include The Bridge Betrayed: Religion and Genocide in Bosnia (University of California Press, 1996). His article “Holocaust Abuse: The Case of Hajj Amin al-Husayni” traces the history of the claim that the Palestinian leader was an architect of the Holocaust, exposes the manipulation of history behind it, and analyzes its influence on American attitudes toward the Middle East. His chapter “‘Armageddon’ in Christian, Sunni, and Shia Traditions” (in The Oxford Handbook of Religion and Violence, Oxford University Press, 2012) focuses on the mutual influence and rivalry between contemporary American Christian and Sunni Islamic “end times” apocalypticism.


Yaacov Yadgar is the Stanley Lewis Professor of Israel Studies at the University of Oxford. He has written extensively on matters of Jewish identity, nationalism, secularism, modernity, and tradition in Israel. He is the author of Sovereign Jews: Israel, Zionism, and Judaism (SUNY Press, 2017) and Israel’s Jewish Identity Crisis: State and Politics in the Middle East (Cambridge University Press, 2020).
Preface and Acknowledgments

Our initial interest in this project emerged from our research and personal involvement in the dynamics of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and our observations of its historical evolution. Each of us has studied, separately, over the years, wide-ranging facets of both Israeli and Palestinian societies and politics. Our academic careers span teaching and research in Israeli, Palestinian, and American universities. We both have personally witnessed the settler-colonial project in Palestine unfolding and expanding. Consequently, it was natural to turn our intellectual and academic interest to examining Zionism, its intellectual representation, and the justificatory system that enabled it for so long to conceal the essence of its settler-colonial project that is called the “Jewish state” in Palestine. Of central interest to us is not only the fact that religious claims are foundational to the Zionist movement, but also their current manifestations in state politics and the rise of what we call the religiously legitimized sacramental politics. This required opening a space for a genuine critical analysis to investigate the nature of this process in comparative perspective.

We came to this project, not as scholars of religion and nationalism per se, but more as involved scholars of a conflict in which the intertwining between religious claims and nationalism are transforming its dynamics. While mainstream discourse across the globe often invokes religion as a major reason for the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, the majority of Israelis and Palestinians have historically understood the conflict as fundamentally secular in nature – either national or settler colonial on the Palestinian side, or a conflict of liberating Eretz Yisrael (read Palestine) from foreigners on the Zionist side. Yet, in the past few decades, the apparent invocation of religious claims and interpretations and the role of religious players in the conflict have been on the rise, as evidenced by the increased infusion of religious claims into the local and global discourse and into state politics, particularly on the Israeli side and on the part of Hamas. Therefore, it was vital to examine the role religious claims are playing in Zionism as a political project.

This project, generously funded by the Henry Luce Foundation, focused on a number of cases worldwide in which such fusion affected state identity and
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politics. In conjunction with the Israeli case, our volume examines the cases of India, Sri Lanka, Serbia, Iran, Saudi Arabia, Northern Ireland, and Palestine (with emphasis on Hamas). Under the auspices of the project, we invited leading scholars from different disciplinary positions and areas of expertise to engage in workshops or small conferences in Boston, New Delhi, Sarajevo, Johannesburg, Jerusalem, and Ramallah between 2014 and 2018 in order to develop a comparative research agenda about the cases selected for study. Out of these working meetings, the chapters that ultimately comprise this volume emerged.

We believe that this project has opened some space, as minor as it might be, for critical discussions among some international scholars on how the intertwining between religious claims and nationalism sacralizes the political. The project has facilitated a more nuanced, comparative analysis, with locally embedded and globally examined perspectives. If the sacralization of politics is about power relations where state policies use religious framing or religious claims to regulate some groups and entities and position others as exclusively entitled, how precisely are we to understand the way such ideological norms are produced and used to maintain and stabilize the material, psychological, and political apparatus of governance, and how can we engage with conflict studies under such complexities?

In the introductory chapter, we focus on the above questions and on how religious claims and nationalism are used by states to maintain and mobilize the machinery of power in general, and in certain types of conflict situations in particular. We argue that examining the sacralization of politics can expand our understanding of violations of human rights, violence of state and non-state actors, political justificatory systems, territorial greed, and colonial and settler-colonial structures and machineries of governance. Such an examination can help shed light not only on what happens when religious claims are invoked to promote racialized violence and enhance discriminatory systems of governance, but also on what is being constructed and affirmed politically.

The various chapters in this volume touch on all the above issues but not in any systematic comparative way. Different chapters focus on different manifestations of this fusion of religious claims and nationalism. The need for a comparative study with these manifestations at the center is still needed. The investigation provided new insights into the possibilities and pitfalls of conflict resolution efforts in sites afflicted by the interlocking of religious claims and nationalism manifest in the power structure. This volume doesn’t address this issue directly, but our analysis might provide guidance for future efforts, because it raises critical questions about the role of sacralized politics in constructing the matrix of power, how it justifies exclusion and violence, and the way it mobilizes global support.

Throughout the work on this project that culminated in this volume, we have learned a tremendous amount and been supported by wonderful scholars, including the contributors to this volume. Our enduring appreciation for accomplishing this book goes to Kate Rouhana for editing the entire volume with characteristic...
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generosity, good spirit, and valuable insights. We would also like to thank Stephanie Williams for her gracious and meticulous editorial assistance throughout and Nina Griecchi-Woodsum for editorial support in the early stages. We were fortunate to have great colleagues from Australia, India, Sri Lanka, Palestine, Israel, South Africa, Bosnia, Croatia, the US, and Canada accompanying us on our intellectual journey. Their generous engagement with our project in various meetings and workshops and their friendship and support made this project a most gratifying learning experience. These include Dino Abazovic, Lila Abu-Lughod, Aijaz Ahmad, Basem Ezbidi, Gadi al-Gazi, Benjamin Beit-Hallahmi, Meir Buzaglo, Anuradha M. Chenoy, Kamal Chenoy, Steven Friedman, Nomboniso Gasa, Mark Gevisser, Ran Greenstein, Amos Goldberg, David Theo Goldberg, Rema Hammami, Dhammamegha Annie Leatt, Achille Mbembe, Hlonipha Mokoena, Esmail Nashif, Sarah Nuttall, Raef Zreik, Rada Drezgic, Selma Porobic, Gorazd Andrejc, Islah Jad, David Myers, Goldie Osuri, Suvendryni Perrera, Joseph Pugliese, Uri Ram, Rosemary Sayigh, Sherene Razack, Ghanishyam Shah, and Achin Vanaik.

We are also indebted to many colleagues who contributed their intellectual insights as this project began to take shape, including Rachel Busbridge, Yossi David, Areen Hawari, Sarah Ihmoud, and Einas Odeh-Haj. Our students and assistants helped in research, writing, and in organizing the workshops and conferences: Danielle Angel, Christopher Blair, Nina Griecchi-Woodsum, Inas Khatib, Revital Madar, Amir Marshi, and Stephanie Williams.

Nadim Rouhana would like to thank the Netherlands Institute for Advanced Studies (NIAS) for its generous support of his fellowship at the Institute during the academic year 2019/2020. The intellectual climate and institutional support provided by the NIAS were ideal for completing the project. He would also like to thank his colleagues at the Institute, in particular Jan Willem Duyvendak, NIAS’s director, for their engagement and insightful feedback on his chapter during the Institute’s seminars.

Nadera Shalhoub-Kevorkian would like to thank her colleagues at the Faculty of Law at Queen Mary University of London, especially Penny Green, Richard Falk, and Neve Gordon for their kind feedback and attentive engagement with this project.

This project was made possible by the generous support of The Henry Luce Foundation. It could not have succeeded without the major, long-term support of The Luce Foundation, especially its flexibility in accommodating the project’s demands within the shifting circumstances in conflict areas. We would like to express our deepest gratitude in particular to the Director of Policy Initiatives, Toby Volkman, for all of her support and contributions in the various meetings and for her attentiveness, which helped us bring the project to fruition in the form of this edited volume. We also thank our editors at Cambridge University Press, John
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Berger and Jackie Grant, for their support and patience throughout the development of this volume.

We are grateful also for the institutional and technical support of both the Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy at Tufts University and Mada al-Carmel – the Arab Center for Applied Social Research in Haifa. Last but not least, we are deeply indebted to our families for their sustaining love and for our many dialogues over the years.