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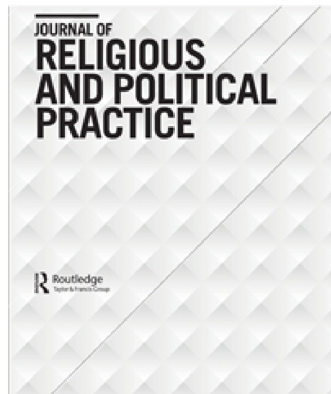

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Nation, Politics, Religion

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Article

Nation, Politics, Religion

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Abstract

This paper argues that religious and political practice in the modern word is in important ways shaped and framed by nationalism. This argument qualifies the general critique of methodological nationalism that is a feature of current literature on transnationalism. It first analyzes the general features of the relation between religion and nationalism. Through a comparison of the development of nationalism in India and China it further argues that while the relation between religion and nationalism in these societies shows some of the general features that have been laid out in the previous section, there are also significant differences that can be understood through an anthropological understanding of the generality of the nation-form and the specificity of its historical articulation. Finally, it exemplifies the argument at the level of practice by showing how secular nationalism has framed ritual and political practice in Singapore without being able to entirely control it.

Keywords: nationalism; religion; secularism; communism; India; China; Singapore

The paper tackles a number of theoretical issues, including the problem of secularism and secularity and that of communism and liberal democracy in the post-socialist transformation.

Introduction

A proper analysis of religious and political practice depends on a robust conceptualization of the modern nation-state. The nation-state is undoubtedly the most important political formation of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. This is despite the fact that communism was supposed to create an international community of workers that would transcend national boundaries. However, as Benedict Anderson (1983) observed in the introduction of his acclaimed *Imagined Communities*, the wars between communist brother-peoples in Indochina brought a definite end to that fantasy. Liberalism was a similar fallacy. It was supposed to make global connections possible through the free movement of persons,

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ideas, and goods and some theorists of globalization indeed predicted the imminent demise of the nation-state (e.g. Ohmae 1995) but, again, contemporary reality has made these predictions less and less plausible. For example, in both India and China, both economies that increasingly depend on globalization, we see a strengthening of nationalism, understood here as *the cultural politics that has the nation as its subject and its object*. The nation is never a finished project and nationalism derives its energy and motivating force from perceived threats from within or outside. The fact that both communism and liberalism pose as trans-or inter-national modes of political practice shows that nationalism is always to be understood in relation to "the other" and "to the world". It is a crucial and productive contradiction of nationalism that is itself a global phenomenon. In that sense one should also understand that transnationalism does not transcend nationalism but is intimately connected with it, as the history of Irish, Jewish, or Sikh transnationalism has amply shown. The critique of methodological nationalism in the study of transnational migration and ethnicity (e.g. Glick-Schiller and Wimmer 2002) usefully points out that transnational linkages can be more important for ethnic groups than their location in a particular nation-state, but this should not lead us to forget the central importance of national borders and definitions of citizenship that shape the conditions that ethnic groups try to negotiate through their transnational networks. Later in this essay I shall give an example of this point in the case of transnational religious networks linking Chinese in Singapore with China and the rest of South-East Asia.

The nation is a specific political imagination that by its emphasis on "the people" distances itself from "the king" or makes a sharp distinction between "the new republic" and "the ancient regime". However, while it is globally spread as a societal formation, it takes very different forms depending on the historical trajectories of the societies that have come to be shaped as nations. It is important to realize that the hyphen between nation and state indicates the conceptual difficulty to sharply distinguish between nation and state which results in very different arrangements of citizenship, cultural belonging, and rights regimes in different parts of the world. Nation-states are therefore specific in their actual organization and functioning. In some societies, the army plays an almost independent political role; in others there is only one party. Societies that forge their national imagination as a response to colonial interventions are a particular historical category. It would be wrong to see them as merely derivative, as Partha Chatterjee (1986) has argued, but they do emerge in an interactional space of imperialism. Nationalism emerges in the nineteenth century which is not only the period of nationalism, but also of imperialism. Nationalism and the nation-state are not singular phenomena, but emerge during a process of European expansion and the creation of a world-system of economies and states (van der Veer 2001). Although sovereignty and self-determination are important elements of nationalism, they are conceptualized in a larger framework of international relations on a global scale. Similarly, so-called "world religions" like Christianity can never be entirely captured by individual nationalisms since they have a global mission. Europe has been globalizing and has been globalized over many centuries, depending on which starting point in history one wants to take for which kind of globalization. Religions like Christianity and Islam are globalizing formations. They have spread through expansion and conversion along trading routes and military campaigns both within outside Europe. This larger history of both competition and contact between Muslim and Christian expansionists is, obviously, of importance for the way Muslims are perceived in Europe today.

However long and important the history of religious encounters in Asia may have been, the modern period of imperialism and nationalism provides a specific rupture with the past because of the externality of imperial power and the ideological emphasis on the difference

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of modern society from both its own past and from other, so-called backward societies. Comparison and an evolutionary perspective on difference became crucial in the high days of the empire. As Edward Said (1978) has argued, the new scientific knowledge of Orientalism also provided the colonized with a new understanding of their traditions. Hinduism, Buddhism, Confucianism, Daoism (all western terms translating such terms as *dharma* (order) and *jiao* (teachings)) were discovered and evaluated by philologists, archeologists and other historians while traders, missionaries and colonial officers tried to deal with the contemporary forms of these traditions. This apparatus of imperial knowledge has created an archive that is still crucial for any understanding of Asian traditions that have been transformed into "world religions" (van der Veer, 2002).

In this contribution, which has a somewhat programmatic nature that fits the first issue of a journal, I want to first analyze some general features of the relation between religion and nationalism. Subsequently, I want to argue by comparing historical developments in India and China that these general features do not explain important differences in that relationship in different societies. Finally I want to use the example of Singapore to show how secular nationalism has framed ritual and political practice without being able to entirely control it.

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Nationalism and religion

If nationalism is a particular form of political imagination, what is religion? While nationalism is seen as modern, religion is commonly seen as either ancient (even intrinsic to being human) or transcending history. In the common view of historians of ideas, it is the European Enlightenment in its critique of religion that is the harbinger of modernity (e.g. Israel 2001). The political expression of that critique was anti-clericalism in the French Revolution and *laicité* (secularism) in the French Republic. Anti-clericalism was also an important feature of nineteenth-century liberal politics in Latin America where the Catholic Church wielded considerable power. Leading students of nationalism have argued that modern, national society is by definition secular and depends on the disappearance or marginalization of religious worldviews and communities (Gellner 1983). Similarly, an important distinction has been made between civic identity, based on citizenship in a territorially defined nation-state, and primordial identity, based on kinship or language or religion or a combination of these elements (Geertz 1973). According to this view, civic identity should replace primordial identity in modern nation-building. The historical process producing modernity by replacing religious identity with civic identity is called secularization.

While one cannot today accept many of the assumptions implicit in modernization theory, one can still argue that both nationalism and religion are modern transformations of pre-modern traditions and identities (Smith 1988). Indeed, there are continuities and sometimes really deep histories. First of all, proto-nationalist formations in ethnicity, language, or religion provide the material of nationalism. National traditions can be "invented" and nations are "imagined", but this is not done from scratch. Moreover, they do not form a seamless whole, a monolithic culture, but rather a discourse in which different versions compete with each other in political debate and conflict. But, deeper than the proto-nationalism that precedes nationalism, there are ancient understandings of linguistic, religious, and ethnic unity, coupled with notions of territorial sovereignty that can be found among the ancient Hebrews, Greeks, Indians, and Chinese, for instance. These ancient understandings of sacred geographies together with sacred histories of particular peoples provide much of the material used in nationalist imagination. All of this material has to be transformed to serve the nationalist cause. Religion thus has to be nationalized in the

modern period. Let me reiterate that this is never a finished process and that nationalism always sprouts counter-nationalisms in the form of regionalisms or religious alternatives. Moreover, religious practice can be about health, protection, welfare, good luck, a host of things, but nationalism still frames its conditions of possibility.

In societies where religions are pitted against each other (like Catholicism against Protestantism or Sunni Islam against Shi'a Islam), they have to be (at least partially) cleansed of their divisive potential by being encapsulated in nationalism. They have to be made part and parcel of a national identity and histories of religious conflict have to be tailored to fit a tale of national unity. Religious worship comes to be connected to moments of national glory and national remembrance. This process of homogenization is seldom entirely successful, because nationalism not only unifies but also diversifies by sprouting alternative nationalisms or regional identities. Well-known examples are modern Ireland and the Partition of India and Pakistan (as well as the further splitting of Pakistan and Bangladesh). Since in modern nation-states a politics of numbers, producing majorities and minorities, is important, religion can be used as the foundation of majority nationalism as well as the foundation of minority identities. Hindu nationalists in India had constantly to attempt to transcend caste boundaries as well as linguistic differences. Their efforts, however, also created deeper divisions between Hindus and Muslims. Britain and the Netherlands were both seen as Protestant nations till well into the nineteenth century when Catholics were included in the nation (van der Veer and Lehmann 1999).

Besides nationalized religion, we find secular nationalism in the nineteenth century. At a theoretical level, secular nationalism has sometimes been seen as the replacement of religion and as the religion of the nation-state, while modern statecraft can be seen as a secularized, political theology. Even in this view, however, religious communities are never entirely absorbed by nationalism and continue to be the object of secular regulation, such as in the separation of state and church. Secular nationalism as an ideology is important in creating and defining the spheres in which religions are allowed to operate. This is what Charles Taylor (2007) has called "the immanent frame", although he sees this as a development in the Western history of ideas preceding nationalism. Forms of separation of the church and state are defined in ways that are different in France, Britain, the USA, Turkey and India, to mention just a few cases. The extent to which science is separated from religion differs greatly, although the power of science is such that it defines the spaces in which religious arguments can be allowed. In the political sphere, democracy is often argued to be secular or that it ought to be secular, but it is not. There are several possible connections between democracy and secularity, but there is no necessary one. Secularity can be promoted in a society by democratic means, but also, as in communist or fascist regimes, by dictatorial means.

Communism provides an important historical case of a radical atheist project to eradicate religion. This project has had major consequences in societies that came under communist rule (the Soviet Union in 1922, most of the others after the Second World War) but it has nowhere succeeded in getting rid of religion, with perhaps the exception of the former DDR which is one of the most secular societies in the world (and, ironically, during communist rule had a politically very active clergy). In most cases the state kept a tight control over religious institutions and their resources (especially targeted by land reforms) and clamped down quickly on religious movements that seemed to constitute a challenge to its rule, as in the case of the Falun Gong in China in the 1990s. Under post-socialist conditions we see a resurgence of public manifestations of religiosity in many of these societies (Ngo and Quijada forthcoming).

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Democracy, however, by no means depends on secularization. In fact, there are hardly any secular democracies in the world because there are hardly any secular societies. As a form of political participation and representation, democracy is typical for the modern nation-state. Liberal secularists may demand that the state is secular and that it treats religions equally and neutrally, but they have to acknowledge that if one allows freedom of religious expression, religion more often than not will play an important role in the democratic process. One therefore needs to distinguish between the relative secularity of the state and the relative secularity of society and make clear how one defines that secularity. Modern states like England, the Netherlands, and the US have all had their own specific arrangements for guaranteeing a certain secularity of the state but these states have found their legitimation in societies in which religion plays an important public role. To give one clear example: it can be safely said that the wall of separation in the USA is a demand that has emerged not from secularists, but from religious minorities that were persecuted in England and therefore that, at least in this case, the secularity of the state is in fact a religious demand. Such a religious demand for the separation of State and Church can also be found, in fact, in the Netherlands among Protestant dissenters in the second half of the nineteenth century who wanted to have an education system that was not controlled by the established state church.

The role of the secular in relation to the religious is not only limiting, since religious traditions that are interpreted in a nationalist way are crucial in the formation of state-society and society-individual relations in the modern nation. These traditions become fields of disciplinary practice in which the modern civil subject is formed. They are also important in creating the modern public. In Britain, Evangelicals were instrumental in mobilizing the public in large anti-slavery societies as well as global mission societies. During the industrial revolution, an entire spectrum of social movements of “moral uplift” has targeted the working class. On the one hand religious institutions enable notions of individual conscience and civilized conduct, on the other, notions of publicity, the public, and public opinion are produced by religious movements.

Nationalism does not have to be secular. It can also be explicitly religious in nature (van der Veer 1994). Religious nationalism may amount to no more than a civil religion in the sense that national leaders, for instance in the US, express their belief that the nation is “a nation under God”. Themes of death, sacrifice, and rebirth as well as that of a mission in the world are celebrated in a religious fashion in national holidays and with national monuments. This is especially the case when war and death are involved in relation to which the nation has to acquire a metaphysical existence beyond individual life. Important theological notions like that of chosenness by God can be used to fuel nationalist projects abroad and at home. As important is the notion of rebirth or revival of the nation that is connected to the Protestant metaphor of Awakening. Finally, there is the notion of the coming of a messiah, a leader who is leading his people to the Promised Land. This important notion is shared by Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, but variations of it are found in Hinduism, Buddhism, and forms of Chinese religion. A religious symbolic repertoire of divine election, of ordeals to test one’s convictions, conversion to higher truth, and martyrdom is routinely applied to the biographies of great, nationalist leaders.

Examples of radical religious nationalism can be found in India, Pakistan, Ireland, and Israel, but in all these cases they are contained within secular constitutions and state institutions. A case of radical religious nationalism that was able to capture the state is that of the Iranian revolution of 1979, leading to an Islamic state under Shi’ite clerical leadership. Islam (like Christianity, Confucianism, and Buddhism) contains ideas about just rule and divinely sanctioned law that were important in the ritual legitimacy of traditional states. To make them important in modern states is something quite different and requires

a complicated relationship between clerical authority and democratic elections. While Iran may have wanted to export its Islamic revolution to other societies it has not been able to do so because the historical production of the Iranian state-society relationship is unique and cannot be easily imitated or replicated elsewhere. The fact that the language of "tribalism" and "sectarianism" has started to dominate the discussion of Iraq's future shows already that the fact that Iraq has a Shi'a majority is not enough to be able to follow the Iranian example.

India and China

In the case of both China and India, the nation-state emerges from the crucible of imperial encounter. This shared imperial history is an important ground for comparing them (van der Veer 2014). Of course Indian and Chinese societies have deep histories, and these histories have resulted in fundamental differences, but in both cases modernity has been mediated by imperialism. In these two cases, the nature of imperial interactions was quite different. India was colonized for a century, while China was under imperial pressure but not made into a colony. Being run by a British state that had its center thousands of miles away is quite different from being pressurized (though not taken over) by a number of competing foreign powers, including neighboring Japan. Even when we consider that India was perforce governed mostly by Indians, it remained a colony. This difference in the nature of imperial interactions can be conceptualized as a difference in state formation. India's postcolonial state emerges from the crucible of the British colonial state, while China's contested republic succeeded a traditional empire and, after Japanese occupation and civil war, was made into a communist state following World War II. The role of the state in producing a modern society cannot be overestimated. However, while state formation is a crucial historical process, one cannot simply see cultural processes as straightforwardly resulting from state formation. Or, rather, one's interpretation depends on one's conception of the state (Mitchell 1999). My understanding of the state is close to the Foucauldian concept of "governmentality" with its emphasis on the connection between techniques of the self (governing the self) and techniques of domination (governing others) (Foucault 2004). This allows one to broaden the understanding of power beyond the arbitrary confines of the state. Religious tradition, religious organizations, and religious discourses and practices have relative autonomy from the state, but are all part of governmentality. Religious movements like those of the Sikhs in India and the Taiping movement in China even attempt to create their own states, showing the arbitrary nature of sharp definitional boundaries between state and religion. Moreover, traditional states like those of the Mughal and the Qing are, at least partly, ritual theatres in which, as Clifford Geertz (1981) has argued, "power serves pomp" The concept of governmentality allows one to see the state not as a unified actor (abstracted from social life), but rather as a set of arrangements, apparatuses, and institutions that are often contradictory and are active at different levels of centralization.

It is remarkable how much the discussion on China is on the one hand dominated by awe of a unified, dictatorial state and, on the other hand, by an awareness of considerable regional and local decentralization as well as informalization. The Chinese economy is especially characterized by a large number of informal arrangements and transactions that are not controlled by the state and involve actors that are often not recognized as economic actors, including religious actors (Tsai 2002). Capitalism is not a rigid system that makes everything the same everywhere, but rather a flexible set of economic and political arrangements that attempt to open up markets for production and consumption. The opening up of China for global capitalism has had immense impact on Chinese society, not by destroying

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but by redeploying Chinese patterns of interaction and expectation. Mayfair Yang (1994) has, for instance, described the importance of gift relationships (*guanxi*) in the Communist state economy. More recently, she has argued for the resilience and transformation of such practices in the newly opened up market economy that still depends on close interaction with Party officials (Yang 2002).

Similarly, it is remarkable how much the discussion of the Indian state is dominated by the notion of a "weak state", incapable of developing society, coupled with an awareness of how resilient the institutions of the postcolonial state in India have been despite much anxiety in 1950s scholarship about the country's potential falling apart (Harrison 1960). The state has dealt with considerable challenges from separatist movements such as the Sikh Khalistanis. Except for a relatively brief state of emergency in the 1970s, the state is legitimized by regular elections. Nevertheless, despite all of this, much of political action in India is extra-parliamentary, basically following a pattern set by Gandhi's political performances that had a religious flavor (the Salt March, hunger strikes). While Gandhi opposed the British, current political activists challenge an elected Indian government. Gandhi operated largely from outside the Congress Party, projecting himself as a moral exemplar above politics. Major recent examples of such extra-parliamentary action include the campaign to remove the Babar mosque in Ayodhya in the 1980s and 1990s as well as the more recent Anti-Corruption movement led by Anna Hazare, another charismatic imitation of Gandhi. The latter also shows the extent to which business transactions involve state officials and are not controlled by public debate in Parliament. Both in India and China there is a lively debate about corruption and a regular exposing of "scandals" which seem to indicate that the boundary between political power and economic entrepreneurship is constantly shifting.

It is imperial interactions that have had a major impact on the formation of Indian and Chinese modernities. It is instructive to look at a formative moment in the 1850s. The Taiping Heavenly Kingdom rebellion in China (1850–1864) and the Mutiny in India (1857–1858) occurred almost simultaneously after a period of deep penetration of Western imperial power in these societies. The Opium Wars in China had made clear how immensely vulnerable the Qing dynasty was in the face of imperialist pressure. The gradual colonization of India by the British was completed with the suppression of the Mutiny. In this era of rupture with the past, desires for restoration fought with passions for innovation. One cannot overestimate the deep resentments that were the result of the encounter with Western imperial power, which are felt even today in postcolonial India and China. Taiping as well as the later Boxer Uprising and the Mutiny can be taken as major events that mark a transition from pre-modern arrangements into imperial modernity. It is interesting to note that this transition was marked by what imperial modernity would signify as "magical" and "irrational". In the case of the Mutiny, one of the events that sparked it was the rumor that the animal fat with which British bullets were greased, and that the Indian soldiers had to bite open, was beef (abhorrent to Hindus) or pork (abhorrent to Muslims). In the case of Taiping (and the Boxers) it was the belief in miraculous weapons and invincibility that made the rebels such a formidable force. The anxiety about imperial Christianity is expressed in Taiping in the fascinating translation of Christianity into indigenous millenarianism, while it is expressed in the Mutiny as a revolt against a greasy form of conversion.

The radical nature of this imperial transition with its violence and iconoclasm makes it impossible to take what appears to be continuity with the past in terms of, for example, language and cultural traditions at face value. However, there is a strong tendency, especially in the academic study of China, and less so in the academic study of India, to emphasize continuities despite the enormous upheavals of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. In

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my view, the imperial moment in the case of both China and India has indeed been a rupture, and so much so that I would suggest that the global context is at least as important in understanding the cultural transformations of the late nineteenth and twentieth century as pre-modern history. If this is correct, comparative sociology has an important role to play in furthering our understanding of contemporary India and China, since it can interpret this global context better than national historiography.

The continuities that are emphasized by those who want to define India and China, both inside and outside India and China, are of an ideological nature and sometimes explicitly express a political agenda. In India, one of the major political parties, the currently ruling Bharatiya Janata Party, has consistently emphasized the continuity with India's ancient Hindu civilization. It has tried to hide the fact that the modern nation-state is a product of the imperial encounter by emphasizing the legacy of "just rule" by the Hindu God-King Rama. It obscures the colonial origins of India's borders by emphasizing the sacred land (*punyabhumi*) of India (*Bharatvarsha*). Muslims (and Christians) have to be forced to accept their minority status, while their historical political significance, as testified in monuments like the Red Fort in Delhi and various Mausoleums, including the Taj Mahal, as well as in the history of iconoclasm that has left its imprint on Hindu pilgrimage places like Ayodhya, Banaras, and Mathura, has to be gradually effaced. The diversity of India's population is not denied as such but interpreted in the modern framework of majority rule over minority populations. The entire political vocabulary of previous leaders like Advani and Vajpayee, as well as that of the current Prime Minister, Narendra Modi, is that of religious nationalism which is buttressed by ritual PR as in Modi's recent visit to Nepal with its extended ritual performance at the important Pashupatinath Temple in Kathmandu.

Similarly, in China the emphasis on the continuity of China's Confucian civilization by the Communist Party today flies in the face of its earlier campaign to destroy "the four olds" (old customs, old culture, old ideas, old habits) during the Great Cultural Revolution which was a culmination of earlier campaigns to change Chinese culture radically (and not an aberration to be blamed on "the Gang of Four"). Let us look briefly at the idea that China is a Confucian society. Former President Hu Jintao and other Chinese leaders have reevaluated the Confucius tradition. They now concede that harmony as the central value of Confucian teachings is something to be cherished. Worrying about growing economic disparities amid rapid economic growth, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) focuses on Confucian harmony as a form of societal consensus and solidarity. For the first time in 66 years, the Party organized a lavish worship ceremony at Tianjin's Confucius Temple in November 2004. In the town of Qufu, the birth place of Confucius, the official ceremony of commemorating his birthday has become an important public ritual since 2004, broadcast live on state television. The Ministry of Education is encouraging numerous courses in Confucian culture by establishing Confucius Institutes all over the world, following the model of the Goethe Institute, the Alliance Française or the British Council. This is not so much to promote Confucianism, since language courses form the main curriculum, but it does suggest that, for the Chinese state, Confucianism is the heart of Chinese civilization (Sahlins 2013). Criticism of the extent to which the Confucian institutes are propaganda machines for the Chinese government compromising the academic integrity of the university has led to the closing of such an institute at the University of Chicago and to mounting criticism in the US and Europe of these institutes.[1]

The popularity of the notion that Confucianism is central or even equivalent to Chinese civilization is also related to the fact that it extols the virtue of filial piety (*xiao*) as a central part of its teaching. The rites of passage (birth, marriage, death) and especially the ancestor cult are fundamental to Chinese religion, and filial piety can be considered a kinship norm

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that is extended to the wider society and the state. However, to conflate these household practices and the wider kinship structure with their ideological expression in Confucian teachings would be a mistake. One could argue that filial piety is part of any patrilineal system that gives the older men of the clan authority over younger men and can be found in different parts of the world without Confucian connections. Moreover, other forms of Chinese religion are fundamental in this regard. It is Buddhism that is deeply connected to the rituals of death, while Daoism is fundamental to all kinds of rituals that connect to the choosing of the grave and the worship of the ancestors. All of this went through changes during Communist rule. Not only were the old family structures seen as feudal, but the costly death rituals and burials and ancestor worship were all repressed. In the Cultural Revolution, children were either set up to denounce their parents or were brought up outside parental control. The Party attempted to replace filial piety and kinship structures with party loyalty or national loyalty.

In important ways kinship structures and their religious expression have been transformed under Communist rule. Not only the patrilineal clan has lost most of its significance in most parts of Mainland China, but the household has also been deeply affected by the one-child policy that has been implemented in Chinese cities. The single son has become the "emperor" of the household. References to filial piety as a fundamental value of Confucian civilization do not make much sense under modern conditions. This is not to say that some of the old views and practices concerning the dead and the blessings of the ancestors have not returned in an altered form. An indication of this is the declaration of Qingmingjie (the grave sweeping festival) as a public holiday in 2008. This is especially interesting in relation to the successful promotion of cremations in China which would in principle make the cleaning of graves superfluous. Graves, however, have been replaced by urns that can still be ritually approached.

What remains central in the use of Confucian conceptions of national civilization is a state authoritarianism that enforces social harmony. It is not so much that people have shared values but that a social cohesion and consensus is produced by economy and politics. A Confucian–Communist state ideology of harmony and filial piety is far removed from these realities on the ground but does provide a language of national unity and historical continuity that can be convenient for Party control. The revitalization of Confucianism is part of Chinese religion today, but its complex relation to central state power should make us question any attempt to make it into the essence of Chinese civilization.

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Ritual as political and religious practice in Singapore

The framing of ritual practice by secular nationalism can be well illustrated by examining the ways in which the Singaporean state has managed religion. Singapore differs from China in not forbidding public performance of religious rituals in the city outright, and from India in that its official nationalism is not only secular but explicitly avoids majoritarianism, embracing multiculturalism. Singapore's population in 2011 was 5.8 million. This included 3.8 million Chinese (74% of the total), 650,000 Malay (13.8%); 350,000 Indian (9.8%), 46,000 Eurasian (2.4%); as well as a foreign workforce of 1.8 million, with temporary residence permits. The city-state was part of the federal state of Malaysia after independence from Britain was achieved in 1963, but was expelled from the federation in 1965 after serious political unrest and communal riots between Chinese and Malay.

Singapore today is a product of inimitable urban planning and social engineering. What has been achieved under the one-party dominance of the PAP (People's Action Party) under the leadership of Prime Minister Lee Kuan-Yew and his son is in many ways admirable.

Figure 1. Sending off the gods in the Harbor of Singapore. Source: Author.

Since its formation in 1963, Singapore has developed into one of the ten richest countries in the world. It has been spared much of the social unrest that besets its neighbors, Indonesia, Malaysia, and Thailand. Through a well-conceived master plan, public housing has been distributed on an ethnic-quota basis that has prevented ghetto formation. Since the 1960s, the entire urban space has been reorganized by destroying the old kampongs and placing people in the new Housing Development Blocks. The social engineering of multiculturalism and ethnic harmony by disturbing the old ethnic solidarities through spatial distribution is remarkable. It has only been possible through enlightened authoritarian rule, strict labor immigration rules with little possibility of acquiring citizenship for migrant workers, and a dominance of one ethnic group, the Chinese, vis-à-vis substantial other groups, Malay and Indian, in a relatively small urban population. What is sometimes

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called the Singapore Model has inspired politicians in India and China but it is a model that cannot be followed anywhere else, and certainly not in such huge nation-states.

The effects of secular planning on religion in Singapore are remarkable. The Singaporean government has successfully promoted a multicultural nationalism instead of a Chinese majoritarian nationalism in order to prevent any kind of backlash in the surrounding Malay-dominated states of Malaysia and Indonesia. The somewhat compulsive references to the racial riots of the 1950s and 1960s and the regular celebration of racial harmony are all part of this performance of multiculturalism (see Goh 2013). This has also meant that the state has marginalized the expression of regional Chinese identities, based on the main, mutually unintelligible, Chinese languages (Hokkien, Teochew, Cantonese), to forge a modern national identity, based on a state-sponsored secular (to some extent Christian) work ethic, buttressed by so-called Confucian values, family, filial piety, hard work, scholarship), and the teaching of standard Mandarin in school. The destruction of the kampongs and the building of Housing Development Blocks (with an ethnic quota system that distributes housing roughly according to ethnic percentage in the population) also entailed the dismantling of regional Chinese identities that were historically based on religious networks and secret societies.

Since temples can only acquire 30-year land leases from the government, they have to raise enormous amounts of money to be able to stay where they are or otherwise they have to move to cheaper locations at the margins of the city, often in industrial areas. Temples often have to move due to the pressures of real estate or urban renovation and the building of roads and metro lines. This makes religion quite invisible in the central areas of Singapore. An alternative is to combine temples of different communities in one space that is leased by unified efforts. Thus one finds temples of different Chinese communities under one roof, but also temples with a Chinese, a Hindu, and a Muslim shrine under one roof. Another alternative is to rent HDB apartments and use them as temples, partly undermining the secularization of space by the government.

The Singaporean case shows the effects of secular urban planning on religion quite clearly, but it also shows the transnational possibilities of religious networks to escape the secularism of individual states. Singaporean Chinese have been adept in keeping alive their transnational networks that connect them to temples outside Singapore, primarily in Malaysia and China. Kenneth Dean (forthcoming) has collected evidence that hundreds of temples in Fujianese hometowns of Singaporean Chinese have been rebuilt with Singaporean support and that ritual networks have been re-established after the secularist onslaught of the 1950s and 1960s in Communist China. This means that at the time that Singapore was officially secularized by urban planning, religious organizations, movements, and institutions developed ritual activities and spaces in South China. Secularization of urban space by real estate pricing in Singapore and outright secular destruction in Communist China are countered by the resilience of temple communities in Singapore and their ability to escape the grip of nation-states through transnational networks.

In his work on the relation between ritual and performance, the sociologist Jeffrey Alexander (2004: 533) wants to explain how rituals that were central to "early societies" have been replaced by other symbolic action with the rise of states, empires, churches. According to Alexander, there is wide consensus among sociologists that a transformation from "simpler social organization in which ritual played a central role to more complex social forms, which feature more strategic, reflexive, and managed forms of social communication" has taken place. This consensus among sociologists often betrays an implicit evolutionism inherent in modernization theory by assuming that the gradual historical transformation from simpler to more complex social organization is accompanied by a total

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transformation in symbolic communication. Alexander refers to ancient Egypt and ancient Greece to support his evolutionary assumptions, forgetting that the theory does not apply to modern complex societies like those of India, China, or South-East Asia (around a half of the world's population), where ritual is not gradually transformed but remains either central to public life (like in India) or is forcibly removed from it (like in China). Moreover, in China and Singapore this is better not described as a *process* of secularization but as a political *project* of secularism carried by intellectuals and the state.

What does this secular framing do to ritual performance? Daniel Goh (2013) has described the transformation of the Chingay festival from a communal religious festival to a national celebration from which the religious elements has been removed, and finally to a carnival for the global tourist market. However, certainly not all rituals have gone through such a spectacular secularization. Let us, for example, examine the annual nine emperor festival Jiuhuangye that I witnessed in October 2014. The Nine Emperor Gods Festival is held from the first to the ninth day of the ninth lunar month among Chinese communities in Southeast Asia. It begins with the welcoming of the gods into the temple where they are to be worshipped for nine days, and ends when the gods are sent off in the harbor on the ninth day. The festival is known for the temple processions that take place during the celebrations.[2]

We started at the Hougang Toumu Temple on Serangoon Road, the first nine emperors' temple in Singapore, but found that the procession had already moved from the temple to another site, namely an inner courtyard with a basketball court in a Housing Development Block where the temple had been removed because of the above mentioned governmental planning but where a few makeshift shrines continued to exist along with a couple of apartments that had been converted into temples. The community waited for the trucks that carried the palanquin with the urn containing the deities. The men carrying the palanquin swayed back and forth to indicate the power of the deity inside the urn. They were awaited by a man with a whip who controlled the spirits and by a large group of devotees clad in white who sounded drums. Finally there were a couple of dragon dances. The group from the Hougang Toumu Temple paid their respects to the shrines in the basketball court and after an hour or so moved on to the next location. A secular HDB space had been temporarily converted into a sacred space for the gods.

Visiting another temple celebrating the festival, we noted that the original neighborhood community had spread over the city and into Malaysia but that for this occasion many had come back to the temple, showing a lasting solidarity despite spatial dislocation. There were mediums who became possessed by the emperor-gods and after a number of activities in which some members of the community were allowed to play a prominent role based on their large financial contribution everyone went in buses and trucks to the seaside to perform the farewell ceremony which entailed a reciting of names by a Taoist priest and the burning of ritual paper and incense joss sticks, culminating in the sending off of the urn in a boat or the burning of a boat made of paper.

The secular framing of the festival was shown in the basketball court that was converted into a scared space by the fact that in some cases the road next to the temple was on a public bus route and that everyone, mediums included, would just stop and wait till the bus had passed, giving clear priority to the unhindered passage of public transport (obstructing traffic being often an issue in the banning of processions) and in the banning of fireworks (replaced by the sounds of a whip). This secular framing is not only obvious in Chinese temple festivals and processions, but even more so Indian festivals that include firewalking, such as Thaipusam, a festival in honor of the Tamil god Murugan. The anthropologist Vineeta Sinha studied the ayya (male god) temples of Muneeswaran and informants told

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her that "Muneeswaran veneration in Malaysian locales is perceived to be more authentic and "closer to the original that what is found in Singapore. The latter version, by comparison, is declared to be 'not so wild' and 'watered down' because 'there are too many rules'" (Sinha 2005: 11).

Conclusion

Religious practices in the modern world are shaped by nationalism in important ways, because nationalism is a dominant form of cultural politics. That is not to say that religious practice is about the nation. It can be about health, welfare, good fortune, protection against bad fortune, and so on and so forth. That is also not to say that religious practices are confined to one nation. Obviously, they are not, since many of the networks involved are transnational. However, none of this prevents it from being shaped and framed (that is conditioned and transformed) by nationalism. In this article we have examined the different ways in which this happens. In India secular nationalism is co-existent with a Hindu majoritarianism that at times becomes a straightforward Hindu nationalism. Religious practices, such as the Ganapati festival in Western India or Hanuman worship in the North, are transformed by Hindu nationalism. In China, Communism is a form of secular nationalism with atheist overtones. After a long period of repression and destruction of religious institutions and practices, the party has rediscovered the importance of Confucianism as a kind of civil religion and of Buddhism as a force to counter the expansion of Protestant Christianity. Religious practice is shaped as a moral nationalist practice and on many temples and mosques today one finds a slogan saying that religion equals patriotism. At the same time religious performance in public is fully controlled and often forbidden. In Singapore, we find secular nationalism that marginalizes religious practice by urban planning. Many temples are destroyed not, as in China, by an atheist campaign, but by demolition in the context of building roads or housing or shopping malls. Most temples are thus literally pushed into the margins of the city in industrial parks, forced to cohabit with shrines of gods of other temples, while religious practices, such as medium possession, is circumscribed by secular policing. All of this is formulated in a nationalist language of secular development.

Asian nationalisms have emerged in the imperial encounter. While Indian nationalisms have made religion an important part of their ideology and political practice, Chinese nationalisms have tried to depoliticize and marginalize religious practice, at least in the public sphere. In their struggle against British colonialism Indian nationalists made religion an important resource for resistance. While many nationalists agreed that reform was needed to be able to end the defeat by imperial power, they did not see a need to replace religion with science. Religion became an important base for mobilization and continues to be so today with significant implications for religious practice at all levels (individual, familial, communal). China was never colonized, although the Qing Empire was ended by imperial power. Popular cults that had often some relation with Daoism and Buddhism were regarded as obstacles of progress long before the victory of Communism. The fact that China was modernized by Chinese, while India was modernized by "Christian foreigners" is certainly an element in the explanation of the divergent paths of Indian and Chinese nationalism. The historical experience of intellectual and state distrust of popular enthusiasms in China and the long history of incorporation and domination of local cults in the imperial system is another element. It is therefore not just communism in China that regards religion as an obstacle for progress. A similar distrust of religion is recognizable in Kuomintang nationalism as well as in Singaporean nationalism.

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The anthropological approach to the relation of religion and nationalism that tries to understand how generalized forms of modernity are articulated in specific historical configurations allows us to see why comparable processes have different outcomes. This is different from using data sets with already defined objects (like "the state" or "religion") and variables (like a variable amount of "civic bonds" or "individualism"), since it questions the abstract universality of these concepts, while giving due weight to the universalization of certain political forms under imperial and post-imperial conditions.

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Notes

1. https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2014/09/26/chicago-severs-ties-chinese-government-funded-confucius-institute (accessed 31 October 2014).
2. http://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/infopedia/articles/SIP_1849_2011-10-21.html (accessed 17 November 2014).

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