

Transnational Religious Identities (Islam, Catholicism, and Judaism): Cultural Concerns

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Abstract

'Transnational religious identity' refers to personal or collective religious identities that transcend enclaves, localities, regions, nations, and states to achieve a wider unity of belief, practice, and community. The term implies the existence of the nation-state as the principal worldwide form of political sovereignty. Transnational religious identities are continuously reconstructed in differing contexts and ongoing struggles over ideology and authority in which shifting coalitions of elites, counterelites, ethnic groups, and those excluded from local authority structures compete for voice and recognition.

The subject of 'transnational religious identity' is unexpectedly complex. It refers to personal or collective religious identities that transcend enclaves, localities, regions, nations, and states to attain a wider unity of belief, practice, or community. Transnational religious identities also imply an inherent tension between claims to universality and the specifics of language, ethnicity, place of origin, locally shared culture, values, and history. The term also implies the existence of the nation-state system – with its own competing claims for personal and collective identity – as the principal worldwide form of political sovereignty. Transnational religious identities are continuously reconstructed in different contexts and ongoing struggles over ideology and authority in which shifting coalitions of elites, counterelites, ethnic groups, or those excluded from local authority structures compete for voice and recognition.

Constructing Religious Identities

Transnational religious identities, like other personal and collective identities, are socially constructed. They are not given or 'natural,' although the advocates of some religious identities, like secular nationalists, often make such claims. In the nineteenth century, William Robertson Smith's influential *Lectures on the Religion of the Semites* (Smith, 1956) traced the development of Semitic religious practices and institutions, stressing how a people's social and political institutions, and the shifting boundaries between their own and 'other' communities, contributed to shaping their religious and ethical conceptions. Thus, the prophecies of Ezekiel and Samuel differed not because of a contradiction in the Bible, but because each prophet addressed himself to different groups and historical contexts.

For Smith and his successors, a key element in the growth and development of religions was the growing awareness that ideas and practices of community are socially constructed even if they are firmly rooted in divine revelation. In this view, a more 'modern' understanding of religious belief and practice implies a self-consciousness of ritual and tradition, places a high value on individual responsibility and commitment, and recognizes the existence of other religions and accords them some measure of legitimacy. In Christianity, Islam, and

Judaism, this individual 'taking charge' of faith and practice also led to the greater role of a nonclerical 'public' in determining the role of religion in society (Salvatore, 2007). In this respect, Quranic verses such as the following, revealed in seventh century Arabia, are distinctly modern: "To each among you, we have ordained a law and assigned a path for each of you. Had God pleased, he could have made you one nation, but His will is to test you by what He has given you; so compete in goodness" (Quran 5: 48). From its beginnings in seventh-century Arabia, Islam as religious tradition and practice has been remarkably open to the outside world (Ernst, 2011). The vast expanse of the Muslim majority world, ranging from Morocco to Indonesia, inevitably meant that it came to encompass a variety of civilizations and cultural forms. In Arabic, the Quran exhorted its initial seventh-century audience to break through parochial identities of tribe and kinship and aspire to a wider, more inclusive community of belief and practice.

Other religious traditions, including Judaism and Christianity, show similar diversity of form and interpretation, commingling local and universal elements. Pilgrimages in all faiths serve to project believers across lines of immediate locality or group. Pilgrims – and visitors to shrines and holy places – set off from home in the hope of reaffirming contact with a spiritual center, encountering 'others' and returning home with a sharpened awareness of difference and similarity (Eickelman and Piscatori, 2003; Sumption, 1975). Whether to Mecca, Jerusalem, Ayodhya, Rome, the holy places of Shi'a Muslims, or to the shrines of Sephardic saints (*zaddiqim*) in North Africa and Israel, pilgrimages and visitations create unity as they highlight differences of locality. In the Mediterranean (for Christians, Muslims, and Jews), as for South Asia (for Hindus and Muslims), pilgrimages and visitations often involve shared sacred spaces (Albera and Couroudi, 2012; Pemberton and Nijhawan, 2008).

Catholic missionaries and the adepts of Sufi religious brotherhoods also carried the word and practice of their respective faiths across vast spaces before they became nation-states (Rudolph and Piscatori, 1997). The missionary activities of the Catholic Church in Latin America date from the Spanish conquests of the sixteenth century. Missionary orders such as the Jesuits and Franciscans implanted complex networks of churches, missions, and schools, transferring people and

resources between Spain and the colonies. In the Middle East in the nineteenth century, French Catholic and American Protestant missionaries opened religious schools in the Levant, and from the 1880s onward, the Alliance Israélite Universelle sent emissaries throughout North Africa and the Ottoman Empire. Although not primarily religious in orientation, Alliance missionaries had a profound impact on the self-perception of the Jewish communities where they worked. The work of these missionary enterprises was aimed, respectively, at Christians and Jews. These activities occurred within a framework of economic hegemony and political domination in which foreign powers actively sought to protect the interests of Middle Eastern Jews and Christians. However, these 'minority' communities were widely distributed geographically throughout the Middle East in the nineteenth century, so that missionary activities aimed at them had a significant indirect impact on the region's Muslim majority. For example, the founder of the Muslim Brotherhood, Hasan al-Banna (1906–49), a strong opponent of Christian missionaries in Egypt and elsewhere, may have been strongly influenced by what he saw of their activities and organization when he was posted as a primary school teacher to Isma'iliya, a town in the Suez Canal Zone, in 1927. Such 'learning' from other religious traditions is an important element in transnational religious movements and not confined to the last two centuries (Höfert and Salvatore, 2004).

Sufi orders had a major role in propagating Islam, both in the Islamization of North Africa and in the subsequent consolidation of Islamic domination. Some orders, such as the Bektashiya, attracted as adepts the political elite of the Ottoman Empire. Others, such as the Tijaniyya, had a major role in the spread of Islam to West Africa. Some orders were highly structured, but most were only loosely linked through informal but pervasive networks of affinity and trust. Their forms of association were widely understood and respected throughout the Muslim world, and their organizational forms continue to serve as a template for many contemporary religious movements.

Religious Identity and Nationalism in the Nineteenth Century

In nineteenth century Europe, the idea took hold that peoples could be divided into nations sharing a common language, religion, ethnicity, and culture, and therefore should form separate political units. This notion was complemented by a heightened self-consciousness, systematization, and explicitness of religious traditions. By the 1830s, the plural 'religions' came into common currency, with a similar development in Arabic, to signify the idea of 'religion' as a system of beliefs and practices that could be set alongside nonreligious elements of the human condition and apart from other religions (Smith, 1963). This idea added impetus to the erosion of clerical authority over public discussions about religion in all faiths, an idea that often crossed from one faith to another (Höfert and Salvatore, 2004), as in the heated discussions between Ernest Renan and Jamal al-Din al-Afghani.

The linkage between nationalism and religion was implicit and the boundaries of religious and national identities rarely

coincided. Partially in response to political and ideological developments in nineteenth-century Europe, a pan-Islamic movement developed in the late nineteenth century. Although the pan-Islamic movements of the 1880s bore similarities to the pan-Hellenic and pan-German movements of the time, only pan-Islam was based formally on a religious commonality (Landau, 1994). The pan-Islamic movements were initially confined to the educated elite, although this elite claimed to speak for all Muslims. The combined French and Spanish effort to crush the rebellion of Abd al-Karim al-Khattabi in 1927 generated protests throughout the Muslim world and appeals for pan-Islamic unity, but the results were transient and minimal. Equally profound is the accelerated nonelite transformation of world religions as they incrementally are influenced by the diverse national contexts in which they develop. For example, some observers write of the birth of a 'French Islam' (Kepel, 2011, p. 11).

The Reemergence of Religion in Public Life

Prevailing theories of modernity and modernization in the mid-twentieth century assumed that religious movements, identities, and practice had become increasingly marginal to modern or modernizing societies and that only those religious intellectuals and leaders who attached themselves to the nation-state would continue to play a significant role in public life. As Casanova (1994) notes, by the late 1970s this prevalent view rapidly eroded through the impact of several nearly simultaneous developments: the Iranian revolution, the rise of the Solidarity movement in Poland, the role of liberation theology in political movements throughout Latin America, and the return of Protestant fundamentalism as a force in American politics. Religion continues to play a significant role in politics and society worldwide. Even locally rooted movements benefit significantly with transnational sponsors or supporters, whether emigrants, states, or others sharing a group's objectives. Opposition to the Shah's regime was firmly rooted in Iran, but the safe haven provided for opposition leaders in exile and their transnational ties and freedom of movement and action were integral to the revolution's success, just as such transnational ties contribute strongly to reshaping how Iranians think of Islam and politics in the era of the post-1979 Islamic Republic (Adelkhah, 2012).

Contemporary religious transnationalism and the identities it supports take many forms. Some are highly structured, while others are only informally organized and related primarily by affinity of goals. Informality and the lack of formal structure can be a strength in contexts of political and religious oppression.

At one end of the spectrum of organizational structure is the vertical transnationalism of the Roman Catholic Church. In its encounter with the emerging system of sovereign nation-states in Europe, the Church incrementally reached an accommodation with nation-states so that the Church hierarchy, although transcending the boundaries of nation-states, also worked within them. The close ties formed with sovereign states often preserved a large measure of local freedom of action for the Church, but they also checked its ability to serve as a voice for social and political reform and for human rights.

The Second Vatican Council (1962–65) significantly altered the nature of Catholic transnationalism. With the Vatican's Declaration of Religious Freedom, *Dignitatis Humanae*, it unambiguously supported the doctrine of universal human rights and used its voice internationally to secure these rights for all peoples and not just Catholics. Vatican II also intensified interfaith dialogue and formally recognized the diversity of Catholic belief and practice. It spurred the translation of liturgies into local languages and promoted lay participation in Church activities, further adapting the Church to local political and social circumstances.

The Church's overall hierarchical structure remained intact after Vatican II, but it was complemented and sometimes overshadowed in importance by decentralized grassroots networks and organizations created for purposes as diverse as Bible study, evangelism, and social and political actions. Many organizations and networks had direct ties to the Church hierarchy, while others operated autonomously. In Latin America, as elsewhere, both types of networks benefited from transnational support. Dutch, Italian, French, Swiss, the United States, Spanish, and other organizations acting transnationally contribute funds and personnel to sustain local developmental programs and action networks. Church-related human rights networks (along with groups with no religious affiliation, such as Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch) have played a significant role in sustaining resistance to authoritarianism and repression, giving concrete form to the idea and practice of transnational civil society.

Protestant transnationalism lacks the time depth of the Catholic presence in Latin America, Africa, and elsewhere, but missionaries from mainline Protestant denominations established a stronghold in Africa by the last part of the nineteenth century, often informally dividing spheres of influence with competing Catholic and Protestant groups, establishing schools and hospitals that often had no state counterparts. Schools have been especially important, and often formed the cadres of early nationalist movements (Beidelman, 1982). Education, intended to inculcate Christian identity and practice, ironically undermined colonial authority and provided the cadres for African independence movements.

The first Protestant churches in Latin America were established primarily for European immigrants. By the 1960s, however, the mainline denominations were increasingly displaced by evangelical, Pentecostal, and fundamentalist churches and missionaries, trained and supported primarily from North America. Levine and Stoll (1997, p. 71) describe the growth of these groups, especially the 'Religious Right,' mixing evangelism with nationalism and anticommunism, as 'spectacular.' They suggest that these groups, in addition to providing needed community services, hospitals, and schools in areas where state facilities are minimal, appeal primarily to people experiencing intense social change and aspiring to improve their status and lives.

The ease of travel and the greatly enhanced role of the mass media have also enhanced the scope and ability of nongovernmental associations and networks to infuse an inherent transnational dimension to contemporary religious identity and practice. Once established, the 'horizontal' networks of civic and religious engagement for both Catholic and Protestant groups became durable and self-sustaining. The

transnational ties engendered through travel for labor migration, missionary activity, civic action, and human rights work creates both institutional ties and a sense of moral community for all participants, not just for the elite. Unlike the hierarchical transnationalism of the Church in earlier periods, the loose network organization that characterizes many contemporary groups is more difficult for states to regulate or control. Moreover, the ease with which participants in such networks can spread information across state boundaries and secure external support serves as a brake on the state abuse of authority. This is as much the case for Latin America as elsewhere. Della Cava (1993), for example, notes the influential role of Catholic nongovernmental philanthropic and service organizations in Central and Eastern Europe as a catalyst for change and an alternative, although not a replacement, for attachment to the nation-state.

Transnational Islamic Identities

Islamic transnational movements occur in a significantly different context than Christian ones because Islam lacks a central organizational hierarchy. Although some Muslim intellectuals call for a spiritual or political unity, the Muslim world has almost always been characterized by a *de facto* pluralism of belief and practice. Even radical Islamic groups such as Lebanon's Hizbullah use the universal language of Islam but in practice seek only to establish an Islamic state or an Islamic order within their respective national borders even if they secure external support (Norton, 2009).

Some Islamic transnationalism is formal, organized, and linked to state organizations. After an arsonist's attack on the al-Aqsa mosque in Jerusalem in 1969, Muslim majority states founded the Organization of the Islamic Conference (OIC), which consists of 56 member states. However, this group has never advocated political unity and some member states, such as Nigeria, are anxious not to appear too closely identified with the organization. Nor has the OIC proved effective in the Iran–Iraq war (1980–88), in defusing the Iraqi–Kuwaiti tension that led to the 1990–91 Gulf War, or in other conflicts among Muslim majority states. However, its Islamic Development Bank, established in Saudi Arabia in 1974, has become one of the most effective aid agencies in the developing world, and various charitable funds associated with it have had a significant impact in its regions of activity.

Unlike Catholicism, in which vertical and horizontal transnationalism coexist, Islamic transnationalism is entirely horizontal. In addition to formal organizations such as the OIC, some clandestine or 'deniable' transnationalism is state supported. After the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979, for example, the United States, with the cooperation of Pakistani and Saudi Arabian security services, supported the recruitment and training of mercenaries from other countries, including Egypt, Algeria, the Yemen, and Sudan to operate alongside Afghan refugees from bases in Pakistan. This 'joint venture' subsequently turned against its initial sponsors. Relationships among like-minded groups are highly fluid, with loosely organized networks of ideological support, financing, and practical training (Sageman, 2008).

Islamic transnationalism is also manifested in nongovernmental movements such as the Muslim World League (*Rabitat al-'alam al Islami*). It sponsors educational programs, religious scholarships for students to study at Saudi and Muslim world universities, and a vigorous publication program throughout the world. Such nonstate organizations, particularly through their formal presentation of Islamic issues and standardization of language and approach, help create common ideological communities that transcend state and national frontiers. Such organizations also show an increasing concern over the situation of Muslim minorities throughout the world, bringing their plight to the wider Islamic community worldwide. The concern of these groups with Muslims living in North America, Europe, and Australia is reciprocated by the emigrants' active concern with the situation of coreligionists in their countries of origin or heritage and with the situation of Muslims in general. Other movements, such as those associated with the Turkish religious leader, Fetullah Gülen, are based on loosely connected clusters of supporters who lack formal central direction. Gülen's movement sponsors schools throughout Turkey, Central Asia, and Eastern Europe, as well as radio, newspaper, and television stations; notwithstanding the lack of central organization, the movement's educational and media programs have emerged as one of the most enduring forms of Turkish presence in Central Asia and Turkish immigrant communities in Europe, North America, and Australia (Turam, 2006).

An even less formal and structured form of transnationalism is represented by *da'wa* (call to Islam) movements such as the Tablighi Jama'at (Masud, 2000). Founded in India in 1927, the movement expanded worldwide after 1947 and currently operates in 80 countries. One principle of the movement is that the practice of Islam does not depend on educated elites alone. The movement's main efforts are directed at deepening the faith of other Muslims and, to promote unity, it avoids theological controversies and politics. South Asian in origin, the Tablighi Jama'at is also active in Europe, North America, and the Arab world. The movement offers no formal training institutes, although some institutions of religious learning are attached to Tablighi centers. Unlike other Muslim organizations, the Tablighi Jama'at lacks welfare or educational programs. Since the movement eschews the broadcast and print media as a matter of doctrine, its spread is entirely through personal contact. With its emphasis on strict adherence to rituals and a concern with the development of individual morality and renewal of personal faith rather than collective action and community change, the Tablighi movement has limited appeal to educated Muslims.

Religious Identity and Globalization

Since the last third of the twentieth century, modern forms of travel, communication, and mass education have accelerated religious transnationalism – the flow of ideologies, access to information on organizational forms and tactics, and the transformation of formerly elite movements to mass ones – rendering obsolete earlier notions of frontier as defined primarily by geographical boundaries and accelerating in pace the earlier spread of ideas already speeded through the

introduction of print technologies. Thus, the devotees of the North African Jewish saint, Baba Sali (Rabbi Israel Abou-hatzeira) meet not only in Israel and Morocco, but also in New York and Europe.

Especially in the Muslim majority world, the advent of mass higher education since the mid-twentieth century, combined with the proliferation of mass media and the greater ease of communication and travel, has led to a significant reimagining of religious and political identities. One change is that patterns of authority have become more diffuse and open. Religiously committed activists increasingly replace traditionally educated scholars as sources of authority. Second, religion has implicitly been systematized and objectified in the popular imagination, making it self-contained and facilitating innovation. Questions such as 'What is my religion?', 'Why is it important to my life?', and 'How do my beliefs guide my conduct?' have become foregrounded in the lives of large numbers of believers, facilitating individual questioning and encouraging individuals to assume responsibility for their conduct and to participate in movements of social and political action. These transformations also mean that 'authentic' religious tradition and identity are foregrounded, questioned, and constructed rather than taken for granted. Finally, the greater access to education, like access to the mass media, has broadened senses of language and community. Just as the rise of written vernacular languages in Europe since the sixteenth century and the spread of print technology created language communities wider than those of face-to-face interactions, mass education and mass communications play a role in the contemporary world, transcending the narrow bases of local communities and dialects and creating new, if fluctuating, bases of religious identity.

See also: Buddhism; Christianity, Origins of; Citizenship, Historical Development of; Judaism; Religion: Nationalism and Identity; Transnational Citizenship.

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