

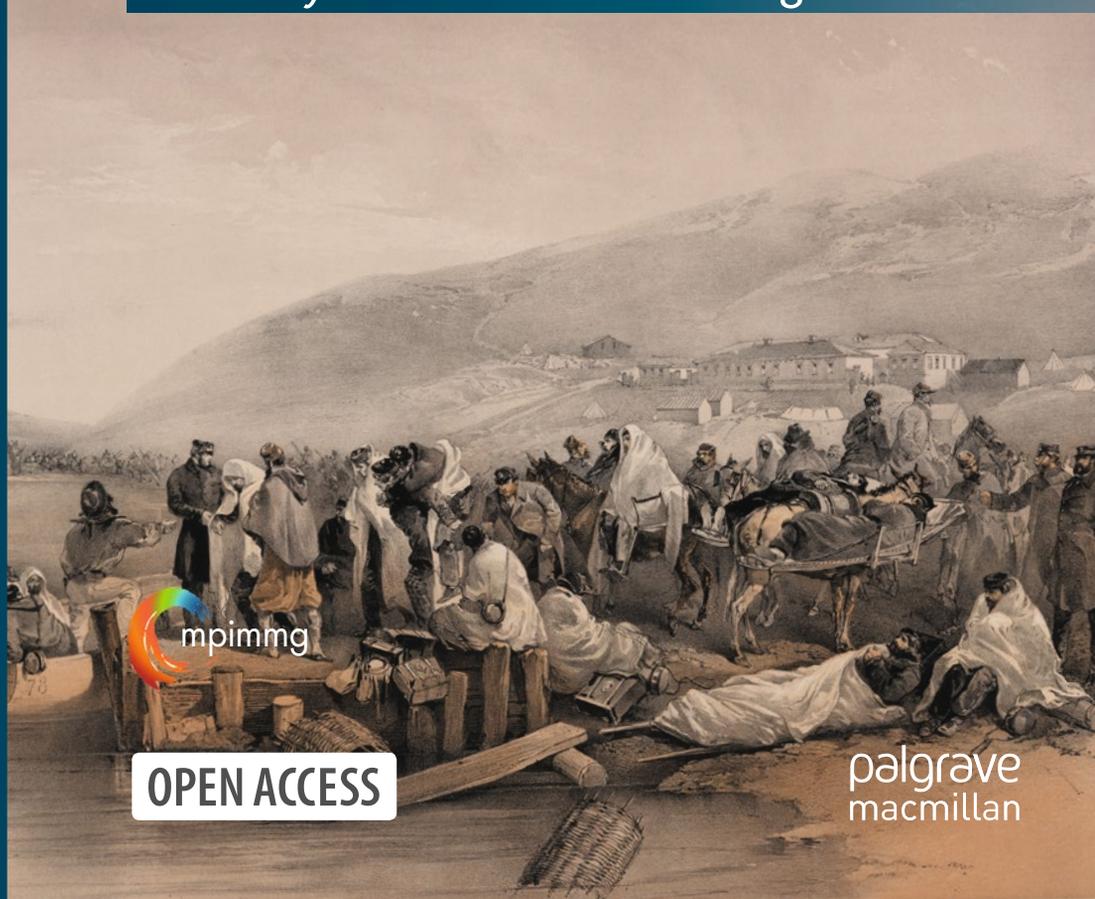


GLOBAL DIVERSITIES

# The Nation Form in the Global Age

Ethnographic Perspectives

*Edited by* Irfan Ahmad · Jie Kang



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Irfan Ahmad • Jie Kang  
Editors

# The Nation Form in the Global Age

Ethnographic Perspectives

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# Essays in Honour of *Peter van der Veer*



A portrait of Peter van der Veer in 2010

As a borderless virus, if Covid-19 marks a form of globalization none had probably predicted, responses to it showed not only the persistence but also intensification of nationalism. Against the dominant views that stress nationalism unaffected by globalization or globalization undermining the nation-state, this volume argues that what characterizes the contemporary world is globalization of the nation form. Based on long-term fieldwork in China, Germany, India, Iran, Pakistan, South Africa and the Netherlands and drawing on multiple theoretical sources, notably Peter van der Veer's significant work on religion and nationalism, twelve chapters by anthropologists critically and variously dwell on tension-laden dynamics of nationalism in a comparative way. Attentive to politics, they historically discuss the nation form in relation to such diverse themes as urban migration, rituals of animal sacrifice and prayer, music, media, e-commerce, Islamophobia, bare life, secularism, literature, violence and atheism. By foregrounding the non-West as a conceptual rather than simply a geographical space, this volume offers new ways of understanding culture and politics of nation and nationalism in a broader perspective. It also charts arenas for future decolonial works on imaginings alternative to the nation form.

# Acknowledgements

In acknowledgement of his enormous contribution to scholarship and as an act of gratitude to him as our supervisor, we present this Festschrift to Professor Peter van der Veer to mark his formal retirement. We say ‘formal’ because it is unlikely that his commitment to scholarship and his rich contribution to the world of letters will come to a halt with his retirement. In many different ways, he has served as a source of intellectual inspiration, academic guidance and practical advice to all the contributors in this volume, as well as to other students whose doctoral dissertations he supervised but who are not represented here. In particular, he has enabled us to tread our own paths and helped us craft our own respective intellectual standpoints.

In addressing the central themes of nationalism and the formation of the nation, the chapters draw on a wide range of topics, ranging from film to fiction, moral labour to digital imagination, religious rituals to atheism, and race to migration. This thematic diversity serves as a window into Peter’s broad scholarly interests in culture, the nation, religion, migration, democracy, secularism and much more, all differently but inescapably informed by a historical and comparative approach. Most of the chapters are substantially revised versions of papers first presented at a two-day conference titled ‘Religion and Nationalism’, held from 17 to 18 June 2019 at the University of Utrecht, The Netherlands (see Photo). We would like to thank the two anonymous reviewers for raising

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pertinent theoretical, methodological and editorial issues. Their suggestions and queries have helped us to improve the structure of the volume and to articulate our positions more sharply.



**Group photograph with participants of the conference, ‘Religion and Nationalism’, Utrecht, 2019**

We would also like to express our gratitude to the University of Utrecht for providing generous funding, a splendid venue and all the necessary facilities to make the conference an especially productive and pleasant event. Our special thanks go to Pieter van der Woude for his efficient, friendly assistance in organizing the conference. We are grateful to the Max Planck Institute for the Study of Religious and Ethnic Diversity, Göttingen, for funds and support in the production of this book in open access. We thank Robert Parkin for his meticulous work in editing the manuscript. We express our appreciation to Patrice Ladwig and Dana Meyer who provided help in searching for a suitable photo for the book cover. Finally, we thank all the contributors for their invaluable time and efforts in attending to our various questions, suggestions and comments.

Preparation of *The Nation Form in the Global Age* began well before the outbreak of the worldwide COVID-19 pandemic. However, much significant work on it took place during the unusual period of the pandemic, when all of us, inhabiting diverse national spaces that were affected differently by the virus and the politics surrounding it, had to adapt to a 'new' world, one that brought with it, among other things, a new set of vocabulary. In some ways this volume bears the mark of that world, connecting it as it does to the world that went before and hopefully the one that awaits us.

Göttingen  
1 May 2021

Irfan Ahmad and Jie Kang

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# Part I

## Introduction



# 1

## Introduction: Imagining Alternatives to Globalization of the Nation Form

Irfan Ahmad and Jie Kang

*Anthropology is the discipline that studies understandings of the world that differ from this ideology [of the modern West] and by that token offers an ideological critique.*

—Peter van der Veer (2016: 153)

*Can we retain the methodological rigor of modern social science while restoring some of the prestige and energy of earlier visions of scholarship, in which moral and political concerns were central?*

—Arjun Appadurai (1997: 7)

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## The Arguments

The aims of this chapter revolve around three arguments. *First*, in agreement with the contributions this volume consists of, it demonstrates the continuing force and reality of the nation form as the only mode of politics worldwide currently. Against arguments seeing the demise of nationalism as integral to the march to globalization, globalism or a cosmopolitan future on the one hand and its persistence regardless of globalization on the other,<sup>1</sup> it argues that what characterizes the world is the ‘globalization of nationalism’ (Greenfeld 2016a, b). This globalization has been such that the national seems to substitute as well as prostitute the rational. The responses to COVID-19—in the form of the stories told about its origin, the groups blamed for its spread, the conspiracy theories that surround it, the ways to fight the virus, the competition between nation states to make or procure its vaccine and the increasing aggrandizement of the state power—amply show not only the persistence of nationalism but also its fierce intensification. Indeed, a new term, vaccine nationalism, is now in use by the media, social scientists, health experts and others.<sup>2</sup> However, it seems not to have occurred to anyone that the time has arrived to vaccinate nationalism itself.

The absence of calls to vaccinate nationalism indexes a broader tendency, including among anthropologists, to regard nationalism as ‘natural.’ This is baffling. In the anthropological literature on institutions from the band through the tribe and chiefdom to the nation state (Eriksen 2001; Harris 1991; Kottack 2008; Skalnik 1983), the time given to the nation state is too short, equivalent not even to a week within a period of a hundred years (to put it quantitatively). Integral to this tendency is a scarcity of interrogation of the violence that nation states have directly or indirectly unleashed throughout the twentieth and current centuries. This interrogation, pertaining to the efficacy and morality of nationalism as a form of polis, constitutes the *second* argument. To those who may take it as a normative position outside the ‘facts on the ground,’ we submit that to shun moral concerns is to dwarf intellectual pursuits. Long ago, C. Wright Mills (1959: 55) warned about the danger of scholars becoming technicians. To think what is moral rather than ceaselessly analyse what barely exists and is real was indeed a key task before the relatively recent rise of a ‘value-free’ science associated with Max Weber (Allen 2004). Here it is important to note Cynthia Weber’s (2010) arresting

internal critique of International Relations (IR) as a discipline, whose still-dominant 'realist' school claims to ground itself in 'reality.' In contrast, Cynthia Weber shows how realism is itself based on fiction. Contrary to its own claim, moreover, the fiction has a tacit normative assumption like the orientation to 'induction' or 'fact' in British social anthropology (Kuper 1983; Parkin 2007). As its founding figure, however, Malinowski's theory of culture, based on a hierarchy of needs, is far from inductive (Ahmad 2021a). It is one thing to observe 'facts' with an open mind, but quite another to presuppose a blank mind, which simply does not exist.

Tellingly, the epigraph from Peter van der Veer's book placed at the beginning of this chapter sees anthropology's goal as studying neither 'reality' nor 'facts'; rather, it is to study 'understandings' of the world. Furthermore, this aim is aligned with anthropology as a comparative craft. Deploying this productively recast vision of anthropology gains further salience vis-à-vis the second argument. Though not always broached explicitly, along with its entwining with religion, at the core of van der Veer's life-long expositions of nationalism has been the latter's trajectory marked with multiple exclusions: racial, ethnic, linguistic, religious, economic and so on. Importantly, this trajectory is enmeshed in the bloodshed, unspeakable dehumanization and violent displacement evident in the figures of refugees and asylum-seekers being 'processed' as statistical and securitized objects by plutocratic-democratic states from North America, Europe and the Manus Islands in the Pacific to India. Van der Veer's terse Afterword (also see Ahmad and van der Veer, this volume) offers a glimpse of the history of nationalism as vicious. As this volume is a *Festschrift* produced by his doctoral students to honour van der Veer's rich, probing and consensus-defiant scholarship, which has variously guided our own respective work, it would only be a fitting critical tribute if we were to extend and expand it.

To do so is to ask questions that van der Veer's impressive corpus of scholarship, spanning over three decades and covering such diverse political formations as India, China and the modern West (including his country of birth, the Netherlands) has not overtly pursued but still require answers (see Ahmad, this volume). Should scholars not imagine alternatives to the nation as a mode of living (ergo, dying/killing)? In such hard work of the imagination, what relationship coheres the past, present and future? How does this relationship shape religion as well as being shaped

by it? Is thinking about such alternatives possible without distancing inquiries from the very nationalism that generate and regulate them? If so, does it vary from one inquiry to another? This set of questions constitutes the *third* argument. It begins by showing how, in certain of their writings, philosophers like Richard Rorty and Jürgen Habermas at once presuppose, analyse and sign nationalism. Opposed to this stance, the next section dwells on writings by anthropologist-social theorist Arjun Appadurai, who problematizes nationalism in order to think beyond it. Discussing the issue of the Caliphate, it ends with an alternative to nationalism that is different from Appadurai's, the source of which is present. Outlining opposition to nationalism in the thoughts of Muhammad Iqbal (1877–1938), poet-philosopher of undivided India, and Hasan al-Banna (1906–1949), founder of Egypt's Young Men's Muslim Association and Muslim Brotherhood, we are interested in the pre-World War II (pre-WWII) imagination of a non-national form of polis.

The third argument becomes clearer when it is juxtaposed to influential notions of anthropology. Justly uneasy about anthropology's declining public voice, Herzfeld (2018: 133) locates the reason for it in its indifference to 'reality,' hence his plea that 'anthropology is a realist discipline!' Earlier, Malinowski (1945: 3) presented a similar idea; in his presentist notion of anthropology, 'the man of science *has to study what is*, and *not what might have been*' (italics author's). Contra Malinowski, 'what might have been' indeed ought to be central to anthropology. From the prism of decolonized knowledge and anthropology,<sup>3</sup> merely to oppose good to bad, inclusive to exclusive, civic to ethnic nationalism is insufficient. A critique qua critique does not simply replace a negative adjective with positive one while retaining the sanctity of what comes after, that is, the nation form. A move away from colonization must examine the universalized wing of its politics: the nation state. If the nation state is integral to colonialism, only adjusting the former will betray decolonization. Here Fanon (1963) is salutary in criticizing nationalism. His *The Wretched of the Earth* is unsparing in its attack on bourgeois nationalism and in seeing the national bourgeoisie as a conduit of capitalism, hence in cahoots with neocolonialism. Yet, Fanon could not escape the nation form either. For Lazarus (1993: 71–72; italics in original), 'Fanon's

critique of bourgeois nationalist ideology was itself delivered from an *alternative nationalist standpoint*.’

The next four sections illustrate these arguments in the order set out above. For structural coherence, the third argument is divided into two sections. The Introduction ends with an outline of the chapters to come. Much of the anthropological literature on nationalism has not made these arguments, certainly not in the ways formulated and substantiated here.<sup>4</sup> The claim to their ‘novelty’ rests on the premise that however novel an idea it is, it comes from somewhere rather than nowhere. And the novelty or otherwise of an argument finds its bearing only within a paradigm (Hallaq 2018). To clarify, the Introduction’s three arguments are mostly independent of the chapters. It is our hope, however, that the questions raised and arguments made here will advance and enrich future anthropological and other works.

## National Borders in the Time of a Borderless Virus

If evidence of nationalism’s persistence were wanting, responses to COVID-19 have furnished plenty. Many nation states nationalized the virus. Donald Trump baptized it as a ‘Chinese’ virus. Beyond the liberal-conservative divide, nationalization of the virus and viral nationalization occurred, and in some cases with deadly results. Chinese individuals were attacked physically and verbally across the continents and in the US, Europe, Oceania and India. In France, tweets inciting violence against the Chinese were posted, accusing them of being responsible for undermining the freedom of ‘real French’ people in the lockdown. In India, people who looked Chinese were attacked and spat on. Abusively called ‘Chinki,’ they were ‘blamed for bringing Covid-19 to India’ (Ahmad 2020a; Krishnan 2020; Liu 2020; Theise 2021).

The nationalization of the virus continued from its origin to its spread. In Britain, India, Italy and the US, Muslims were blamed for spreading it. Sergio Benvenuto, an Italian psychoanalyst, wrote how certain his domestic servant was that Arab Muslims had ‘schemed’ the coronavirus.

In Britain, far-right groups blamed Muslims for its spread. In the US too, the media gave it a Muslim angle, urging people ‘to think about this [virus] the same way we think about terrorism and 9/11.’ In India, the media spun the narrative that Muslims were deliberately spreading the virus. ‘CoronaJihad’ trended on Twitter. The official discourse only bolstered the media narrative, particularly about the Tablighi Jamaat (TJ), a non-political group urging Muslims to practice Islamic rituals. In its news bulletin about the coronavirus, the Delhi government put out a separate column, called ‘Markaz Masjid [the headquarters of TJ],’ to which it causally linked cases of infection. There were also rumours about how Muslims were ‘spitting on food and infecting water supplies with the virus.’ Images of Muslims as spreaders of the virus even figured in a film that ostensibly contested the politics of enmity that had been unleashed during the lockdown. A short film, *Darr* (Fear), spread that politics in the guise of bringing ‘harmony between communities.’ Its message was that not all Muslims should be blamed because only some Muslim vendors had spat on vegetables to spread coronavirus. That some Muslim vendors had done this was taken as truth and broadcast on social media (Ahmad 2020a). In contrast, in April 2021, at the peak of the second wave when daily cases of infection were exceeding the hundred thousand mark, 3 million Hindus gathered freely in Haridwar for the Hindu ritual of Maha Kumbh Mela. Rather than stop this massive gathering, both government and media supported it (Sikander 2021; Sen 2021). There was no pretence about ensuring public health.<sup>5</sup>

If the Indian case illustrated the idea of the nation’s enemy already being within its borders,<sup>6</sup> old national borders were reactivated and new ones erected in the heart of the European Union (EU), viewed by Habermas (2003: 94) as an ‘example for a form of democracy beyond the nation-state’ and as an insignia of a ‘cosmopolitan’ future. Spain imposed a two-week quarantine for all arrivals from the Schengen free-travel zone (the Schengen treaty was made in 1985 and came into force in 1995). In retaliation, France imposed the same rule for people entering its own territory from Spain. While Denmark reopened its borders with Germany, it did not do the same with Sweden even though infection rates in parts of Sweden were lower than in some parts of Denmark (Alemanno 2020). In March, Germany sealed off its borders with Switzerland and France

(Roache 2021), as it did with parts of Austria and the Czech Republic, whose citizens the police prevented from entering Germany (*DW News* 2021). While old borders were activated, new national fences also emerged. Before the pandemic, people from Konstanz and Kreuzlingen, municipalities in Germany and Switzerland respectively, freely moved between them. To fight the virus, in April the Swiss authorities erected a fence between them. Notwithstanding the fence, lovers from both sides met, conversing with one another through holes in the fence (see Fig. 1.1). To stop romantic touches, including exchanges of things, the authorities later erected another fence one and a half metres in front of the first one. In a photo essay in *Time*, there was a touching vignette about an eighty-year-old grandmother suffering from cancer. While visiting her, her grandson, the German photographer, Ingmar Nolting, lamented that he



**Fig. 1.1** Lovers in conversation at the new fence built on the Swiss-German border during the 2020 lockdown. (Photo: Ingmar Björn Nolting)

could not hug her. His grandmother, whose doorway had the message 'I'm staying at home' stuck to it, said: 'Everyone must stick together and do their part to keep Germany stable' (Roache 2021). It is hard not to notice the intimacy between filial and national love here.

Along with the erection of national fences and the hardening of existing ones, vaccine science itself became 'nationalistic' (Gebrekidan and Apuzzo 2021). So intense was the nationalist impetus that a proposal to make vaccine a global good was blocked. Ghana, Pakistan, South Africa and others had called for a free 'people's vaccine,' but the US, EU and other powers thwarted it. The reason was not just the desire for profiteering by pharmaceutical companies in a 'free' economy. Many states, the US included, had in fact poured a lot of cash into funding the companies involved in it. If they wanted, these states could have made companies produce the people's vaccine. That the rich and Western states blocked the proposal in the name of 'innovation,' protection of intellectual property and patents (ibid.) shows, to invoke Karl Polanyi (1944: 147), that 'laissez-faire was planned.' It also belies the slogans of borderless globalization and caring for humanity. What could be more global than the concrete proposal for the people's vaccine against a borderless global virus and its access to all across the globe? Here the German philosopher Peter Sloterdijk (2012: 188) seems both right and wrong. He is right to say that 'people in the West are the only ones who speak of globalization, for all others the theme doesn't exist.' He is wrong because the leaders of Ghana, Pakistan and South Africa did speak of globalization, though its content differed radically from that of Western leaders. Sloterdijk perhaps meant globalization and globalism as an ideological project, which, as sociologist Manfred Steger (2005, 2009) notes, is driven by Western elites under the aegis of US military power. Due exactly to this, apologists for globalization like Thomas Friedman present it as a truth that no one is 'in charge of' globalization (in Steger 2005: 36; also see Fernandez 2011).

The annihilation of the people's vaccine proposal went hand in hand with escalation of the state of exception. In the name of fighting coronavirus, Viktor Orban in Hungary practically became a dictator. The Hungarian Parliament allowed him to rule as long as he himself deemed it necessary. Surveillance by states and companies and crackdowns on media and activists increased in Bangladesh, Ghana, India, Kenya and Sri

Lanka. In India, among those jailed were two research scholar-activists of Jamia Millia Islamia, a university in Delhi (Ahmad 2020a). In short, the escalation of the state of exception in the name of security and the nation—(semi)democratic, communist, undemocratic or a combination thereof—took place globally.

## On Vaccinating Nationalism, or the Nexus Between Violence and Nationalism

The erection of fences dividing lovers at the Swiss-German border in 2020 may appear as new, especially after the fall of the Berlin Wall following the end of the Cold War, the onset of a ‘borderless world,’ ‘de-territorialization’ and so on (Appadurai 1996a). It is not. Indeed, more nation-state borders exist today than in 1989. In the past decade, EU states committed to free movement within have built lethal border walls to stop ‘immigrants’ from without. Along its borders with Serbia and Croatia, Hungary built a thirteen-foot high wall with razor wire (Donnan et al. 2018). Beyond Europe, the dawn of the new century saw billions of dollars spent in building thousands of kilometres of border walls. India (the largest democracy), Israel (the most stable democracy in the Middle East) and the US (the oldest democracy) together built gigantic national walls of 5700 kilometres long (Jones 2012).<sup>7</sup> Historically, most borders across the world were born out of violence and in turn continue and signify violence—literal, symbolic, social-cultural and infrastructural. In cases where there is ‘peace’ along the borders, violence is only deferred, and peace itself is kept through violence.<sup>8</sup> In Europe, after the long religious war, theoreticians concluded that the solution to war within was its displacement without. In Reinhart Koselleck’s (1988: 44) view, this theorization was enabled by divorcing morality from politics and the resultant notion of ‘*justus hostis*, a rightful enemy.’ In matters of war and peace in the age of nation states, such are the relations between inside and outside, within and without, here and there! The stage is set to execute the second argument: nationalism’s relations with violence and destruction.

In largely the anthropological and sociological literature, there are two main positions. While one holds that nationalism is war-prone, the other disagrees. There is also a third position, which it is difficult to name. While the brutality of WWII was still continuing, Malinowski (1941: 537, 540) published a long, largely incoherent essay. Rightly refuting biological explanations for war, however, he also viewed it as productive: 'Warfare of this type is culturally productive in that it creates a new institution, the nation-state.' In his anthropology of war, the conquest of the New World was positive: 'The most important cultural effect of conquest is an all-round enrichment in national life through a natural division of function between conquerors and conquered.' Notice that to Malinowski, the division of function between conquerors and conquered was 'natural,' not coercive and political.

To return to the first position, drawing on the world's datasets over the past two centuries, Andreas Wimmer (2013: 23, 141) argues that the 'nation-state model is a major cause of war in the modern world.' Between 1816 and 2001 there were 484 wars, of which 77 were wars of conquest, 111 were wars between states and 296 civil wars. He established empirically that formations of empire and nation states are 'two important sources of war in the modern world.' Earlier, Cederman et al. (2010: 114) argued that about half the conflicts since WWII were linked to ethnopolitical fights over state power.

One strand of this literature iterates that the passion to kill and be killed is central to nationalism. Carolyn Marvin and David Ingle (1999) maintain that the notion of the totem has shifted from pre-modern society to the totem of the modern nation state. They equate the nation, its rituals and calls for bodily sacrifice, memorialization and the sacredness of flags with the salience of religious rituals in traditional societies. The sacralization of the nation state as a deity entails that its members be ready to sacrifice themselves for its upkeep and renewal. Religion is the core of this sacrificial urge. Later Marvin (2002: 21, 28) criticized Robert Bellah's concept of civil religion as 'a poor ... pretender to religion.' Though not taken as sacred, civil religion, he held, 'inherits the rituals and symbols of Christianity.' Bruce Kapferer (1988: 6) made a similar argument in his study of Sinhalese Buddhist nationalism in Sri Lanka and Anzac nationalism in Australia. He argued that 'the violence,

destruction, and prejudice of Sinhalese and Australian nationalisms' are derived from the 'force of Buddhist and Christian themes ... [and] formed and realized in the religious order of nationalism itself.' With a focus on the imbrication of Hindu nationalism with religious rituals and sacred spaces, van der Veer (1994, 1996) has forcefully argued how nationalism and violence are intertwined in India, impacting the everyday as well as the extraordinary.

Rejecting the 'nationalism is war-prone' thesis, John Hutchinson argues that 'many wars may have a nationalist character, but this does not entail that nationalism was their cause.' To Hutchinson, 'strong nation states' can stem political violence. Criticizing Wimmer, and noting the presence of conflict in the non-West, Hutchinson asks: 'In what sense postcolonial states can be characterized as nation-states, and how genuine is the nationalism proclaimed by the political actors' (2017: 161, 184). Note that this is not a politician vouching for nationalism's genuineness but a scholar. Like Hutchinson, Siniša Malešević (2013: 13) rejects any 'natural linkage' between nationalism and violence. In the Introduction to their edited volume, *Nationalism and War*, John Hall and Malešević question the view that 'nationalism causes war.' Presenting a 'complex picture,' they stress the nature of imperial legacies, types of regime, geopolitical conditions and other factors. They observe that while there was 'some causal relationship' between nationalism and war in 1914, there was a 'total connection' in 1939. Writing from a Eurocentric worldview, they hold that the marriage between nationalism and imperialism is now void, 'at least in Europe.' Since wars were linked to the desire for 'coherence and size,' and as this desire is absent in the present, 'the great states,' they predict, 'will manage their nations with tolerance' (Hall and Malešević 2013: 23). Although they don't specify what 'the great states' are, the context suggests they mean the Great Powers. How did the national coherence of the Great Powers, then, come about?

Taking Spain, France and England as case studies, political scientist-historian Anthony Marx (2003: ix, 200, 3) examines the views of Westerners who 'enjoy self-congratulation' in depicting their own nationalism as liberal, inclusive, tolerant and engage in the 'denigration of others,' whose nationalism is often viewed as illiberal and exclusive. Tracing the history of European nationalism back two centuries earlier than the

usual accounts, he argues: 'At the heart of liberalism is an ugly secret: supposedly inclusive nationalism was founded on the basis of violent exclusion, used to bound and forge nation to whom rights would then be selectively granted.' Instructively, Marx begins his Introduction with 1492 when 'Christian forces' took control of Granada and expulsion of Jews and Muslims followed. In his account, 'religious unity' and 'linguistic homogeneity' were thus crucial to nationalism.

To return to Hall and Malešević, they are silent about the constitutive relation among 'the great states' and their implied opposite, 'the weak states.' For them, the violent asymmetrical make-up of the world of nation states and the exercise of power, at times simply brutal, by some nation states against others is unimportant because 'the age of the empire is over.' Really? Not for Derek Gregory (2004), who sees its continuation at work, for instance, after 9/11, and not only in Afghanistan, Iraq and Palestine but elsewhere too. Neither Hall and Malešević nor Hutchinson say anything substantial about nationalism and violence in the new century. Barring a passing mention of terrorism, nor do they dwell on nationalism and the Global War on Terror (GWOT), the duration of which is already three times longer than that of WWII, the destruction it caused not being over. According to the 2019 Costs of War project led by Neta Crawford and anthropologist Catherine Lutz (2019), at least 800,000 have died directly due to the war. In another estimate, in 2018 the number of people killed was already over 1 million (Dunning and Doyle 2018). As for refugees, from Afghanistan, Iraq, Pakistan and Syria alone, they numbered 21 million (Crawford and Lutz 2019).

Devotees to nationalism—among them are also scholars—may dismiss the above figures as unrelated to nationalism. The standard account of a million people killed due to GWOT states that the killings were due to 'terrorism,' 'internal sectarian' divides and failed states in the Middle East. In another shade of such explanations, Islam itself becomes *the* factor. But is terrorism unhooked from nationalism? Taking Burma, India and Sri Lanka as case studies, Ahmad (2021a) shows how the problem of terrorism is rooted in the purificatory, unifying project of nationalism in each of the three nation states. He extends this argument beyond the subcontinent to explain the phenomenon of terrorism in most places, including those in and directed against the West. The long and

continuing racist assaults on black lives from the time of the Ku Klux Klan to the 2021 raid by the white Christian nationalists on Capitol Hill—as well as the resistance to it—pertain squarely to nationalism. The reason why, in most accounts, the deeper connections between terrorism and nationalism, like those between racism and nationalism, are rarely systematically pursued is because to do so would mean questioning the very system of nation states that Western elites have built and in which most non-Western states enviously participate. Nationalism's connections with violence logically extend to the phenomenon of immigration. Anthony Smith (2007: 27), a known nationalism scholar, puts it as follows: 'If war was formerly the focus of and 'test' of nations, today it is immigration that fulfils that function.' That the immigrants Smith was referring to are predominantly Muslims is too obvious to require stating (TEDx Talks 2020).<sup>9</sup> Anthropologist Banu Karaca (2021: 16) notes that, post-9/11, immigrant and Muslim became interchangeable terms in Germany.

## Studying Nationalism, or Signing It?

To protect nationalism analytically rather than radically expose it to public scrutiny to discuss its limits and violence is a symptom of a deep-rooted fear—the fear of searching past the present for an alternative polis. In her passing but arresting remark, Erika Harris (2016: 246), an expert on nationalism in Central Europe, notes that this lack of an alternative has created 'a near existential anxiety.' In our view, it is the other way around. Since this unelaborated quote from Harris occurs only in her final paragraph, we pursue her allusion differently. Greenfeld (2016a: 118) views nationalism and functional mental illness like schizophrenia, affective disorder and depression as interconnected, arguing that 'only with nationalism functional mental disease became a social problem and an issue in public health.' If correct, could it be that manic depression, born out of very nationalism, is a cause of the absence of sustained thinking about alternatives to nationalism? This conjecture rests on the ground that, like hopelessness, depression precludes thinking about hopeful alternative futures.<sup>10</sup> Concurrent with and bequeathed by Western

modernity, however, both nationalism and mental illness came to be seen as universally ‘natural.’ To de-naturalize them is to begin to imagine alternatives to nation states, a task completed in the section ahead.

First, there is the question of how nationalism also informs and thrives in academic writings. To this end, we do not discuss past theorists like Émile Durkheim (d. 1917) and Max Weber (d. 1920) who, during WWI, supported their respective nation states—Weber backed Germany for the cause of *Kultur*, whereas Durkheim supported France ‘with equal vehemence’ to defend ‘the cause of *civilization*’ (MacIntyre 1984: 3). Our focus instead is contemporary. Greenfeld (2016b: xxii; italics author’s), cited earlier, writes: The Japanese ‘never wanted to be “like” the West’ and ‘conscious of being unlike, they did not envy *us* and did not develop resentment.’ The *Them* versus *Us* dichotomy at the heart of nationalism also occurs, albeit differently, in texts like Greenfeld’s, a sociologist. Nationalism also structures the writings of ‘universal’ philosophers like Richard Rorty (d. 2007) and Habermas (b. 1929).

The nationalism of Rorty, a pragmatist American philosopher, is manifest in many works, including *Achieving Our Country*, a text proclaiming ‘national pride’ (1998: 3). Elsewhere he wrote: ‘My native country has world-historical importance only because it cast itself in the role of vanguard of a global egalitarian utopia’ (Rorty 1999: 234). Shunning any humility, he continued: ‘I think that our country ... is an example of the best kind of society so far invented’ (in Billig 1993: 78). Needless to add that Rorty’s best society resembled the US as a nation state. Clearly, Rorty’s national pride partakes in the wider Western discourse. He also addressed himself as ‘we Western liberals.’ Michael Billig reads his nationalism as part of the *Pax Americana* in which the American voice becomes the voice of ‘us all.’ Rorty’s defence of democracy was likewise nationalist in that it was actualized in a nation, the US, which in turn was taken as the motor of democracy. Did his defence of democracy extend to democracy everywhere? Probably not! As he put it, ‘we postmodern bourgeois liberals’ should ‘defend the institutions ... of the rich North Atlantic democracies’ (in Billig 1993: 78).

How does nationalism work in Habermas, an influential contemporary philosopher engaged in ‘defending the project of modernity and universalism’ (Chambers 1996: 13)? In his 2003 text, at once an analysis and

an appeal, on the mass demonstrations against the US-led invasion of Iraq, Habermas amply displayed his sense of nationalism (Habermas and Derrida 2003: 291, 293).<sup>11</sup> To counter ‘the hegemonic unilateralism of the United States,’ he proposed a common European policy. To the existing and future members of the EU, he advised adding a ‘European dimension’ to their ‘national identities.’ The core of this European identity, Habermas observes, is the distinct ‘form of spirit’ ‘rooted in the Judeo-Christian tradition.’ Striking is the syntagma ‘Judeo-Christian tradition,’ a post-WWII American coining absent in the pre-Holocaust vocabulary (Sorkin 2015: 121–122). Without telling his readers about the term’s radical novelty, Habermas notes that democracy, individualism, rationalism and so on, which were bequeathed by this tradition, later spread to the US, Australia and elsewhere.<sup>12</sup> So infused with Eurocentrism was Habermas’ appeal that at the very far end he had to say that he did not favour Eurocentrism. The political theorist Iris Young (2003), however, noted how Habermas’ appeal amounted to a re-centring of Europe that was far removed from global democracy. Calling his posturing of Europe against the US as ‘little more than sibling rivalry,’ she pointed out how his appeal to fashion ‘a particularist European identity’ meant designing the ‘other.’ Young also identified the erasure of protests outside Europe, for Habermas highlighted only those in Europe to mark ‘the birth of a European public sphere.’

In many ways, the elements of a European identity which Habermas advocates resonate with discourses pursued aggressively by Geert Wilders and Marine Le Pen, anti-Muslim radical populists of the Netherlands and France respectively. Both differently mobilize the ‘Judeo-Christian’ identity of Europe/the West to fashion Islam as the enemy (Morieson 2021). This discursive commonality is also manifest in the silencing of Muslim voices. If the traditions and values of the people against whom the war was waged and on whose behalf he seemed to speak appear as invisible in Habermas’ ‘cosmopolitan’ text, in the discourses of Wilders and Le Pen Muslim voices are muffled as the reverse of Dutch, French or Western ‘Judeo-Christian’ identities. It is worth recalling that in 1991, in the name of universal principles and a universal constitution, Habermas had supported the war against Iraq, ignoring ‘the rationalization of the violence and barbarism of the constitutional orders themselves’ (Hill and

Montag 2000: 7).<sup>13</sup> To clarify, our point is not that Habermas, Wilders and Le Pen are alike. Yet, a fair assessment cannot bypass the shared ground to construe them hastily as chalk and cheese.

Furthermore, if taming nationalist zeal among formerly hostile countries under the banner of the EU is cosmopolitanism, as Habermas suggests, it is neither novel nor universal. August Schlegel (d. 1845) was a German nationalist wedded to 'European patriotism' (in Ahmad 2013: 239). He imagined a united Europe, observing: 'If I might make a claim on the German feeling of nationalism, it would be ... to recognize itself as the motherland of Europe.' Giving this primacy to both Germany and Europe was also religious. To his brother Fredrick Schlegel, though born in Orient, Christianity 'expressed its most essential and outstanding effects wholly in the Occident' (in Murti 2001: 16, 13). Unlike Schlegel and others, Habermas separates patriotism and nationalism through 'constitutional patriotism.' This task is undertaken to move away from Germany's Nazi-era nationalism (Habermas 1998; Müller and Scheppele 2008) and 'combine universal principles of democracy and personal liberties in the constitution of a single country' (Turner 2004: 286). However, is it conceptually possible to delink nationalism from patriotism? Alasdair MacIntyre (1984: 14) thinks not. He takes patriotism as 'a permanent source of moral danger.'<sup>14</sup> Describing fanaticism as 'patriotism for religion,' Muhammad Iqbal, whom we shall meet later, regarded patriotism as 'fanaticism for the country' (in Ahmad 2019: 1). Notably, Habermas' legal patriotism is both derived from and devoted to the Western project, for he firmly stated: 'the only sort of patriotism that will not alienate *us from the West* is constitutional patriotism' (in Rorty 1998: 145n11). Our italicization of *us* and *from the West* should be noted.

Central to constitutional patriotism is loyalty to the constitution, itself a territorial-national text the words of which can be, indeed they have been, stretched, skewed, molested or made still. Despite both countries' constitutional pledges to socialism, ruthless capitalism is ongoing in India and China, as is violence against Muslims, regardless of their both being constitutionally secular (see Ahmad and van der Veer, this volume). Apt here is Joshua Mitchell's (2008: 5) remark that 'with loyalty comes cruelty as well.' After all, nation states kill citizens for committing treason. From the frame of the nation, Habermas' festive story of individualism

(above) is misleading.<sup>15</sup> As an individual, when the novelist E.M. Forster (d. 1970) stated that ‘he would betray his country [rather] than his friends, he was met with contumely’ (Smart 1998: 84). In his autobiography, Ghaus Ansari (1929–2012), an Indian anthropologist trained in Austria and the UK, noted the nefarious charges of national disloyalty made against him (Ahmad 2018).

It is obvious that Habermas’ Eurocentric nationalist claim of ‘democracy beyond the nation state’ does not include democracies like India or Senegal. That for non-Europeans the EU’s cosmopolitanism is for Europeans alone (that too for not all beyond race, religion or class) and is ultimately nation-statist is evident from its visa procedures. Non-Westerners apply for visa to one of Europe’s nation states, not to the non-existent EU embassy. The reason why the philosophical nationalism of Habermas passes as universal and cosmopolitan is not only a matter of individual accomplishment. Rather, it is because of the very constitution of modern Western philosophy as a hegemonic and security project, which turns its ethnic character into an emblem of universalism. Nothing illustrates this more vividly than the projection of the Enlightenment, both French and German, as universal, while effacing its ethnic features, as shown through the framework of the anthropology of philosophy. Without elaborating this argument further here (on which, see Ahmad 2017), suffice it to note that instead of respectfully and judiciously taking *from all*, Western philosophy presented its own particularity (as universal) *to all*.

The description of thoughts of Rorty, Habermas and others as philosophical nationalism, some may have noticed, echoes Derrida’s (1992: 10, 2000) reflection that ‘the claim of nationalism does not happen to philosophy by chance or from the outside, it is essentially and thoroughly philosophical.’ What this reflection unveils, then, is a paradox: philosophy’s assumption of its universality and its situatedness in a particular language, tradition and culture. Rather than resolve it, Derrida took it as the very condition of the possibility of philosophy. The formulation made above—for a universal philosophy proper to itself, the benchmark of *to all* must be preceded by *from all*—is one response to the paradox.

## Imagining Alternatives to Nationalism

Unlike Rorty and Habermas, who philosophize more with a banner (of nationalism) than with a hammer, as Nietzsche (1998) would have it (see next chapter), Appadurai has written explicitly and productively against nationalism. He begins one essay with ‘we need to think ourselves beyond the nation.’ This need is partly driven by biography. His father, a journalist with Reuters in Bangkok, met Subhas Chandra Bose (b. 1897), a towering Indian nationalist. Earlier linked to the Congress party led by Jawaharlal Nehru and Mohandas Gandhi, Bose, who believed in the use of violence to oust colonial rule, later formed his own movement. In WWII, he backed the Japanese, with whose support Bose formed an Indian government in exile. Appadurai’s father was a minister of propaganda in that government. When Bose was killed or died in 1945 (some think he is still alive), he returned to India, where partisans of Bose became ‘poor cousins’ in the saga of India’s nationalism. To the triumphant nationalism in power, they were ‘unwelcome,’ ‘rouge nationalists,’ ‘an embarrassment.’ The tale of Appadurai’s father and his own experience in ‘the elite sectors’ of Bombay ignited his own ‘doubts about patriotism’ (1993: 411, 413, 412). Harrowing is thus the experience of the Appadurai family at the hands of anti-Bose nationalists. However, for many reasons, the ‘embarrassed’ remained part of the nationalist ‘family,’ albeit as its ‘poor cousins.’ By virtue of this, the embarrassment rings mostly honorific. It is time to script doubts about nationalism by those defined as ‘anti-national’ and perennial others of the family of nationalism at large. Not only are anti-nationals outside nationalism’s family, they are not even a neighbour—and if they are, it is a neighbour who from the forced ‘outside’ has sneaked inside the family during the thick darkness of the night. Wilders construed the dynamic of nationalism, family and neighbour as follows: ‘It [Turkey] is a very respected ally within NATO. ... But I believe it is not a member of the family. A good neighbour is not the same as being a member of the family’ (in Ahmad 2013: 247). Along with what seems honorific, can there be theoretical space for what is horrific?

Given our unremarkable biographies, it is relevant to note only this. As a child, while going to the madrasa in his village in India, which meant passing through a Hindu quarter, its residents frequently hurled a rhymed taunt against Ahmad. Uttered in the local dialect, it asked:

Mīyān ṭīyān gaṛī kē pahīyā  
Mārab lāt ta jaiha kahīyā

O, you Muslim, like the wheel of a cart  
When I kick you, where will you go/reach?

While the word *mīyān* used by an outgroup to refer to Muslims is itself derogatory, its conjunctive echo word, *ṭīyān* (created through duplication by distorting the former it is positioned after), increases the viciousness of the taunt.<sup>16</sup> Clearly, the question mark about the spatial location or belonging of Muslims in the last line nullifies any membership of the family and not even the status of a neighbour, let alone a good one. The question's infinite nature (dis)places Muslims anywhere and thereby nowhere. The threat of expulsion in the taunt is as certain as its destination is uncertain or unmarked. This was nationalism in a village with only dirt roads and without electricity—a village that in Ashis Nandy's ideation would otherwise likely qualify as the bastion of 'indigenous' (read Hindu) tolerance!

To return to Appadurai, in addition to slices of biography enabling him to see nationalism as 'the last refuge of ethnic totalitarianism,' bloodshed in the name of the nation, the rise in xenophobia in many parts of the world and so on are other factors to think about beyond the nation form. Who, then, are the agents of what he calls a 'postnational world'? Appadurai's focus is on the diaspora, whose lives are discordant with nationalism and its sovereignty. He discusses transnational networks and movements like the violent Khalistan movement, Amnesty International and Oxfam. The postnational mobile actors are thus business elites, UN soldiers and development specialists, as well as the laity. What interests Appadurai most are disjunctures (marked by technology and deterritorialization), not conjunctions, among space, place, citizenship and nationhood. To him, the US, already 'a postnational space,' is well suited to playing a pivotal role 'in the cultural politics of a postnational world,' where sovereignty too is postnational (1993: 419–421, 423, 427, 1996b: 58, 48, 43–44, 1998: 449).

A full engagement with other rich aspects of Appadurai's complex writing is not feasible here, nor is it relevant to elaborate on the fact that part of his argument and its force, including his predictions, proved incorrect—something he himself recognized later (2006).<sup>17</sup> Pertinent here is the fact that the locational source of his postnational world is essentially the *present* of the post-WWII era. In contrast, we close this section by discussing Muslim thinkers—India's poet-philosopher Iqbal and Egypt's Banna—who criticized the nation form before its total institutionalization. We posit that the debate on the postnational will benefit comparatively from the 'anti-national' Muslim thinkers' pre-national imaginations of a polis different from the nation form, as it would from a treatment of pre-WWII imaginations of the non-nation form in French West Africa (see next chapter). Since Islam was the language of their critique, and the Caliphate was the model they often appealed to, secularist dismissal of them as 'theocratic' will not do. This dismissal is more a supra-academic assault than a scholarly argument. Without going into the critical literature on the secular (e.g., see Asad 1999, 2003; van der Veer 2001), suffice it to note that the secular as supposedly separate from and the obverse of the religious, indeed of the 'sectarian'<sup>18</sup> too (Abillama 2013), is *also* a weapon wielded by modern power. Under the pretext of fighting 'terrorism' and 'separatism,' the almost sacral deployment of *laïcité* by President Emmanuel Macron (and his predecessors too) illustrates this dynamic. His government's practice of stigmatizing subalternated French Muslims and denying them their religious rights (Fernando 2021; Gabon 2021; Ramdani 2021) goes against the idea of secularism as guaranteeing religious liberty to the faith minorities (van der Veer 2013b: 660).

To make sense of Muslim thinkers' pre-WWII anti- or non-national imaginations, we begin with a 2014 tweet by the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS). Defying the national borders between Iraq and Syria, ISIS announced 'the end of Sykes-Picot.' Sykes and Picot are the last names of Mark Sykes and François Georges-Picot, diplomats respectively of Britain and France. Secretly agreed in 1916 (Falk 2015), the Sykes-Picot Agreement between Britain and France served as the basis for creating a number of nation states out of what had been the Ottoman Empire. That is, the creation of these new nation states did not take place by

echoing the people's will, but rather in 'defiant opposition to the vast majority' (Farouk-Alli 2014: 8). One example typifies the imposition of the nation state as a colonial form of polis in the Middle East, itself an imperial term coined by an American naval officer, Alfred Mahan (Ahmad 2011). At his coronation as the King of Iraq in 1920, Faisal I, the third son of Sharif Husayn (*amir* of Mecca) who had earlier been handpicked by the British as the ruler of Syria, no Iraqi national anthem could be played because it did not exist. In the presence of the British officials, the band therefore played the anthem of the British crown, 'God save the King,' instead (Cleveland and Bunton 2009: 207; Allawi 2014: 380). Enacting the *divide et impera* policy, a British official stated: 'What we want is not a united Arabia, but a weak and disunited Arabia, split up into little principalities so far as possible under our suzerainty—but incapable of coordinated action against us' (in Curtis 2018).

In the opening scene of the ISIS video that was embedded in its tweet, the camera shows the Iraq-Syria border, described it as 'the so-called border of Sykes-Picot.' The central figure in the fifteen-minute video is its unnamed narrator, who, according to the Belfast Telegraph (2014), is from Chile. He asserts that 'we do not recognize it [the border].' With a gun hanging from his shoulder and a baseball cap on top of his flowing hair, he appears calm, and occasionally he also smiles. In fluent English, the narration is interspersed with Arabic phrases like 'praise be to God.' Pointing to the Iraqi national flag, he calls it 'flag of *shirk* [polytheism].' He then quotes Prophet Muhammad to say, 'Whoever calls to nationality, he is not from me.' The narrator describes ISIS's leader Abu Bakar Baghdadi simultaneously as a caliph and as 'the breaker of barriers,' resolving that we will 'break the borders of Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon and other countries also' because 'there is no nationality [in Islam].'

As it is evident, the ISIS video is preoccupied with first highlighting the Sykes-Picot nation-state border and then announcing its abolition. The reason for its abolition is grounded in a prophetic saying and Islam, which it interprets as standing above nationality and national barriers. It is after explaining this rationale that the narrator describes Baghdadi as a caliph and 'the breaker of barriers.' By virtue of the whole political matrix in which Baghdadi is called a caliph and the unilateral declaration of ISIS's Caliphate occurs, the very meanings of 'caliph' and 'caliphate' in

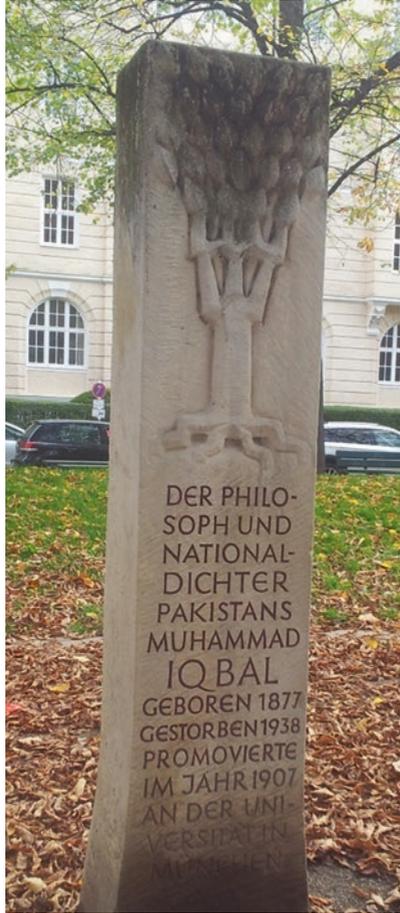
2014 depart from their usage in the 1920s when, for instance, Indian Muslims (and Hindus) opposed the abolition of the Caliphate. At that time, the nation states had not come into being yet. Likewise, the meaning of Caliphate in 2014 differed from that in the eighteenth century or earlier when as an institution it existed, rather than only in its imagination by ISIS. The novel meaning of ISIS's Caliphate is further evident from the fact that it was announced after over six decades of relentless experiment with the nation state. That the alliance of local, regional and Western elites catalysing the brutal coup against the first democratically elected President of Egypt, Mouhammed Morsi, served as a prelude to ISIS's declaration is obvious. As for ISIS's deployment of religion, it bears a striking similarity with Christianity interpreted as the motor of a united Europe. Warning against the nationalist passions of European states against one another, in his 1922 German text, *Pan-Europa*, intellectual Richard von Coudenhov-Kalergi affirmed: 'Europe is bound together by the Christian religion, European science, art and culture, which rest on a Christian-Hellenic basis' (in Villanueva 2005: 74). To appreciate Coudenhov-Kalergi's thinking in its fullness is to recall, as cited earlier, Fredrick Schlegel's rendition of the Occident as coterminous with Christianity. It is, therefore, unsurprising that after WWII, with the support of the Vatican, devout Catholics like Konrad Adenauer, Robert Schuman and Alcide de Gasperi led the project of European integration. While it is true that Catholics have rallied for the EU cause more than Protestants, compared to nominal adherents in each, the devout among them both are the more vocal supporters of the EU (Nelsen et al. 2002).

There is some debate about the degree to which ISIS belongs properly to the fold of Islam. *Fatwas* have indeed been issued by several *ulema* against ISIS. Some have even called ISIS *khāriji* (see Anjum 2016; Sayyid 2017; Sing 2016). Setting the doctrinal debate aside, concerned as we are with the Muslim political imagination, it is our contention that ISIS's reading of the nation form has some precedence.

When, aged 22, al-Banna, a schoolteacher, founded the Society of Brotherhood in 1928, the fundamental challenge Egypt faced, as did the rest of the non-Western world, was European domination. Of the many responses to that domination, modernism was one. Against the country's modernist-secularist and wealthy elite, who, awed by the West's

domination, had cheerfully adopted European manners as well, Banna equally opposed their politics of nationalism. Unlike those elites who were elated by the abolition of the Caliphate in 1924 by Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, for Banna it was a shock (Commins 1994). The goal of decolonization, as Banna saw it, was not simply national independence through the very institution of the nation state overtaken and continued by secular nationalists, it was also a moral-political independence the wellspring of which was Islam. That is not to say that he dismissed Egypt's ancient cultural heritage. Banna's main opposition was to the territorial bases of politics as the form of the nation and its inherent racism in modern Western political developments beyond Europe. Describing 'all racial or ancestral distinctions' as 'false,' he stressed the Qur'ānic idea of the single brotherhood of all believers as follows: 'Remember: Islam neither admits geographical differences; nor gives any importance to racial or blood distinctions ... it takes all the Muslim countries as one nation, although there may be great distances between them' (in Gani 2019: 660). Banna was emphatic that 'the Muslim Brothers do not ... advocate Pharaonism, Arabism, Phoenicianism, or Syrianism' (in Samman 2011: 181). When told that his idea of the community went against the reality of the modern age, with its 'prejudices of race and colour,' Banna remarked that the duty of the physician was not 'to agree with the patients,' but to 'treat them' and 'show the correct path.' Such was Banna's critique of the nation form against which he idealized the Caliphate in which geography, race or sheer birth were not the basis of collective life. In his view, Muslims should work to think about the Caliphate as an alternative mode of political life, rather than meekly mimic nationalism imported from the West. Marking the decolonial force of Banna's thought, Jasmine Gani (2019: 661, 667), however, observes how his organization subsequently developed 'strong nationalist overtones.'<sup>19</sup>

Unlike Banna, who formed an organization, the poet-philosopher Iqbal built none. But his critique of nationalism was total and philosophically grounded. Educated at Trinity College Cambridge and with a doctoral degree from Germany's Munich University (see Fig. 1.2),<sup>20</sup> he was an ardent and critical student of European thought. Rooted in Islamic philosophy, he was attracted by and studied the thoughts of such diverse thinkers and philosophers as Bergson, Hegel, Goethe, Milton, Nietzsche



**Fig. 1.2** A stele in Habsburg platz, Munich, marking the award of doctorate by Munich University to Iqbal in 1907. Wrongly, it describes Iqbal as ‘Pakistan’s national poet’ (see note 20). (Photo: Irfan Ahmad)

and Wordsworth. He also had personal-intellectual relations with many European thinkers, among them Edward John Thompson (1886–1946), an academic-missionary based in India (whose son was the British historian E.P. Thompson). Iqbal’s rejection of territorial nationalism, the *differentia specifica* of which he took as its ‘over-organized and homogenizing state structure,’ was epistemological, not only political. Unlike

nationalists concerned to prove to the West that their country was also a nation, Iqbal held that transplanting the institutional arm of Western politics, the nation form, in the colonized world would defeat any genuine decolonization. For precisely this reason, he viewed his resistance to nationalism as integral to his anti-imperialism. This was an unorthodox gesture, for in the then dominant discourse nationalism was seen as a rival to imperialism. As an anthropologist of European philosophy and politics, Iqbal was aware of the diversity within the West. He observed that, while European leaders were determined to shape the world by imposing the nation form, many of its thinkers had critiqued nationalism. It is unlikely that Iqbal did not know the works of Lord Acton (d. 1902), a Fellow at Trinity, who viewed Catholicism and nationalism as incompatible. Acton also feared the subduing of religion by the all-encompassing nation state. Crucially, for Iqbal, nationalism in Europe had eclipsed the universal ethical message of Christ. Appreciative of Luther's critique of the ecclesiastical establishment, Iqbal, however, noted how the post-Luther era witnessed territorial-national wars and an upsurge in the growth of narrow loyalties (Sevea 2012: 130n14, 127, 131, 144).

If for Nietzsche (1998: 38) alcohol and Christianity were 'the two great European narcotics,' for Iqbal, nationalism and Western civilization were the 'narcotics of imperialism.' Elsewhere he likened nation states to idols (Sevea 2012: 135, 139). As the nature of Iqbal's philosophical hatred for the nation form is complex and space does not allow us to describe it in full, we can only explain some elements of it. Cognizant of Muslims inhabiting many spaces as the *qaum*, in his view, the *qaum* cannot trump affiliation to the *millat*, which signifies religion as a way of life. That was why he contested Husain Ahmad Madani (who was aligned with the Congress and its territorial nationalism), who, he held, privileged *qaum* over *millat*. But why *millat* over *qaum*? Iqbal did not want to leave the formation and development of selfhood (*khudī*) at the mercy of 'mono-cultural and territorially defined nation-state' (Sevea 2012: 162). Commentators on Iqbal often take his two poems, *The Secrets of the Self* and *Mystery of Selflessness*, as antithetical, the former stressing the individual, the latter the social. However, Iqbal Singh Sevea, whose exceptional work I draw on, aptly observes that Iqbal's notion of *khudī* (self)

and *bēkhudī* (selflessness) were complimentary, pertaining as they did more to the realm of *millat* than to *qaum*. Notably, Iqbal viewed nationalism as inimically pitting one segment of humanity against another. In 1936, two years before his death, he published his poetic anthology, *Zarb-e-kalīm* (The Staff of Moses). Its subtitle was ‘declaration of war against the contemporary age.’ In a poem entitled ‘Mecca and Geneva,’ he called into question the very principles on which the League of Nations was founded. He deeply lamented the effacement of the ‘unity of Adam, *vahdat-e-ādam*’ in an age when nation state had become the norm of global politics. Iqbal (1936: 54) concluded the poem by asking:

Mecca has dispatched a message to Geneva [the League of Nations’ headquarters]

Should there be a unity of humankind or unity among nation-states?

So much for Iqbal’s critique of the nation form! Did he imagine a form of polis alternative to the nation state? He did. In an earlier formulation—like most philosophers’, his thoughts too evolved—he imagined India as a garden: ‘we are its [India’s] nightingales’ and India is our garden, *gulsetāñ*. What symbolizes *gulsetāñ* is the diversity of flowers and plants, each with its autonomous self, each with its distinct colour and fragrance. Notable is Iqbal’s depiction of garden’s dwellers not as citizens but as nightingales. The flight, movement and song of the nightingales do not stop, like the affiliation and life forms of members of *millat*, at the borders of the nation states. In a monumental irony, the nation state of Pakistan abducted Iqbal as its ideologue even though he had died as a non-nationalist Indian, long before Pakistan’s birth (see note 20).

In 2018, the former British Prime Minister, Tony Blair predicated the rise of three giant powers in the future: China, India and the West. Imagining that scenario, he pleaded that ‘in those circumstances, we need the West to stay strong’ and that ‘Europe will be significantly weaker if you pull Britain out of Europe’ (in Hunt 2018). When liberated from its Schmittean-like posturing in the naked game of power reduced to strategic interests and purged of morality, and if ethically cleansed of racism and Islamophobia by figures like Wilders and Le Pen, the EU is already a garden—a beautiful one. A recent essay, ‘Who Wants the Caliphate?’ by

Ovimir Anjum (2019), a well-known American scholar of Islam, has generated much debate. Stating that democracy is not hostile to the Caliphate, in a discussion of his essay, Anjum (2021) imagined a Caliphate akin to the European Union.

## Outline of Chapters

Considering developments in Ukraine and the likely break-up of the UK, Niccolo Caldararo (2014: 1) recently remarked that existing theories of the nation state were ‘in trouble.’ Earlier too, anthropologists had issued calls for new theorizing about nations and nationalism (Gingrich and Banks 2006: 21–23). New theories, even middle-range ones, however, are not on the horizon, at least not yet. Developing a new theory is not the avowed objective of this volume. In addition to the three arguments advanced in the Introduction, however, this volume will serve as a major springboard for achieving that goal for the following reasons. In-depth ethnographic accounts of nationalism in different parts of the world are essential to any sound theorizing. With a few exceptions, most of the chapters in this volume are based on long-term fieldwork, and all the contributors are trained anthropologists. Additionally, the distinction of this volume lies in the fact that unlike the earlier volume edited by Gingrich and Banks, it focuses on the non-Western world, covering many regions (Asia, Africa, the Middle East and partly Europe as well) and nation states such as China, Germany, India, Iran, Pakistan, South Africa and the Netherlands. The contribution, for example, by Verkaaik travels between Pakistan and the Netherlands. In line with earlier works on Asia such as those by Kapferer (1988) and Tambiah (1997), this volume discusses nations and nationalism in a multi-dimensional and globally comparative way.

In marked contrast to the volume by Gingrich and Banks, this one is not premised on neatly demarcating new nationalism or neo-nationalism from the old one. That is not to say that we take nationalism to be a static phenomenon or maintain that nationalist mobilizations and their discursive articulations have remained the same over the long term. A common analytical hazard in formulas such as the suffix ‘neo,’ however, is that in outlining the contours and properties of ‘neo-nationalism,’ it may end up

reifying both the old and the new, thereby precluding a proper treatment of vital elements of continuity. In ways more than one, Mukulika Banerjee's account of Indian/Hindu nationalism (in Gingrich and Banks) illustrates this hazard (see Ahmad and van der Veer, this volume). The observation by Tariq Modood (2019: 233), a noted British scholar of nationalism and multiculturalism, thus seems pertinent, namely that 'today's "new nationalism" marks merely the latest iteration of yesterday's old nationalism.' Put differently, following critiques by Prasenjit Duara (1993) and van der Veer (1994) of Benedict Anderson's (1991) account of nationalism premised on a sharp rupture between the traditional and the modern, the past and the present, we maintain that a more fertile way is to see them relationally and dynamically (van der Veer 2013a).

What distinguishes this volume is also its distinct themes. Though attentive to politics in the realm of the state or party politics, it discusses at length social-cultural processes like urban migration (He), rituals of animal sacrifice and prayer (Tayob, Yu), music (van der Linden), the salience of the media and cultural translation in the imagination of the nation form (de Kloet), e-commerce through digital platforms and the Internet (Lengen) and Islamophobia among Chinese Christian revivalists (Kang). Likewise, it dwells as much on the functioning and ideology of secularism (Ahmad and van der Veer), the imbrication between literature, nation and secularity (Verkaaik), as it does on atheism and its impossibility (Binder). Obviously, in many cases these themes overlap as well. The majority of the chapters richly and variously deal with the subject of religion—African religious practices, Chinese religions, Christianity, Hinduism and Islam. And they do by taking up a multiplicity of issues in diverse sites: Ahmad and van der Veer on India (Christianity, Hinduism and Islam); Alinejad on Iran (Shiism); Binder on Southern India (Hinduism and atheism); Kang on China (Christianity); Tayob on South Africa (Islam, African religious practices); van der Linden on India (Hinduism and Islam); and Yu on Germany (Christianity). The thematic diversity demonstrated in the various contributions is as important as are the regional or geographical social-political formations around which the chapters are organized. As for the framework, like the diversity of themes broached in the various chapters, it is far from uniform. Many contributors draw on more than one theoretical tradition. While most

contributions are academic in a conventional sense, the chapter by Alinejad appears to be informed by the concerns of the policy-security field. Echoing anthropology's foundational goals, a comparative approach informs descriptions as well as analyses in many contributions, though some chapters do it more rigorously than others do.

Finally, a key distinguishing feature of the volume is that, in their analyses and arguments, most contributors draw differently on Peter van der Veer's enormously rich and theoretically significant scholarship on religion and nationalism. Crucial aspects of his scholarship that most contributors find salutary are: the continuing significance of religion and its entwining with nationalism (van der Veer 1994), the methodological renewal of anthropology as a comparative pursuit (van der Veer 2016) and the fruitful formulation for studying cultural and religious formations vis-à-vis nationalism in the West and in the non-West not as autonomous but in historically dense interactions with each other (van der Veer 2001). This historical sensibility is manifested in various ways in his works, the latest of which connects the 2015 European refugee crisis to the era of the Reformation (2021).

Such are the aims and distinct theoretical and methodological contours of *The Nation Form in the Global Age*. It is only appropriate, then, that readers first know the range and depth of Peter van der Veer's corpus of scholarly works as an anthropologist. This is the task of the next chapter, which, by weaving his academic biography and relevant snippets of his non-academic life together, outlines the oeuvre of Peter van der Veer.

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## Notes

1. In different ways and from varied standpoints, scholars have argued over and prophesied the decline, even the end, of the nation state. Others have made counterarguments about its continuation. For these diverse positions, see Appadurai (1996a), Benhabib (2009), Guehenno (1995), Habermas (2003), Harris (2016), Mann (2003), Smith (2007) and Strange (2003).
2. Respectively, Gebrekidan and Apuzzo (2021), Bollyky and Bown (2020) and Ghebreyesus (2021).
3. On the decolonization of knowledge, a recent but growing field, see Hallaq (2018) and Mignolo (2002, 2009); on decolonizing anthropology, see Harrison (1997), Smith (1999) and Ahmad (2021a).
4. See Boyer and Lomnitz (2005), Herzfeld (2016), Gingrich and Banks (2006) and Smith (2007). The cited literature is only representative. With an overview of major works on nationalism, but with hardly any signposts to an alternative to nationalism, Herzfeld arranged his bibliographical essay under ten heads: nationalism under construction, nationalisms in conflict, the status quo, emergent nationalisms, archaeology and nationalism, folklore and national culture, language and discourse, heritage, performance and eugenics. We do not reference the standard anthropological and other works, which are discussed, among others, by Herzfeld, van der Veer (1994, 2013b), Breuilly (2013) and others. On nationalism and the visual arts, see the latest and interesting work by Karaca (2021); see also note 12. For an overview of social theories of nationalism, see Delanty and O'Mahony (2002).
5. Much of the logic, among the Hindu elite and the public alike, against the vilification of Islam and glorification of Hinduism as the core of the Hindu nation stems from the British-Orientalist idea of Islam as external and Hinduism as indigenous to India. Against this Orientalist-nationalist notion, van der Veer (2013b: 665) observes: 'To see Hinduism as indigenous one needs to abolish the idea that it has been a creation of Aryan invaders, members of Indio-European family; and to see Islam and Christianity as alien one has to ignore their millennial or even longer presence on Indian soil.'
6. Every state has some kind of formula for an internal enemy too (Schmitt 1996).

7. To single out Donald Trump for the construction of border walls, which he called ‘big, beautiful,’ is at best convenient. Joe Biden has not stopped it; see Graziosi (2021).
8. In Charles Tilly’s (1975: 42) formulation, ‘war made the state, and the state made war.’
9. In an ethnographic study discussing Muslim immigrants and refugees (from Somalia) in Tilburg, Paul Mutsaers (2014) describes the installation and working of ‘borders’ within the Netherlands (and the EU).
10. In one study, around 50 per cent of Americans are ‘occasionally mentally disturbed’ (Greenfeld 2016a: 122). Mental illness as an official medical problem in non-Western countries is relatively recent, reported cases being fewer than in industrialized nation states.
11. Though signed by both Habermas and Derrida, the text is composed mainly by the former; see Ahmad (2021b: vii-note 5).
12. In her fine work, Karaca (2021: 41, 42, 4) compares German and Turkish nationalisms in the field of the visual arts. She writes that German artists viewed France as a ‘foreign’ civilization and that the projection of German art ‘as European art in a western tradition’ took place in the process of ‘recivilizing Germany’—indeed ‘occidentalizing’ it—after WWII. Based on extensive ethnographic work, Karaca argues that despite globalization and the dominant understanding of art as ‘universal,’ it is the national frame that ‘continues to refract the production and perception of art.’
13. A host of American intellectuals, most of them top academics who included teachers of ethics and religion, supported the GWOT in the name of Enlightenment values (van der Veer 2004: 12).
14. Also, see Canovan (2000), Gomberg (1990), Hayward (2007) and Viroli (1997). Smart (1998: 84) puts it succinctly: ‘However nicely phrased, patriotism implies the practical inferiority of others.’
15. Habermas’ (1998: 399) account is markedly Weberian. He draws on Weber’s ‘the ideal-typical model’ and mostly works with his definition of the state. From the perspective of the argument in the Introduction, the commonality of nationalism between the two is striking; Weber ‘was an unabashed German nationalist’ (Lebow 2017a: 2). Habermas’ reliance on Weber’s definition of the state as the sole power with a monopoly of the legitimate use of violence within a demarcated territory neglects the fact that Weber noted the great states imposing their ambition on other states. This was manifest in Weber’s concerns about defending Germany’s

- distinct future and culture from the threat from Russians and ‘English-speaking “society”’ (in Lebow 2017b: 17).
16. I thank the linguist Rizwan Ahmad for clarifying its socio-linguistic dimensions.
  17. The 2019 Citizenship Amendment Act, based on the ethnic idea of a Hindu nation (Ahmad 2020b), demonstrates reterritorialization more than de-territorialization.
  18. The vulgate of the ‘sectarian’ Middle East, given wider currency since the launch of the GWOT, is surely a ‘reality.’ However, this reality cannot be understood, as historian Makdisi (2017: 4) rightly observes, without taking sectarianism as a ‘colonial strategy of governance insofar as Britain, France, Israel, and the United States have routinely manipulated the religious and ethnic diversity of the region to suit their own imperial ends.’ Integral to Orientalist repertoire, sectarianism is tied directly to the logic of nation-state formation. With much finesse, Al-Eriani (2020) shows how the Western powers explained the failed 2011 democratic uprising in Yemen in terms of ‘sectarian conflict.’ The descriptor ‘sectarian Middle East’ also effaces the supra-sectarian intellectual and political initiatives (Ahmad 2015: 101).
  19. Cf. Asad (1999: 191), who, while observing that Islamists are preoccupied with nation states, maintains that they are still different because they do not have the same commitment to nationalism as secular nationalists have and that commitment of the former is not teleologically driven. This difference exists in another respect. Clearly, imagination is at work in the thought of Banna as it is in the thoughts of nationalists. For example, Hindu nationalists imagine the past as showing that India was already a nation, while Banna and others read the past to reach a different, opposite conclusion. On approaching pre-modern possibilities, see Scott (1999). The construction of 5000 years of the nation’s glorious past by India, China, Iran or other states is mythical as it is xenophobic-racist, the latter being most eloquently evident in the powerful myth of Iran as an Aryan nation officially staged by the secular-modern king of Iran, the Shah (see Alinejad, this volume).
  20. It is ironic that the poet-philosopher who railed against the territorial nation state is posthumously called Pakistan’s ‘national’ poet. This description itself belongs to nationalism connecting Germany and the Subcontinent. Given that Iqbal died nearly a decade before Pakistan’s birth, what makes him a Pakistani? Obviously, Pakistani nationalism

hijacked Iqbal to legitimize itself. Unsure if Munich's municipal office decided the stele's text, describing Iqbal as 'Indian-Pakistani' by scholars like Andrew March (2019: 77) may seem awkward.

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# 2

## The Oeuvre of Peter van der Veer

Irfan Ahmad

*In lyrical appreciation of works by Peter van der Veer, my guru-ustād!*

### Introduction

The principal objective of the opening chapter to this volume is to present a critical assessment of the diverse writings, spanning three decades or so, of Peter van der Veer, a well-known Dutch anthropologist and arguably one of the foremost scholars of the comparative study of religion, nationalism and urban anthropology (unichicago.edu 2019).<sup>1</sup> In order to undertake this task, I begin with a brief personal note in acknowledgement of the fact that the biographical and the academic are connected, at least in part.

In 2000, only two weeks after I was awarded a scholarship by the University of Amsterdam to begin my doctorate, I was granted another one, a Government of India Commonwealth scholarship. For a while, I

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was in somewhat of a fix about whether I should go to the UK or Amsterdam. I chose Amsterdam, one key reason being Peter van der Veer's book *Religious Nationalism*. As an MPhil student at Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi, I had read a photocopy of it. I liked it on three counts. Besides being relevant to what I wanted to do, it contained some hard truths about nationalism, particularly Indian nationalism. At that time—recall that Hindutva activists in league with state agencies had illegally destroyed the Babri Masjid in 1992 and that in its wake Muslims were living in a state of fear—'secular' critiques of Hindu nationalism or Hindutva relied on reviving Nehru's and Gandhi's ideals as an alternative to and in opposition to Hindutva. This approach was evident, inter alia, in books like *Making India Hindu* (Ludden 1996). In contrast, van der Veer argued that 'so much of the culture of the Indian state is already Hindu, in its "pluralist" version' (1994a: 31, 94, 23). In some ways, van der Veer anticipated Masuzawa's (2005) argument by over a decade. While Masuzawa argued that the invention of 'world religions' was a way to preserve European-Christian universalism, van der Veer argued that the orientalist-mediated reading of Hinduism as a 'universal religion' included Islam only through its exclusion, as it stigmatized Islam as an unwanted particularity. Similarly, for van der Veer, Gandhi's ideas were not an effective antidote to Hindutva, as they were themselves a 'moderate' version of Hindu nationalism (I return to this later). Nehruvian secularism was likewise complicit, as was evident in its lack of action against those who, in 1949, had illegally installed Hindu idols inside the Babri Masjid or when in 1950 the 'secular' state backed construction of the Somnath temple project (1994a: 155–157, 146–152).

Second, the book appealed to me because of its grasp of theory, absent, for instance, from Jaffrelot's (1996) otherwise voluminous book on the same topic. In addition to criticizing Benedict Anderson, Ernest Gellner and others, it also questioned the 'derivative discourse' thesis. Van der Veer argued that 'Indian nationalist politics is to a significant degree "indigenous"' (1994a: 20), a point later acknowledged by the political theorist Bhikhu Parekh (2019: 246).

Third, its exposition of Islam—a subject I was interested in—was significantly different from that in other works, which either simply erased Muslims (e.g., Chatterjee 1986; on which see Ahmad 2017; Hasan 1998)

or, if they discussed them at all, did so patronizingly. Before I began my doctoral studies at the University of Amsterdam, my knowledge of British academia was limited, if not poor. I was familiar with the historian Francis Robinson's work, but he did not have much to say about 'postcolonial' India. I was also familiar with the works of Sudipta Kaviraj, then based at the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London, and was in touch with him. He is a political scientist, not a specialist in Islam. The challenging journey of my MPhil research on a Muslim movement and the decision to continue to do research on Islam for my PhD made me readily appreciate the worth of terse sentences in *Religious Nationalism* such as these: 'anthropologists want to make a contribution to the understanding of what is understood to be the "dominant culture" of the majority. They thereby unwittingly support Hindu nationalism' (1994a: 196). I also felt a sense of the scholarly isolation that van der Veer later articulated so tellingly: 'students of Indian Islam almost form a separate community ... reflecting the separateness of the community they study, almost implicitly acknowledging that Muslims do not "belong" to India' (2008: 385).<sup>2</sup>

From this personal note, let me now switch to an overview of van der Veer's works, at the analytical core of which is the triad of Western modernity, its relations with contemporary non-Western countries (especially India and China) over the *longue durée* and the subject of religious and cultural diversity. Put differently, his scholarship is mostly an investigation of the interrelationships between modernity's political form—the nation-state—and religion, in which the latter, until recently, was treated as no more than a residue of the past. Van der Veer's scholarship broadly falls into two different, yet overlapping phases: from 1985 to 1994, and from 1995 right up to the present day, which is continuing productively (e.g., Meyer and van der Veer 2021). While each phase has some distinct features that I will shortly discuss, there is also a commonality across them. There are three aspects to this commonality: comparative, historical and empirical, all marked by combative modes of theorizing. I use 'combative' in the sense of Talal Asad (in Scott 2006: 247–249). All these elements bear the mark of van der Veer's engagement with philosophy: now secret, now public. Derrida's remark that 'Bourdieu relates to philosophy as a man relates to his mistress'<sup>3</sup> (in Hage 2013: 79) seems

pertinent here. Whether engaging with Hegel, Marx, James Mill, Charles Taylor, Habermas, Rawls or Seyla Benhabib (van der Veer 2016: 73–79, 2001a: 3–11, van der Veer and Lehmann 1999: 3ff.), van der Veer is both philosophical and anti-philosophical. With eyes cast on the ground and his mind in a quest to grasp the larger picture, he is against the supposed universality and ‘generalism’ of philosophers and the ‘endless particularity’ informed by the British-style inductive empiricism that is evident in many works, including anthropological ones (2016: 148). His mode of intervention is often persuasively combative.

The rest of this chapter is divided into three parts. In the first part, I dwell on van der Veer’s early works from 1985 to 1994, which deal largely with South Asia. Here I discuss his contributions to the study of Hinduism, orientalism and nationalism. Part two is devoted to an analysis of his works during the second phase from 1995 to the present (2016 to be precise). Though diverse, I have organized my critical analysis of these works under the overarching category of comparison. The final brief section aims to identify the style and mode of van der Veer’s interventions, the *sine qua non* of which I describe as ‘theorization with a hammer’. On occasions, I draw on the personal to elucidate certain points.

## **Hinduism, Orientalism, Nationalism: 1985–1994**

The first of van der Veer’s combats was directed against orientalism as both a field of inquiry and a method. This is most obvious in van der Veer’s doctoral monograph, *Gods on Earth* (1988), described by Nita Kumar (1990: 583) in *American Ethnologist* as ‘an exceptionally valuable and enjoyable book’. Based on long-term ethnographic fieldwork (from 1977 onwards) in Ayodhya, a famous Hindu pilgrimage centre believed to be the birthplace of the god Ram, himself considered an incarnation of Vishnu, and supplemented with archival research, it was a powerful critique of Indology as a field. Indology then dominated the study of Hinduism, and anthropologists such as Jonathan Parry also subscribed to this argument (van der Veer 1985: 306), if differently. In some ways, *Gods*

*on Earth* was probably a critique of van der Veer himself or more accurately of his earlier pre-anthropological training as a Sanskritist and Indologist at the University of Groningen in the Netherlands (1988: vii).<sup>4</sup> Focused on the Rāmānandī order, the Hindu specialists of priests and monks who lived in Ayodhya, rather than the transitory hundreds of thousands of pilgrims who visited the town, its main *problématique* was the formation of the identity of these Hindu specialists. Contrary to his predecessors and many contemporaries who privileged Hindu values in their analyses, van der Veer looked instead at their contextual actions and practices. In place of eternal values read through the lens of and enshrined in sacred texts, he urged scholars to take priests as political actors who both shaped and were shaped by larger historical processes of economy and state formation. The relations among the Hindu priests and monks were marked by serious competition, even conflicts. Against popular perceptions of *sadhus* as a category of spiritual specialist disinterested in society or unmusical about politics, van der Veer found that they acted like businessmen. Furthermore, they were not unsullied emblems of non-violence. Rather, unlike Tyāgīs and Rasīks, the subgroup of Nāgās among the Rāmānandīs indeed believed in violence and was also trained in fighting.

The journal articles from his doctoral research (e.g., van der Veer 1985, 1987) criticized specific Indologists without using the term ‘orientalism’, as *Gods on Earth* was to do. For van der Veer, orientalism was responsible for the prevailing portrait of Hindu society as ‘static, timeless’ and as ‘dominated by Brahmans as guardians of the sacred order of society’. After World War II, when anthropologists shifted their attention away from tribes living on the frontiers of Hindu civilization to studying caste/Hindu villages, they too contributed to the orientalist portrait. The synchronic study of villages by anthropologists such as Robert Redfield and Milton Singer operated on the binary premise of the Great versus Little Traditions, the former enshrined in Sanskrit literature and spatially anchored in ‘sacred centres’, the latter found in villages as forms of deviation from the former (McKim Marriot called it parochialization as opposed to the obverse process of universalization). Louis Dumont and his collaborator David Pocock consolidated this line of inquiry by announcing, in 1957, that a proper sociology of India must combine

sociology and 'classical Indology'. For Dumont, classical Indology was so foundational that he saw no difference between the religious and the social because 'all that appears to be social is in fact religious'. Drawing on Talal Asad's (1993) critique of Clifford Geertz, van der Veer argued that orientalists in general, and the anthropologist Dumont in particular, failed to account for the shifting relations between meaning and power. In so doing, they unduly privileged the self-perceptions of the Brahmans. Describing this approach as distinctly theological, he considered it 'detrimental to anthropological research'. Hence the call to free the 'anthropological study of Hinduism' from 'the orientalist perspective with the intellectual and theological overtones that have dominated it from the start' (van der Veer 1988: 55, 57, 58).

Five years after issuing this call, however, van der Veer had discovered that it was not that easy to free the anthropological study of Hinduism and India from orientalism. The volume *Orientalism and the Post-colonial Predicament*, co-edited with Carol Breckenridge, synoptically expressed this dilemma by using the word 'predicament' in its title. Its main aim, as set out in the Introduction, was to examine the 'relations between colonialism and nationalism in the politics of culture in both the societies of the ex-colonizers and those of the ex-colonized'. For Breckenridge and van der Veer, postcolonial nationalism can hardly avoid orientalism, the intellectual-cum-scholarly wing of colonialism. Building on Edward Said's (1995 [1978]) work while also criticizing it, they extended the scope of the debate from the Middle East, the prime focus of Said's study, to South Asia. The extension was also thematic, from literary works to administrative catalogues and practices within the social sciences.<sup>5</sup> Unlike Said's voyage, which took him largely into history, Breckenridge and van der Veer were interested instead in the postcolonial South Asia of the present, where they saw 'significant continuities' between colonialism and postcolonial nationalism. Their basic criticism of Said was that 'colonized subjects are not passively produced by hegemonic projects but are active agents ... in the formation of their societies'. Moreover, orientalism informs the Orient as much as the Occident. The postcolonial predicament regarding orientalism was evident in the fact that the methodologies and theories used by postcolonial subjects themselves had emerged during the colonial era. Postcolonial nationalism and

decolonization therefore cannot ‘escape from a history characterized by a particular discursive formation that can be called “orientalism”’ (Breckenridge and van der Veer 1993: 1, 4, 5, 2).

Van der Veer’s own chapter in the volume—‘The Foreign Hand: Orientalist Discourse in Sociology and Communalism’—contained a systematic analysis of Dumont’s scholarship on India, especially his famous essay on nationalism and communalism (Dumont 1970). In it, van der Veer argued that ‘Indian nationalism undoubtedly is an anticolonial force, but in its very anticolonialism, it shares basic discursive premises with orientalism and with the nationalism of the colonizing British’. Far from being antagonistic to each other, he went on to say that Gandhi’s discourse and the postcolonial Hindu militant discourse ‘present variants of Hindu nationalism’. As a discipline, anthropology did not stand outside these historically constituted relationships between knowledge and power. Rather, there were ‘fascinating convergences’ between orientalism, Hindu nationalism and sociologies such as Dumont’s. Van der Veer also connected his argument to the then emerging subject of transnationalism, dwelling chiefly on the transnational movement of Vishva Hindu Parishad or VHP (see van der Veer 1994b, 1987), to conclude that ‘it is the postcolonial predicament that orientalism is reinvented in the dialectic of nationalism and transnationalism’ (van der Veer 1993: 39, 40, 41, 43).<sup>6</sup>

Van der Veer did not limit his critique of orientalism to South Asian contexts: he also brought it back home, as it were. In his 1995 book on orientalism, written in Dutch (van der Veer 1995), he undertook a critique of Christiaan Snouck Hurgronje (1857–1936), the internationally renowned Dutch orientalist who was Professor of Islam and the chairperson of the Koninklijk Instituut voor Taal-, Land- en Volkenkunde (KITLV, or Royal Institute of Linguistics, Geography and Anthropology) in Leiden. Maarten Kuitenbrouwer’s book on the KITLV, published to mark its 150th anniversary and sympathetic to Hurgronje and his tradition, described van der Veer as having targeted Hurgronje and ‘assailed Leiden Indologists past and present with Said’s contention’. To place this issue in perspective, the Dutch Ministry of the Colonies had financed Hurgronje’s trip to Arabia to make inquiries among Indonesian pilgrims to Mecca. Later, the Dutch state used Hurgronje’s knowledge in the

bloody military assault of 1898 on Aceh, which killed over 50,000 people out of a population of about 500,000 (van der Veer 2002a, 2004b; 2010: 215). In Kuitenbrouwer's account, van der Veer, 'the Amsterdam scholar of religious sociology',<sup>7</sup> viewed Hurgronje as an imperialist and drew an analogy between Dutch colonialism in Indonesia and the Nazi occupation of the Netherlands. Responses to van der Veer's critique like Kuitenbrouwer's were largely acrimonious, if not unscholarly. While in a newspaper column the historian H.L. Wesseling condemned 'the Amsterdam sociologist' for what he called 'modern stupidity', for H.W. van den Doel no amount of criticism of Hurgronje could dislodge the fact that the latter was 'the radiant sun in the Leiden universe' (in Kuitenbrouwer 2014: 72, 8).<sup>8</sup> If the responses to van der Veer's critique in this case were less than civil and academic, in another case van der Veer received an unexpectedly reasoned response, approximating as it did to the notion of critical academic discussion. In publications resulting from his doctoral fieldwork, he had immanently criticized the works of Jonathan Parry and Chris Fuller, both at the London School of Economics (LSE). On publication of his critique, and exemplifying the British idea of 'fair play', he received an invitation to become a visiting scholar at the LSE (van der Veer 2008: 378).<sup>9</sup>

Returning to the subject of the interconnections between nationalism and orientalism, the volume van der Veer co-edited with Breckenridge (mentioned earlier) foregrounded but fell short of offering a full-scale treatment of the former, logically suggesting that an examination of nationalism in its own right was overdue. This precisely became van der Veer's goal in *Religious Nationalism*, published in 1994, one year after *Orientalism and the Post-colonial Predicament*. As I have already discussed aspects of *Religious Nationalism* in the Introduction, here I will mention some additional features of it I regard as salient.

Focused on Hindu traditions, *Gods on Earth* too was a comparative work, if diagonal in nature. The comparison in *Religious Nationalism*, by contrast, was across religious traditions—Hindu, Muslim, Sikh. The academic community received it with much enthusiasm and applause. While the *Journal of Asian Studies* (McKean 1994: 1309) praised it as 'an appealing book' on account of the 'clarity of its argument, the breadth of its dialogue with other works on nationalism, and its informative range of

ethnographic and historical materials', *Man* described it as a 'challenge' to 'the received wisdom' (Fuller 1994: 1025). According to Brian Smith (1997: 164), a scholar of comparative religion, it offered 'the best and most sophisticated analysis to date' of religion and nationalism and as such was a 'definitive work'. At its core, the book offered a resounding critique of modernization theory, which, based on the Enlightenment premise, suggested a correlation between secularism and nationalism. Benedict Anderson's and Ernest Gellner's works displayed this secularist assumption in their conceptualizations of nationalism. For Gellner, by erasing the particularities of tradition industrialization produces homogenization, which in turn leads to individualization and nationalism, both of which he viewed as far removed from religion. In Anderson's analytical scheme, nationalism marks a rupture with the traditional realms of the religious community and the dynasty that preceded it. In contrast, van der Veer argued that the religiously diverse case of India showed the continuing significance of religion in nationalist discourses and practices, past and present. The pervasive role of religion, however, did not mean that religion was a timeless idea but a practice constituting and constituted by modernity. To demonstrate this thesis, he focused on sacred centres, networks of religious specialists (Hindu saints, Muslim Sufis and reformers), religious rituals (see Fig. 2.1) and their modes of communication in Hindi and Urdu, competing notions of self and other, imaginations of territory and the like. In sum, the book called the modernization paradigm into question, urging scholars to pay attention to the power of religion beyond 'the master narrative of European modernity' (1994a: 202).

Was the Indian phenomenon of religious nationalism unique, however, or could it be compared with other cases elsewhere, including in Europe? The stage was set for a comparison different from that van der Veer had undertaken in *Religious Nationalism*. Co-edited with Hartmut Lehmann, *Nation and Religion*<sup>10</sup> compared Asia and Europe by discussing the intertwining of religion and nation in India, Japan, the Netherlands, the Middle East (partly) and the UK. Anderson, in its short final chapter, defended his earlier argument.

Beyond the liberal obsession with volition and choice, however, the decision to undertake this comparison was not entirely van der Veer's



**Fig. 2.1** Peter van der Veer taking a ritual bath on the pilgrimage route to the temple of Kedarnath, India, 1980

own. After researching Hindu social-political formations, he wanted to turn to Indian Muslims. Against the common perception, shared also by the ‘liberal-secular’ intelligentsia, van der Veer considered Islam an ‘Indian religion’ on which he had also begun his fieldwork in Surat (see van der Veer 1992), a city in the western state of Gujarat from where India’s current prime minister, Narendra Modi, hails. However, the Indian government did not grant him permission to conduct fieldwork there. The large-scale anti-Muslim violence in Surat after the destruction of the Babri Masjid in 1992 made any such research plan impossible (van der Veer 2008: 385). From the early 2000s, van der Veer’s interests shifted to China and its vicinity. Despite friendly warnings that it was too late for him to begin to study a new language and culture, he started learning Mandarin (van der Veer 2014: ix–x). Such was his determination! In many important ways, this determination inaugurates (non-monodirectionally) the second phase of van der Veer’s academic life.

## Comparison Past the Enlightenment Hubris: 1995 to the Present

If there is a single theme that undergirds van der Veer's work from 1995 onwards in a variety of ways, in my view it is comparison. His work from this point on becomes a multifarious exercise in enunciating, clarifying, refining and demonstrating what comparison, normally taken as a truism by anthropologists and others, means or should mean for our times. Eschewing the demotic notion of comparison as a method, in what follows I will discuss the conceptual and theoretical underpinnings of van der Veer's idea of comparison, culminating as it did in *The Value of Comparison* (2016). Delivered first as the prestigious Lewis Henry Morgan Lecture for 2013, in some ways the resulting book may be considered a summative manifesto of some of his many works of significance during this phase.

One way to understand the subject of comparison is to begin with an outline of its general parameters. Though an exponent of the *longue durée* approach in history, unlike Fernand Braudel, for whom it may mean several centuries, or even a millennium (Ahmad and Kanungo 2019), in practice for van der Veer it means a shorter and evidentially more plausible time span linking the eighteenth century to the present. Notwithstanding this difference, both Braudel (1980) and van der Veer share a refusal to be seduced by presentism (van der Veer 2014, 2011: 9). This history, for van der Veer, is 'interactional' as opposed to the prevalent form of nationalist historiography exemplified in 'little Englandism' on the one hand and 'big Indianism' on the other. That is, if Indian historiography is largely unmusical in respect of the impact of the colony on the metropole, English history posits Britain's immunity from influences from the colonies, the latter being assigned to the specialists of colonial history. By contrast, the task of interactional history, situated in the matrix of knowledge-power, is to reveal the entanglement of what are seen either as opposites or as not connected or as both. How is this specific interactional history different from global history and world-system perspectives on political economy frameworks practised, though not identically, by Andre Gunder Frank, Karl Marx, Sydney Mintz, Immanuel

Wallerstein, Eric Wolf and others? While appreciative of many of the merits of such frameworks, van der Veer finds them deficient because they do not tell readers about ‘the ways people shaped their understanding of these world historical processes’. Moreover, they privilege factors of economy and downplay the significance of culture and religion (van der Veer 2001a: 8–11, 2014: Ch.1, 2016: 17–18). The insistence on the valency of the social and cultural gains further significance because van der Veer, like Marshall Sahlins, rejects the focus in cognitive and evolutionary anthropology on, among other things, the so-called universalism of brain science (van der Veer 2016: 41ff.).<sup>11</sup> However, van der Veer’s discomfort with materialist frameworks does not lead him into a celebration of the ‘culturalist approach’ of, for example, Max Weber.<sup>12</sup>

In *Imperial Encounter*, which offers the most elaborate account of the notion of interactional history to be cast in a comparative frame, van der Veer’s goal is fairly modest. In it, there is no claim to present ‘an alternative history’; instead, it offers ‘alternative ways to look at the familiar problems and materials’ (van der Veer 2001a: 13). One of its principal objectives was to interrogate the opposition between the religious and the secular, in Britain and India alike. This inquiry is tracked through various sites, investigating the very concept of religion and its changing trajectory, the role of Hinduism in the making of the masculine Hindu man and the role of Christianity in the making of the masculine Englishman, the entailment of race, religion and nationalism, and so on. In *The Modern Spirit of Asia*, the goal, over a decade later, is noticeably bolder: ‘What I offer in this book is a nonsecularist counter narrative’. The question of the secular–religious opposition unfolds differently here, as a ‘syntagmatic chain of religion-magic-secularity-spirituality’, where the four elements in the chain are interdependently located in relation to the state (van der Veer 2014: 9).

Along with the scale and temporal horizon, what to foreground as a unit of investigation is a much-debated issue in the literature on comparison. For van der Veer, the unit cannot be civilization as Max Weber posited it, as Weber’s discourse compared ‘civilizational essences’ rather than ‘historical networks’ (van der Veer 2001a: 10). One may add that, as a sociologist of empire, Weber effaced empire as an important category in his analysis (Allen 2017). This Weberian preoccupation with essences,

van der Veer justly observes, was predicated on an ‘oriental deficiency’ (2016: 66). Though he does not say as much, van der Veer’s refusal to deploy the category of civilization also implies a critique of Norbert Elias (most explicitly, of Samuel Huntington, of course). A theorist of the civilizing process and Weberian in his orientation, Elias, in Jack Goody’s view, was ethnocentric, as he took the civilizing process as unique to the history and sociology of the West (Goody 2002; cf., Liston and Mennell 2009, who defend Elias). Taking Elias’s theory as biased, Goody showed how Elias made no systematic comparative investigation of the non-West. However, this did not prevent Elias from placing increasing self-restraint at the heart of his argument about the civilizing process, opposing it to the *Naturvolk* in Ghana.

If not civilization, what about the nation-state? Van der Veer categorically shuns this too as a viable unit of comparison. He pointed out that the emergence of the social sciences as academic disciplines in Europe coincided with forms of and thinking about the nation (2014: 9–10). Since anthropology was hardly an exception to this historical association, it pursued its research agendas in cahoots with the interests and aspirations of these states. Many anthropologists took the anthropological notion of holism as synonymous with society, which in turn had become substitutes for nation-states (Giddens 1990). This conception of society ‘as a unified whole’ led to ‘the typesetting of societies and religions in a particular unifying way’. Especially revealing in this context is van der Veer’s phrase ‘the macro sociological form of ethnic profiling’, which he uses to characterize holism-inspired works such as *Patterns of Cultures* by Ruth Benedict, *The Cultural Background of Personality* by Ralph Linton and similar works by Abraham Kardiner and Francis Hsu (van der Veer 2016: 31, 159n20).<sup>13</sup>

If neither civilization nor the nation-state is a viable unit of comparison because of the notion of a priori ‘whole’ on which both are predicated—whether as ideal types or as universal models—what is the alternative? Van der Veer’s answer is ‘fragment’. In my reading, however, the relations between the fragment that he strongly advocates and the whole that he wants to abandon for good are hazy, if not under-thought. One thought that comes to mind is this: fragment, fine—but which entity is the fragment part of, conceptually, relationally and spatially?

Does the fragment have an existence of its own? Is not the fragment actually itself a whole kept in abeyance by a particular configuration of power? Setting these questions aside for the moment, the highly illustrative examples the book offers judiciously guide anthropologists and others on to the path of van der Veer's comparative project. An example of a comparison of fragments that arrested my attention in *The Value of Comparison* is the chapter on care and sanitation in relation to the subalternated. Using a historical lens, this chapter beautifully illuminates this subject by comparing China (see Fig. 2.2), India and the Netherlands. Equally revealing is the chapter that compares the issue of religious minorities, namely Muslims in India, China and Western Europe respectively—a comparison that is unusually rich as much as it is rare. Seen from the Indian nationalist perspective, it is almost defiant in that many Indians display their own brand of 'exceptionalism' in resisting any comparison



**Fig. 2.2** Peter van der Veer interviewing a Burmese monk in Dehong, Yunnan, China, 2013

between ‘democratic’ India and ‘communist’ China.<sup>14</sup> Beyond the respective differences in their political arrangements, here van der Veer shows instead how the commonality of nationalism and its discourse promoting the idea of a unified nation threatened by ‘others’ permits a comparison of fragments between China, India and Europe.

In addition to showing us a new path of sustainable comparison, the contribution of *The Value of Comparison*, as I see it, is theoretical. More boldly and convincingly than other works, it questions the ‘continuing Western ethnocentrism in research’ that is derived from, as well as evident in, the modernization paradigm or the very concepts that are beholden to the Enlightenment and its postulates, whether they are, for example, democracy, tolerance, civil society, religion, the public sphere, secularism or the family. Though articulated more forcefully here, a healthy distrust of Western and Christian categories or categories derived from them is discernible as early as 1987, well before the publication of van der Veer’s first monograph. In an article in *Man*, he disowned the prevalent use of the term ‘sect’ which scholars unproblematically applied to the Rāmānandī branch of Hindu monks (discussed earlier). Pointing out the origin of the term ‘sect’ in Europe as a breakaway group from the Church, he described Rāmānandīs as an order rather than a sect because the Church as an institution did not exist in Hinduism (1987: 683: ff.). By raising such conceptual questions, *The Value of Comparison*, in short, becomes a remarkable intervention, the task of which is nothing less than putting the regnant idea of ‘the self-sufficient Euro-American modernity’ (van der Veer 2016: 46, 28) in its place. Early on, and by expanding the horizons of anthropology, the Introduction makes this clear. Below are some ‘fragments’:

Anthropology is primarily an engagement with ‘difference’ and ‘diversity’ and focuses on problems of cultural translation. As such, it offers a critique of the universalization of Western models and provides thus a basis for a comparative sociology. Ethnographical data derived from fieldwork form a big part of anthropology, but the study of other kinds of material—historical, textual, and visual—also benefits from an anthropological perspective.

Anthropology is the only social science that reflects on Western ethnocentrism and takes the problem of translation seriously.<sup>15</sup>

Comparison is thus not a relatively simple juxtaposition and comparison of two or more different societies but a complex reflection on the network of concepts that underlie our study of society as well as the formation of those societies themselves. It is always a double act of reflections. (van der Veer 2016: 9, 20, 29)

One should note, if parenthetically, the presence of the Netherlands, van der Veer's home nation-state, in the entire comparative enterprise. Certainly it was never a formal research site for him. However, its history, sociology and politics inform the comparative enterprise throughout, though not necessarily and overtly everywhere. Whether writing about secularism, tolerance or sanitation in India and China and placing them both in comparative relations to the West, the Netherlands serves as one among many points of reference (van der Veer 2006, 2016: chapter vi). I too came to learn the Dutch meaning of 'home' comparatively, though rather differently. In the very early months of my PhD, van der Veer arranged a reading session with me to make me think comparatively about my own research on India. My assignment was to read and discuss with him two works: Robert Hefner's *Civil Islam: Muslims and Democratization in Indonesia* (2000) and Robert Putnam's *Making Democracy Work: Civic Traditions in Modern Italy* (1994). After the session, I casually mentioned this to some of my fellow PhD friends. One of the responses I still remember was, 'He invited you to his *home* for the discussion?' For me, there was nothing surprising in this: many of my friends visited me in Patna, India, at my parents' home, a two-room first-floor apartment where, if we had meals, we took them with newspapers or a tablecloth spread over my father's bed in the room close to the tiny balcony (there was no separate dining area). Home invitations in the Netherlands, by contrast, generally deny visitors access to the bedroom. It was hard to miss the comparative meanings of home in Patna and Utrecht. This observation contributed, partly, at least, to my formulation of the neologism of *domophilia* as a phenomenon relationally positioned to Islamophobia as a global phenomenon and going well beyond the distinctions between 'East' and 'West' or between democratic versus authoritarian and/or monarchical nation-states (Ahmad 2013).

## On the Very Style, and a Little More

At this point I will say a word or two about van der Veer's style of intervention as a prolific writer. In my opinion, it resembles Nietzsche's style: 'to philosophize with a hammer'. This phrase is the subtitle of *Twilight of the Idols* (see Brobjer 2010: 38). For the purposes of this chapter, let me rephrase it as 'theorizing with a hammer'. Often hastily yoked by his commentators to the vocabulary of warfare alone, Nietzsche's metaphor was an expression that is also constructive and diagnostic. Deborah Cook (2018) and Amy Allen (2016: 193–195) use it as a method of exaggeration and hyperbole—the objective of which is not to leave putative reality behind, but to underline the sheer value of a thought at its utter extreme, unclouded by excesses of ifs and buts. This method—or technique if you will—also informed the writings of Adorno and Foucault (the latter once told his interviewer that he had written nothing else but fiction) (see Cook 2018: 150n130).

In making arguments, many if not most anthropologists proceed with the utmost caution, especially if and when they engage with viewpoints they want to contest or position themselves against. 'Nuance', 'off the mark', 'over-stretched', 'one-sided', 'too watertight' and so on thus characterize their prose. Not van der Veer's, however. I do not mean that such words or expressions are entirely absent from his writings. What I suggest instead is that those writings also (and often) contain words like 'mistake', 'erroneous', 'misleading' and 'meaningless'. Having discussed Dumont's structuralist understanding of the Hindu caste system, without mincing his words, van der Veer wrote that to assume 'a structural opposition of asceticism versus devotionism' is 'to commit a *basic error*' (van der Veer 1987: 693). Likewise, in criticizing Jonathan Parry's understanding of the position and role of Brahman priests, van der Veer wrote: 'In Parry's analysis ... the highest aim in life for the Brahman priest is to leave his priestly profession. ... I think this interpretation is *erroneous*' (1985: 319). To take another example, he criticized Edward Said as follows: 'It would be a *serious mistake* to deny agency to the colonized in our effort to show the force of colonial discourse' (van der Veer 1993: 23). About Anderson, van der Veer wrote: 'Such a *misleading* conception is

also fundamental to Benedict Anderson's ground-breaking discussion of nationalism' (1994a: 15). One more example will suffice to demonstrate my point about van der Veer's theorization with a hammer: 'religion's organization, its place in society ... are so different in Japan that ... a simple form of the secularization theory ... derived from ... Western Christianity becomes *meaningless*' (van der Veer and Lehmann 1999: 10, all italics here the author's).

To conclude this short section, let me note another feature of van der Veer's scholarship. A reader of his works from the 1980s to the present will be struck by the fact that, while he has engaged extensively with new things, continuities of certain ideas, themes and authors mark his oeuvre. For instance, regardless of the change in fieldwork sites, relocation for reasons of employment from one country or continent to another, and movements in time, religion and modernity/the West, both broadly construed, have remained the pivot of his thinking. Thus viewed, globalization is not a process that is unhooked from religion, as economists and political scientists would have us believe, but a 'genre' of religion (van der Veer 2011: 9). As for authors and interlocutors, Arjun Appadurai, Talal Asad, Louis Dumont, Clifford Geertz, Marcel Mauss and Max Weber, among others, recur in his texts from the first monograph of 1988 through to the latest of 2016.

## In Lieu of a Conclusion

Clearly, this chapter makes no claim to present an all-inclusive analysis of van der Veer's entire corpus of writings. Rather, it is one among many possible analyses—and a preliminary one at that. To be sure, the chapter bears the marks of my own research interests (hence its limitations). I do not have a precise conclusion to make. Given the format and aims of this chapter, that in fact seems less than desirable. In lieu of a conclusion, therefore, I will use this space to make some remarks about themes and questions that van der Veer's works do not squarely address but that gainfully work as analytical enablers of future research.

Judging from his publications, it is obvious that van der Veer is hardly an admirer of the nation-state as a political institution or of nationalism

as a corporate ideology—the passion of which has much affinity with modern religion, itself considerably nationalized. He is equally sceptical of nationalism in its current, more popular garb of civilizationalism, put in place by Huntington and readily embraced by such International Relations theorists such as Peter Katzenstein, who characterizes China, India and the US as civilizational states (van der Veer 2016: 64). One can sense this discomfort being splashed throughout many of his writings, often not directly enough. However, one does not see any full-blown theorization of the pre-, non- or anti-national forms of life (intertwined with death) as alternative, parallel or counter to the nation-state, much less post-national belonging (on which, see Appadurai 1996), which is surely hegemonic, even naturalized, though the history of it, and probably the future too, is soaked in blood. It is true that from the eighteenth century an ascendant Europe significantly transformed much of the non-Western world by mapping it along the axis of nationalism, and eventually in the institutionalized forms of the emerging nation-states. No less true, however, is the presence of counter-imaginings, in West and non-West alike, to the hegemonic projects of nation-states. Writing about French West Africa, Fredrick Cooper (2011, 2018) observes how, during the 1930s and 1940s, many intellectuals and politicians there, as well as those in France, nursed and worked for political programmes that cannot be reduced to forms of or thinking about the nation. In India, Hasrat Mohani (1878–1951), an important anti-colonial leader and journalist, viewed the future free India as a ‘Constitutional Indian Union of Federations of Republics’. He visualized one federation each in the east, south, centre, south-west, and west of India, each federation in turn comprising many republics organized along regional and/or linguistic lines (in Ahmad 2015: 103). Clearly, there was hardly any enthusiasm for Mohani’s vision, certainly not among the ethnic partisans of muscular Indian-cum-Hindu nationalism, and today most Indians do not even know his name. The absence of enthusiasm for Mohani’s ideas and the utter lack of knowledge of him among contemporary Indians should not astonish us. Given its anti-doxa force, Mohani’s proposal looked confusing and disturbing to the partisans of nationalism. This by no means diminishes the radical import of non-national forms of thought in West Africa or India. The point is to recognize that nationalism or nation-state

thinking was not the only thought available. We should also note that states like Syria were created not in consonance with the ‘national’ wishes of its people but in ‘defiant opposition to the vast majority’ (Farouk-Alli 2014: 8). In short, and especially because of the world-wide rise of populism (on which see Ahmad 2019a), the significance of an accomplished comparativist like van der Veer investigating non-national forms of life need not be stressed. In a review of Eric Wolf’s famous book, *Europe and the People without History*, Asad (1987) asked: ‘are there histories of people without Europe?’ To pursue such questions, one may ask: Are there histories of non-, anti- or counter-nationalism within and without Europe? If so, do they have any future—immediate, postponed, delayed, interrupted or denied (see the Introduction, this volume)?

As for religion, which along with the nation-state has been van der Veer’s life-long concern, in a recent interview with the *Times Higher Education Supplement* (Matthews 2018), he observed that the Netherlands of his childhood was so religious that one’s whole life was organized along lines of religious affiliation, his own being a form of Dutch Reformed Protestantism. Reading the interview, I was reminded of Edmund Gosse’s (1925) account of growing up in a Plymouth Brethren environment in late nineteenth-century Britain. In the interview, van der Veer remarked, ‘I have never been a believer’. At the age of eight, he had discovered that a belief in God or religion was ‘not very plausible’. To some, it may seem somewhat too early (and hasty to boot)—losing something before acquiring it or exiting a zone<sup>16</sup> before duly arriving there.

This critical evaluation of Peter van der Veer’s diverse body of work published over the past three decades or so will, I hope, interest anthropologists, sociologists, scholars of comparative religions and politics, Indianists, Sinologists, Asianists and historians. In particular, it will interest Dutch sociologists and anthropologists. Scholars of academic biographies and intellectual historians, especially of Europe, may also find this chapter of some relevance.

## Notes

1. An earlier version of this chapter appeared in 2020 as a Working Paper published by the Max Planck Institute for the Study of Religious and Ethnic Diversity, Gottingen, Germany.
2. For an article in which he reviews works on Islam, see van der Veer (2004a).
3. The word ‘mistress’ connotes a secret relationship with pure enjoyment. Derrida seemed to think of philosophy ‘as the unlimited jouissance of a thought that knows no empirical restraints’ (Hage 2013: 79).
4. At Groningen van der Veer (1986: 343) studied Indo-Iranian languages (including Sanskrit) and cultures from 1973 to 1979. Jacob Ensink, who is acknowledged in *Gods on Earth*, taught Sanskrit there from 1951 to 1984. In 1953, he established the Institute of Indian Studies ([dutchstudies-satsea.nl](http://dutchstudies-satsea.nl) 2019). From 1980 to 1984, van der Veer lectured in ‘Religious Anthropology’ at the Free University of Amsterdam.
5. Trained in orientalism, Wael Hallaq (2018), a scholar of Islam currently at Columbia University, also criticized it to the extent that he found Edward Said wanting in recognizing the comprehensive constitution and effect of orientalism as an epistemic regime beyond the literary domains.
6. For collaborative works on Hinduism outside India, especially in the Caribbean and Surinam, see van der Veer and Cors van der Burg (1986) and van der Veer and Steve Vertovec (1991).
7. As Leiden University is deemed as the seat of orientalism, Kuitenbrouwer stresses van der Veer’s identifications with the University of Amsterdam and his discipline, anthropology. There is also some rivalry between the two universities.
8. For references to Hurgronje in his other works in English, see van der Veer (2002b, 2004b) and van der Veer (2001b) in Dutch.
9. For a quasi-autobiographical account of his academic journey, see van der Veer (2008).
10. In 2018, the Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies, Qatar, published the Arabic edition (visually very attractive) of this book. See van der Veer and Lehmann (2018).
11. He is also deeply critical of experimental psychology and behaviourism in general, whose conclusion is based on a sample of Western, educated, industrialized, rich and democratic (WEIRD) societies—an evocative

- acronym (van der Veer 2016: 46). Through an excellent deconstruction of PEW surveys, he detects flaws in quantitative research, showing the richness of anthropological knowledge as an alternative.
12. Cf., Brigit Meyer's (2012) 'mentalist approaches' and 'mentalism' in the studies of religion.
  13. The omission of Clifford Geertz here is a bit surprising. His *Islam Observed* argued that, although both Indonesia and Morocco were mostly Muslim, they had contrasting holistic 'historical personages', 'character', and a 'national archetype'. See Ahmad (2018).
  14. At Monash University, Australia, I supervised a doctoral thesis that aimed to explain comparatively why China left India behind in economic growth after 1947. The candidate, a Chinese national, explained it in terms of Hinduism and the caste system (oblivious, additionally, of the fact that about 20 per cent of India's population is not Hindu) and the charisma of Chairman Mao (as if India lacked charismatic leaders). She completed her thesis after I left Monash University.
  15. On issues of cultural translation like incommensurability and isomorphism, see Ahmad (2019b).
  16. The choice of the word 'zone' is intentional; van der Veer edited Routledge's book series titled 'Zones of Religion,' of which van der Veer (1996) is a part.

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# Part II

India



# 3

## On the 'Impossibility' of Atheism in Secular India

Stefan Binder

### Introduction

This contribution examines the precarious role of atheism in the framework of contemporary imaginaries of the Indian nation. While atheists and the irreligious of various kinds certainly exist in India—and have existed in the past—they tend to be marginalized in both public and academic discourses on Indian society, national culture and politics. This can manifest itself in different ways, for example, by ignoring irreligious identities and forms of life, by denigrating them as culturally inauthentic products of colonial, 'Western' or otherwise foreign influence or by relegating them to a sphere of elite Sanskrit philosophy in the pre-colonial past with none but the most tenuous relevance for popular culture and everyday life in the present. In this chapter, I look more closely at this marginalization in order to highlight how it ties into a specific nationalist imaginary in India, which does not presuppose an outright denial or

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unqualified disavowal of atheism but rather an imagination of atheism as ‘impossible’. This imagination of impossibility is pervasive in so far as it is grounded in certain assumptions about religion, morality, individual agency, social responsibility and communal as well as national belonging (if not sociality as such) that are also shared by some people in India who do, in fact, identify with atheism and irreligion.

As such, notions of impossibility are neither a mere misrepresentation belied by the existence of atheists nor an essential attribute of atheism—or a specifically ‘Indian’ cultural variant of it. Instead, I approach them similarly to how James Laidlaw’s Jain interlocutors in North India explained that Jainism is impossible for laypeople who do not follow the ideal path of ascetic renouncers:

By this they did not mean either that it is unclear what its teachings are or that it is literally impossible to follow them. ... [A] good lay Jain, as a renouncer necessarily cannot, should venerate, protect, and materially support those renouncers who do follow the soteriological path; but this, because it requires good public standing, political and material resources, and the rearing of a new generation who might be recruits to the order themselves or patrons to support it in their turn, conflicts *directly* with the central precepts of virtuous ascetic life itself. The more you are a good *lay* Jain, the less you can be a true *Jain*. (2014: 126)

Jainism is impossible in the sense that competing moral values attached to renunciation and worldly life give rise to a situation in which the practical conditions necessary to realize one value fully effectively undercut or preclude the other value. While impossibility is in this case internal to the social structure of the Jain community (see also Sethi 2012), I propose to approach the impossibility of atheism as a historically contingent effect of a specific configuration of Indian nationalism, which makes the idea of atheism as a socially viable way of life neither unthinkable nor necessarily undesirable but, at the end of the day, practically impossible.

Benedict Anderson (1983) famously described the genesis of nationality or nation-ness as emerging from an imagined community enabled, among other things, by certain forms of media—especially the novel and the newspaper—and the nationalization of particular vernacular

languages within a larger political-economic regime of print capitalism. In contrast to dynastic social formations, which are defined by sacred languages, divinely legitimated hierarchies and centres of sovereignty, the nation as an imagined community is premised on the idea of a clearly and territorially bounded 'society', which allows complete strangers and various forms of political and economic inequality to cohere in a 'horizontal comradeship' (ibid.: 7). While certain aspects of Anderson's account have been criticized (e.g. Kelly 2001; Meyer 2009), his focus on the role of mass media and on their regimes of production, distribution and consumption has proved immensely productive for a vast body of both historical and anthropological scholarship on the genesis, continuous transformation and functioning of nationalism and various projects of nation-building (for examples from South Asia, see Dalmia 1997; Mankekar 1999; Rajagopal 2001; Blackburn 2003; Roy 2007; Datla 2013).

Against this background, I analyse cinematic representations of atheism in two recent, commercially successful Bollywood movies, *OMG—Oh My God!* (2012) and *PK* (2014), in order to elucidate how the frameworks of religious nationalism and state secularism structure the impossibility of atheism in India. Both films sparked protests from Hindu nationalist groups, which criticized them for being offensive and for veiling anti-Hindu sentiment behind a specious veneer of a more general critique of religion. While such reactions are a seemingly obvious way to link these instances of cinematic atheism within a discursive framework of religious and more specifically Hindu nationalism, I propose to approach them from a different direction, namely the generally positive and favourable reactions they have received from atheists.

However, I am not pursuing an ethnographic account of either the consumption of these two films or specific atheist interpretations; rather, my point of departure is the observation that my atheist interlocutors in Telugu-speaking South India found in the films' protagonists viable foils for positive engagement (projection, recognition, identification etc.) *despite* the films' explicit depiction of the failure and/or impossibility of atheism. By taking this route, it is possible to examine how the impossibility of atheism is not merely the product of a religious or Hindu nationalist perspective but a constitutive aspect of a larger national frame of reference in which atheists themselves are suspended as well. As already

mentioned, I do not claim that impossibility is a necessary, essential or transhistorical attribute of ‘atheism as such’ or of all possible ways of thinking about atheism in India; instead, I argue that it is an aspect of a specific Indian nationalist imaginary, which resonated in significant ways with how the self-identified atheists in South India among whom I have conducted ethnographic research thought about the problem of putting atheism into practice (for other anthropological accounts of atheism(s) in India, see e.g. Quack 2012; Thomas 2017).

## Organized Atheism, Religious Nationalism and State Secularism

My observations are based on fourteen months of fieldwork with members of a loosely organized irreligious movement in Andhra Pradesh and Telangana, which consisted of a heterogeneous array of informal groups, officially registered organizations and networks of more or less active, sympathetic individuals (Binder 2020). Most members of the movement were middle-aged and senior men who hailed from Telugu-speaking and Hindu backgrounds and could be placed somewhere on a middle-class spectrum. Questions of caste were precarious and fiercely contested precisely because the movement was based on an unequivocal rejection of the caste system. While officially disavowed, people’s caste identities, especially the upper-caste backgrounds of leaders as well as entire factions of the movement, were still remembered and, so the mutual accusations went, were not at all a question of the past. While not all of my interlocutors considered ‘atheism’ (*nāstikatvaṃ*) a suitable name for their movement, and some preferred labels like ‘humanism’ (*mānavavādam*) or ‘rationalism’ (*hētuvādam*), they all agreed that the lack of belief in the existence of god(s) was a basic premise of their world view. Hence, the disagreement about names revolved mainly around the question of which label communicated most effectively, in the context of social activism, the movement’s claim that irreligion goes far beyond the mere denial and debunking of religious beliefs.

My interlocutors criticized religions not only as specific belief systems but also as a style and strategic method of social organization, which they considered to be based on exploitation, inequality and 'blind belief' (*mūḍhanammakam*) in coercive customs and traditions. The aim of their movement was to implement atheism as a practical 'way of life' (*jīvitavidhānam*) and thereby achieve a comprehensive 'reconstruction of society' (*saṃghanirmānam*) without religion, but also without other forms of so-called mental slavery (*bhāvadāsyam*) that may not be readily recognizable as 'religious' in the narrow sense, such as political authoritarianism or capitalist consumerism. However, precisely because my interlocutors did not reduce atheism to questions of an individual lack of belief but insisted that it should entail a collective and enduring way of life—a material culture, a collective memory of historical continuity, mechanisms of reproduction, procedures for delimiting and policing communal boundaries and so forth—their ideal of practical atheism also risked replicating what they themselves considered a defining problem of mental slavery: the tendency of dynamic, rational and reflexive ways of life to ossify into obdurate and mindless tradition. The movement was acutely aware of the potential of organized atheism to devolve into a 'godless theism' (Gora 1972: 5) or 'merely another Hindu atheist tradition' (Venkatadri 2007: 192), and rival factions within the movement regularly accused one another of being caught up in such processes of devolution.

Though none of my interlocutors used the word 'impossible' to describe this predicament, which they tended to consider a concrete practical and moral challenge, it is similar to the structural impossibility of Jainism referred to by Laidlaw (mentioned earlier) and also resonates with Webb Keane's (2013) semiotic analysis of the 'uninhabitability' of secularism as a moral narrative of modernity. While it is important to stress that secularism cannot be equated with irreligion, the actual relationship between secularism and irreligion—or religion and irreligion for that matter—has until recently received scant attention from critical scholarship on secularism. The important critical insight into the ideological or discursive nature of secularism has resulted in a tendency to efface methodologically rather than theorize or empirically describe the difference between religion and irreligion in terms of a lived, embodied

and material phenomenon (Binder 2019; see also Blanes and Oustinova-Stjepanovic 2015; Lee 2015; Scheer et al. 2019). It has also prevented more sustained inquiries into the actual role that impossibility or uninhabitability may play for people who insist on being irreligious. To reiterate my argument: in so far as the impossibility of atheism as a practical project is embedded in a larger conceptual and institutional configuration of religious nationalism and state secularism, it does not follow that atheists cannot pursue that project; rather, they can pursue it within that configuration and, therefore, as an impossibility.

Peter van der Veer (1994, 2001) has retraced the imperial and transactional history of that configuration by showing how religious nationalism and secularism are two intrinsically related and co-constitutive aspects of the nation state understood as a global political project, a form of governmentality and an epistemological regime. Van der Veer conceptualizes religious nationalism and secularism as operative discourses and institutional apparatuses through which various projects of religious reform and state regulation shape existing historical ‘material’ (practices, ideas, social relations, symbols, rituals, forms of personhood, sacred objects and spaces etc.) into a coherent form of ‘modern religion’ (see also Kippenberg 2001; Masuzawa 2005; Chidester 2014). By being modernized and nationalized within the framework of the secular nation state, ‘religion becomes one of the fields of disciplinary practice in which the modern civil subject is produced’ (van der Veer 2001: 33). As such, it is part of a solution to the problems of national unity and political loyalty with which nation states are confronted due to their inherent heterogeneity and the presence—and indeed production—of minorities of various kinds (Mahmood 2016).

The nationalization of religion hinges on what van der Veer calls a ‘syntagmatic chain’ (2014: 9) of a whole range of conceptual by-products like superstition, magic, communalism, secularity, science or spirituality, which are instrumental for defining the nature and boundaries of religion in a given context. In India, spirituality in particular has played a vital role in both anticolonial nationalism and postcolonial secularism, given its ability to signify a common principle of unity for an Indian nation otherwise defined in terms of religious pluralism. The nexus of spirituality and secularism, in its concrete ‘Indian’ form of nationalized religious

pluralism, is central to an understanding of atheism's impossibility because that nexus is an important location of the concept of a 'way of life'. Especially in critical debates on Indian secularism since the 1990s, the supposedly impermeable boundaries erected by modern and nationalized religions, referred to as communalism, have been contrasted with more benign forms of Indian spirituality manifested not as bounded religions but in inchoate and popular ways of life. Since those ways of life are considered, at least potentially, to be open to syncretism and plurality, they are supposed to transcend religious boundaries as well as the binary logic of an essentialized distinction between the religious and the secular (Bhargava 1998; Needham and Sunder Rajan 2007; Tejani 2008).

Rather than reviewing the details of this debate—or critical assessments of it (e.g. Ahmad 2009)—I prefer to emphasize that, irrespective of whether the Indian nation is considered to consist of bounded religious communities or fluid ways of life, atheism or irreligion is usually not one of them. This becomes most explicit in staple reiterations by politicians and academics alike that secularism—at least in India—is *not* irreligious but rather a form of tolerance, regulation or indeed celebration of religious pluralism (cf. Bajpai 2018). As a consequence, critical debates tend to focus on whether this religious pluralism is skewed towards one or other religious community, while its character as not irreligious usually goes unquestioned. In the following engagement with cinematic representations of atheism in two Bollywood films, I seek to illustrate how the disavowal of irreligiosity does not simply eject atheism from the framework of Indian nationalism but includes it in the form of an impossibility.

Anthropological studies of the relationship between nationalism and modern mass media, especially television and cinema, have stressed the importance of analysing media texts or content in the context of more complex 'media practices' (Couldry 2004: 127). By looking not only at the production, circulation and reception of media texts but also at the practices and discourses around, about or oriented towards them, ethnographic studies have foregrounded the fissures, discursive slippages and open-endedness of messages that are broadcast within different projects of mass-mediated 'national pedagogy' (Abu-Lughod 2005: 10; see also Mankekar 1999; Meyer 2015; Bhrugubanda 2018). Rather than attempting an ethnography of media practices, my aim in the following

is more modest in that I limit myself to a close reading of the plots of two audiovisual media texts in order to illustrate how the impossibility of atheism thrives on conceptual slippages, most importantly between atheism and irreligion, and between religious critique and irreligious criticism.<sup>1</sup>

## The Atheist as Failure in *OMG—Oh My God!*

The Hindi movie *OMG—Oh My God!* was released in 2012 and later remade in Telugu (*Gopala Gopala*, 2015) and Kannada (*Mukunda Murari*, 2016). It announces itself as an adaptation of a Hindi play (*Kishan vs. Kanhaiya*), which in turn is based on the 2001 Australian comedy, *The Man Who Sued God*. The film follows Kanji Lalji Mehta, a staunch and vocal atheist, who earns his livelihood by foisting overpriced religious idols and faked sacred ware on to his naïve customers. When Kanji disrupts a religious festival, in which his family members participate against his wishes, and the presiding Hindu priest threatens him with divine punishment for this sin, Kanji brushes aside the warning and openly challenges God. Promptly, an earthquake hits the city, and Kanji's shop is utterly destroyed, while the rest of his neighbourhood remains unscathed. He still rejects explanations of divine punishment, remains steadfast in his lack of belief in God, even boldly reiterating it and instead trusts in his insurance policy.

The insurance company, however, refuses to pay, arguing that earthquakes are 'acts of God' not covered by his policy. Kanji therefore decides to sue God for indemnities via his earthly representatives. In the course of a protracted lawsuit, which arouses immense media publicity, he loses his livelihood, his family and friends leave him, and his continuing blasphemies make him the target of the violent ire of devotee mobs orchestrated by the villainous godmen, and one godwoman, whom he opposes in court. However, it is the god Krishna himself who descends to earth in the guise of a hotshot, motorcycle-riding real estate agent and not only rescues Kanji from physical danger, homelessness and social isolation, but also provides him with the decisive clue to win his lawsuit. Krishna nudges him to study the *Bhagavad Gita* and other sacred

scriptures on whose basis he will prove the liability of god's earthly representatives in court. Kanji himself remains an atheist until right before the verdict, when he falls into a coma and the doctor informs his family that now only God can save him. Indeed, Krishna finally reveals himself to the comatose Kanji and informs him that his enemies have in the meantime been amply compensated for their defeat in court, namely by monetizing the idea that Kanji is the latest spiritual guru and religious reformer. After a scene of tender love in which Kanji asks forgiveness, he wakes up, destroys his own idols and even saves his enemies from the duped mob that has turned against them at last. The movie ends by enjoining the people to eschew self-appointed godmen and look for God directly in fellow humans. In a final epiphany, Krishna reminds Kanji that love, not fear, is at the heart of religion.

Although this moral conclusion iterates one of the commonest atheist arguments against religion, namely that it is driven by fear, my reading of it suggests that it effectively cements the impossibility of atheism in a more fundamental way than the simply incontrovertible existence of the god Krishna throughout the plot. From an atheist's perspective, Kanji's final 'conversion' is deplorable because it evokes a common trope of atheist failure by depicting a lack of belief as a temporary and ultimately deficient phase to be overcome in a transition towards a better understanding of religion. After all, throughout the film Kanji is depicted as consistently fearless and unassailable in his atheism until the very matter-of-factness of god's presence simply leaves him no other choice. While devoid of fear, Kanji was not lacking love; in fact, his character is an utterly likeable and caring family man, he is well-integrated into his neighbourhood, and his somewhat excessive rigour and stubbornness still remain within the limits of appropriate masculinity. The film presents his bold atheism in humorous and endearing ways, and he is clearly intended as the main figure of positive identification for viewers (which may fail, of course). Even his morally questionable fraudulence as a businessman—selling tap water as holy water from the Ganges, for example—is justified in so far as his foolish customers seem almost determined to be cheated and merely prove Kanji's point that religion is above all a means to mint money out of blind belief.

The movie's narrative style and portrayal of its characters provide Kanji's perspective with constant support. His performances of sober reasoning—critics may say specious argument—are depicted as universally persuasive and go largely unchallenged, except for desperate emotional outrage at their blasphemous nature by his villainous enemies. His court case evolves into a class action with a host of plaintiffs from all the major religious communities in India, and Krishna himself is depicted as utterly enjoying the TV broadcasts of Kanji's rationalist dismantling of religion. And yet, Kanji finds himself economically destitute, socially isolated, publicly scorned, physically attacked and blithely unaware of being saved repeatedly by the very god he denies. It is Kanji's impeccable and unwavering embodiment of the ideal, prototypical male atheist that seems effectively to drive home the point that his ultimate abandonment of atheism is not due to any personal failure on his part but is due to the more general impossibility of atheism.

The film's investment in a hallowed discourse of humanist spirituality (love God by loving your fellow humans), well-entrenched through nationalist discourses of religious reform (Chatterjee 1983; Jones 1989; Radice 1999), fully supports Kanji's atheist critique that institutional religion is largely an insincere and fraudulent human artifice maintained through familial pressures and notions of social respectability. At the same time, however, it is precisely this social aspect, rather than the plot's insistence on God's existence, which makes a total rejection of *all* spirituality—and not just certain 'bad' forms of institutionalized religion—impossible. Hence, the decisive moment of atheism's impossibility is not its factual cancellation by the presence of God but the plot's insistence that, while Kanji was being an atheist, he spiralled into a state of utter social isolation and, therefore, material destitution, which he could not have sustained if it had not been for (covert) Krishna's assistance.

This also brings us back to a crucial feature of the discourse on Indian secularism, which tends to entertain an Orientalist, largely unquestioned common sense that Indian civilization somehow is, has been and will remain beholden to a basic, ineradicable religiosity. As a result, the secularity of the Indian state—in its ideal form and in contrast to society, the people or indeed *the nation*—has nothing to do with irreligion, as it refers to things like equidistance from all religions, religious tolerance or

neutrality (Tejani 2008; Bajpai 2018: 206–268). While there are certainly important nationalist figures like Jawaharlal Nehru, Muhammad Ali Jinnah or Bhagat Singh, who are famous for their aloofness from religion or, in the latter's case, an explicit commitment to atheism, their personal religiosity or lack thereof tends to be put aside as simply that: *personal* and, as a consequence, impossible or unnecessary as a model for the wider Indian population and the building of a secular national community (e.g. Khilnani 2007). The courts and legal system, more than the government, the state or its personal representatives, are usually treated as the ultimate locus where this model of secularism as a *not* irreligious equidistance from (all) religions is played out more or less successfully.

Since *OMG* revolves around a court case, it directly taps into this imaginary of the secular state, the religious nation and, I argue, the impossible atheist. In fact, the somewhat 'anglicized' judge, Kanji's pious Muslim lawyer and even the opportunistic insurance company are perfect embodiments of the ideal of Indian secularism in so far as they abstract from whatever personal or 'sentimental' investment they may have in religion and engage with it in entirely instrumental terms, whether as a matter of legal adjudication (judge), professional duty (lawyer) or economic interest (insurance). Kanji's calm and rational demeanour in court contrasts strikingly with the unrestrained, hysterical and abusive display of emotions by his religious opponents. Kanji thus approaches the court as a *secular citizen* whose personal beliefs/disbeliefs should not matter, however incendiary they may be, as long as he can provide legal evidence for his case. The evidence in this instance is the very same sacred scriptures he personally rejects (for a historical perspective on the evidentiary role of texts, including opponents' texts, see Appadurai 1981). He wins the case, and the ideally operating secularism of *OMG* would actually undergird his atheism if it weren't for the 'common people' who manage to transform even a staunch atheist and blasphemer like Kanji into yet another deity, and his radically irreligious critique into yet another reform of religion. This, too, is a common atheist trope,<sup>2</sup> which the film adopts but turns against atheism by projecting it as a natural and inevitable process that may validate atheist critique of religion but makes the practical implementation of its consequences nonetheless impossible.

Throughout the film, media coverage of Kanji's atheism, especially on television, constitutes the operative link between secular state and religious nation, court and people, and thus indicates the crucial role that scholars have accorded to transforming media environments for the production and evolution of religious nationalism (Lutgendorf 1990; Rajagopal 2001; Ahmad 2019). The role of media comes to the fore in a more pronounced way in the following example, the movie *PK*, where atheism articulates more explicitly with the ambivalent relationship between immediacy and technological mediation.

## The Atheist as Alien in *PK*

*PK*, released in 2014, is the story of an extraterrestrial, humanoid researcher—named PK—on a field trip to Planet Earth. Shortly after his arrival in rural Rajasthan, the first human he meets steals the remote control for his spaceship, which looks like a gemstone, and sells it to a Hindu godman in New Delhi. The film's plot follows the alien's tumultuous quest to retrieve the device in order to return home. The story is framed by a subplot of a young Indian (Hindu) woman, Jaggu, and a Pakistani (Muslim) man, Sarfaraz, who meet in Belgium, fall in love and decide to get married. In doing so, they defy the objections of Jaggu's family, whose spiritual guru, Tapasvi Maharaj, predicted that Sarfaraz, being a Muslim, would betray Jaggu. Due to an unfortunate misunderstanding in the wedding chapel, Jaggu believes the prophecy has come true, cancels the marriage before Sarfaraz can clear up the confusion and returns to Delhi, where she starts working as a TV journalist. As it so happens, Jaggu's family guru is the godman who has acquired the extraterrestrial remote, which he passes off as a bead from Lord Shiva's necklace that he claims to have received while meditating in the Himalayas. At the end of the film, the alien exposes Tapasvi Maharaj as a fraud during a live talk show on Jaggu's TV channel and reunites her in the process with Sarfaraz, who has returned to Lahore.

While Kanji in *OMG* is an explicit atheist from an equally explicitly Hindu background, who engages with religion in the context of an ideal image of the state's religiously neutral secularity, *PK*'s extraterrestrial

researcher embodies that equidistant, neutral secularity himself. The state in *PK* is represented by the police, not the court, and is much less efficient, as a police officer is the first to introduce the concept of God to the alien. He comments on the absurdity of the alien's request to retrieve a stolen remote control in a city like New Delhi by telling him sarcastically: 'I am not God'. This instance of figurative speech kicks off the film's main plot, as the alien attempts to get in touch with God by means of all the different religions he finds in Delhi, as he assumes that only God can help him in his search for the remote. It is precisely his unprejudiced, sincere and logical but utterly naïve or literal engagement with all religions that gradually reveals the hypocrisy, bigotry and fraudulence that, as the film suggests, marks all of them equally to the extent that they function as social institutions.

In his journey through the religious landscape of contemporary urban India, PK constantly becomes enmeshed in mostly humorous situations that stage a fairly common repertoire of religious critique revolving, as is the case in *OMG*, around the monetization of belief and the merely human-made nature of institutional religion. Metaphors of religion are drawn mostly from the economic sphere, for example, when godmen are referred to as managers of God, worship is depicted as bribery or religious belonging is construed in terms of a (fashion) label. In contrast to *OMG*, however, the existence of God is never denied nor considered as a significant theme by either the characters or the movie as a whole. Our alien can still be called an atheist, as he initially lacks any concept whatsoever of either God or religion. There simply isn't anything for him to deny.

While Kanji is a Hindu who rejects his and by extension all other religions, the alien stands in an entirely external relation not only to religion but also to all other aspects of human culture; and this connection between religion and culture already prefigures atheism's impossibility in *PK*. The alien arrives on earth completely naked and without language, as his species communicates by mindreading through physical touch; he cannot speak and cannot lie. The alien thus embodies an imagined state of 'bare humanism', and his exercise of pure logic, unencumbered by any form of prior knowledge or bias, exposes religions and, especially, their differences to be based on merely arbitrary and superficial social conventions. The film's humorous mode of critique thrives on the fact that the

alien's use of logic leads him to constantly violate norms of social, religious and gender difference in his quest to understand and imitate human behaviour. Because of his strange and deviant conduct, people assume he is drunk, *pīke* in Hindi-Urdu; so, he starts calling himself PK. Whereas *OMG* staged an irrational and hollow religion as a set-up for making the critique of an antagonistic and cynical atheist plausible, *PK*'s critique operates by causing religion to expose itself in the course of an innocently ignorant but logical 'bare humanist' sincerely attempting to practice it.

Both films ultimately discount the option of radical irreligion in favour of a form of humanist spirituality or religious reform that juxtaposes the social and institutional aspects of religion with more direct and pure connections of love, not only between individuals and God but also among humans. While *OMG* contrasts love with fear, *PK* articulates and engages more directly with the failures of love, both of God and between Jaggu and Sarfaraz or Jaggu and PK, who 'goes native' when he eventually falls in love with Jaggu and lies about it. The failure of love is linked to the breakdown of immediacy and communication across human-made and therefore ultimately spurious differences and distances, be they between religious communities, nations, or even between humans and God. This is again symbolized by PK's bare humanism as the ground 'beneath' the surface of acquired differences: PK's original nudity is the foil against which gender and especially religious difference register merely as a surface of sartorial practices: men wear shirts, women wear skirts, Hindus wear saffron, Sikh men have turbans, Muslim men grow beards, Muslim women are covered in black, Hindu women wear white if they are widowed, but Christian women wear white if they are about to get married and so forth. PK's initial inability to use language functions in a similar way: he must physically touch humans in order to communicate with them, but he finds himself incapable of doing so without violating norms of heterosocial and homophobic behaviour instituted on the basis of gender difference. He only finds direct human contact 'below' conventional standards of moral propriety, namely in the arms of a sex worker, whose (chaste) touch channels into him a 'sub-standard' dialect of Hindi. This conjures up the notion of a presumably authentic realm of popular and/or rural culture supposedly less estranged from the bare humanity underneath the artifices of human 'civilization'.<sup>3</sup>

Whether sophisticated or popular, verbal language is necessary for PK's survival and his quest among humans, yet it also opens the gate to both insincerity and misunderstanding. It thus serves as the primary model for the film's concept of human culture as a system of communication that, like any medium, both connects and separates. As PK is told that only God can help him, the film's critique of religion unfolds through his gradual insight into the cultural function—or rather malfunction—of religions as social institutions mediating between humans and God. The decisive turn of the story occurs when PK grasps the use of non-literal speech. He suddenly understands the concepts of prank, joke and lie and finally realizes the role of intentional duplicity in the malfunctioning of religious communication: God is unresponsive not because he went 'missing', as he assumed initially, but because people have misdialled and called the wrong number of godmen and what he calls 'duplicate gods'. His frustration turns into anger, as he gains awareness of the common atheist critique of religious institutions as fraudulent manipulators, rather than mediators, which do not connect but separate people from both God and one another.

*PK* rehearses a common repertoire of critique shared by atheists and religious reformers alike in a way that invites viewers to perceive them as utterly self-evident from an unbiased and neutral point of view, rather than from a position already marked as atheist, as is the case in *OMG*. Kanji needed the secular state's religious neutrality as an external counterbalance, whereas the alien PK himself embodies a form of ideal (Indian) secularity, which combines an equidistant neutrality with a positive, transcendent identification of spirituality as the principle of unity in diversity. In *PK*, the role of private media is not to connect state and society but to provide the public forum for the alien PK to perform an exemplary secularity as a model for both state and citizens. However, the final, televised showdown between PK and Tapasvi Maharaj secures this secularity by establishing the impossibility of atheism and banishing the *horror vacui* of irreligion. Tapasvi Maharaj asks PK if he desires a world without God and how he proposes to fill the void he creates by snatching away the hope that God represents for people. Remembering his own experience of material destitution, social isolation and despair, PK agrees to the

necessity of God but juxtaposes a false god that humans create to the god that created humans, about whom they know nothing.

The default atheism of bare humanism emerges here as a merely rhetorical and narrative device that constructs an impossible scenario in order to enable *PK*'s religious critique. This critique is based on an abstract idea of a human being outside society and culture that can only be inhabited by an actual alien—or be imagined as a state of inebriated lunacy—as it inevitably leads to unviable social deviance and dysfunctionality. PK finds himself constantly attacked, beaten and chased by angry mobs for his transgressive behaviour that violates socially instituted differences. His nudity is both utterly vulnerable and offensive (it also sparked a major controversy around the film; see Qadri and Mufti 2016). The *extraterrestrial* otherness of bare humanism also returns at a different scale of foreignness in Jaggu's and Sarfaraz's subplot, whose story of inter-religious and international love can only be imagined in the *extra-national* space of foreign Europe (cf. Dwyer 2017). Ultimately, PK has to leave earth, even though the movie ends with his return a year later with an extended team of alien researchers.

## Conclusion

Even though both films are invested in a reform of religion and ultimately deny the viability of atheism, they do not shy away from trenchant criticism of existing religions, especially in their institutionalized forms, by portraying positions of explicit irreligion (Kanji) and total alienness to religion (PK). My reading of *OMG* and *PK* proposes, however, that it is neither a lack of belief nor, more precisely, an ontological question of the existence of god(s) that determine atheism's impossibility, but a pervasive discourse on the social nature of religion. Religion may be deemed benevolent, harmful or amenable to reform, but the idea that it is not only linked to but in some way constitutive of sociality—and thus constitutive of 'society' as the substrate of the imagined community of the nation (cf. Anderson 1983)—is shared by many atheists, religious reformers, apologists and, I might add, scholars of religion. The discourse on the social function of religion as both the basis of an innermost sense

of self and communal and national belonging is pervasive, in so far as it is the framework within which the positions of critic, reformer and apologist are enabled and differentiated in the first place.

In his discussion of anti-conversion legislation in India, Nathaniel Roberts describes this understanding of religion as a 'sedimented modernist common sense' (2016: 116) that is shared across the political spectrum of national elites in India, from secular liberals to Hindu nationalists, because it has been constitutive of both anticolonial and postcolonial nationalisms. While Roberts analyses this 'national frame' (ibid.: 111) in order to explain why conversion from one religion to another is considered deeply problematic, even by those who oppose legal bans on conversion, I argue that it also frames the impossibility of not belonging to any religion. Robert's ethnographic study of conversion among Dalits in a Chennai slum is particularly interesting for my argument because he shows that his interlocutors operate not only with a different understanding of religion but also with reference to a discourse of a basic humanity devoid of human-made and exploitative differences of nation, religion and, above all, caste.

My point is not that this is necessarily the 'same' humanism as that endorsed by my atheist interlocutors in Andhra Pradesh and Telangana—nor the 'alien humanism' depicted in *PK*—because, to start with, one is 'illegal' and the other 'impossible'. The comparison of atheism with conversion is instructive precisely because it shows how they are both entwined with complex, historically constituted grids of social, political and economic difference and marginalization, in so far as the problem of conversion is habitually displaced on to Dalits, Adivasis or women, who are considered particularly vulnerable to the lures of conversion (ibid.: 7), whereas the impossibility of atheism tends to be associated with 'Westernized', cerebral and culturally deracinated elites.

However, just as Dalits have their own ideas about religion and conversion, atheists do not simply resign themselves to the impossibility of atheism. To be suspended in the national frame of religious nationalism and state secularism does not entail consent or ideological alignment, which is borne out by the popularity and largely positive assessment of *OMG* and *PK* among my atheist interlocutors, despite the films' ambivalent messages about atheism. As scholarship on the production of

imagined national communities has amply demonstrated, mass-mediated projects of national pedagogy do not require their addressees to believe in or be persuaded by specific media messages, especially since those media messages are not pre-existing, seamless, coherent wholes (Mankekar 1999; Rajagopal 2001; Abu-Lughod 2005; Meyer 2015); rather, the efficacy of state- and/or media-led projects of nation-building operates on principles like ‘familiarity’, ‘pervasiveness’, ‘iteration’ or ‘ubiquity’ (Roy 2007: 18–19), thus ensuring that certain national frames become sedimented as common sense and thus provide the very terms in which dissent can possibly be voiced.

In this chapter, I have approached *OMG* and *PK* as instances of nationalist iterations of atheism’s impossibility, while the conditions for atheists’ dissent seem comparable to what Susan Harding calls ‘narrative encapsulation’ (2000: 65). With this concept, she describes a condition of cultural hegemony in which a subordinate group has no choice but to use the terms and premises of a dominant discourse in order to frame and articulate not only its own story but also its very opposition to that discourse. In Harding’s case, this meant that at a certain point in time, namely after the so-called Scopes trials, Christian fundamentalists in the USA had to conceptualize their *opposition* to a specific form of secular (not non-religious!) modernity as *defeat*. In a similar way, the currently hegemonic discursive framework of Indian religious nationalism and state secularism compels atheists to conceptualize their *opposition* to that framework as *impossibility*.

By no means does this imply that they simply agree with the depictions of impossible atheism in *OMG* or *PK*. Since both films rehearse all major tropes of atheist critique from an unmistakably affirmative perspective, the stories’ eventual turn against atheism is criticized as a half-hearted and cowardly move on the part of producers, directors and scriptwriters, who simply do not have the guts to go all the way. After all, the condition of narrative encapsulation does not refer to a situation in which an opponent’s image is simply internalized, but one in which one’s self-image is constituted in and on the opponent’s terms. If atheists appreciate *OMG*’s and *PK*’s depictions of atheist impossibility, they do not appreciate them as a correct representation of the reality of atheism but as a correct representation of the problems in realizing it. More concretely, my atheist

interlocutors were aware of but rejected the films' attempts to transform an atheist critique of religion into an instance of religious critique or reform. They maintained a discursive slippage between the two that allowed them to construe the films as simply unequally sincere, consistent or gutsy versions of the same phenomenon: an atheism whose practical realization as irreligion is made impossible by its social framing at both the intradiegetic level of the films' narratives and the extradiegetic level of their production.

My aim in analysing the cinematic renderings of atheism in *OMG* and *PK* was to demonstrate that it is possible to study the historical production, social contextualization and diversity of atheism's impossibility. The two films represent two very different forms or characters of atheism, which are configured differently with regard to the secular state, the public sphere, the media and religious pluralism. While both films speak to themes and issues that may be specific or even unique to India or Indian religious nationalism, the direct adaptation of an Australian film in the case of *OMG* and a more subtle, maybe unintentional, similarity to George Gurdjieff's (1950) novel *Beelzebub's Tales to His Grandson* in the case of *PK*<sup>4</sup> indicate that they are also part of a larger 'international frame'. Again, I do not mean to imply that impossibility articulates an essential, universal or transhistorical truth about atheism. Instead, the task of an anthropology of atheism is to analyse how the transactional global history of discourses like religious nationalism or state secularism continues to shape and transform the conditions in which atheism becomes impossible, possible or something else entirely.

## Notes

1. In the context of the problematic political and moral claims of narratives of secular and/or liberal modernity as a legacy of the European Enlightenment and its particular forms of 'rational' critique, it is important to distinguish between religious critique, which may include projects of religious reform but also go beyond it, and the critique or criticism of religion, which may but need not necessarily entail a principled rejection of one or all religions or of religion as such (for a more detailed discussion,

see Asad et al. 2009; Ahmad 2017). In the case at hand, however, I argue that the impossibility of atheism, in the sense of a basic discursive assumption rather than an explicit critique of atheism, is premised precisely on the ability to gloss over the distinction between critique and criticism and to let one slide into the other.

2. As a striking example for this process, my atheist interlocutors frequently mentioned their interpretation of the historical development of Buddhism as a process of ‘Hinduization’ (*haindavīkaraṇa*), whereby the Buddha’s originally atheist and rationalist critique of Brahmanism was gradually transformed into a new religion that eventually transformed the Buddha himself into a new deity.
3. In *OMG*, the realm of the ‘common people’ was depicted as the locus of an ineradicable and self-propelling tendency towards religion, which is entirely immune to forms of rational critique and therefore requires a secular state to regulate religions in a neutral and unsentimental way. The realm of the popular in *PK*, by contrast, evokes a different discourse. As mentioned in the introduction, it construes the common people as the locus of cultural syncretism and forms of social solidarity beyond the divisive logic of communalism or secularism instituted by the modern nation state. Both discourses associate the popular with a state of ‘uncultured’ authenticity but assign very different valuations to it by conceptualizing it either as the breeding ground for obstinately superstitious religiosity or as the repository of a wholesome way of life that will cure the ailments of modern fragmentation (cf. Binder 2018).
4. I thank Vivek Kumar for bringing Gurdjieff’s novel to my attention.

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# 4

## Hindu Nationalism and North Indian Music in the Global Age

Bob van der Linden

### Introduction<sup>1</sup>

In modern states around the world, the imagination, canonization and institutionalization of national music by members of a social majority has repeatedly led to the stigmatization and marginalization of music created by social minorities. Roma music in Hungary (Brown 2000) and Turkey (Bates 2011), Bukharan Jewish art music in Uzbekistan (Levin 1996), Uyghur art music (Harris 2008), Nazi music (Rees 2000) in China and Jewish popular music in Tunisia (Davis 2009) are just a few examples. Central to this process were hierarchical, if not evolutionary ideas about music, whereby the imagined national music—by and large, either in the European idiom, as in China, or in that of a modern ‘classicized’ local tradition of art music, as in the cases of *shashmaqam* in Uzbekistan and *ma’luf* in Tunisia—was seen as more ‘progressive’ than other, often folk or popular forms of music (van der Linden 2015). The making of north

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Indian art music, known as Hindustani music, into national music fits this context, while also being very different. This is because it concerned, besides a growing demarcation between ‘high’ art music and ‘low’ folk and popular music, a transfer from a Muslim ‘minority’ community to a Hindu ‘majority’ community of musicians, patronage and audiences within a single art music tradition.<sup>2</sup>

Indeed, since the seventeenth century, due to Mughal rule and Muslim patronage in general, the Hindustani music scene was dominated numerically and professionally by Muslim hereditary musicians, commonly known as *ustads* (literally, teachers), yet this supremacy by a social minority was gradually dismantled into the twentieth century through a process of ‘Hinduization’.

This unique event in global history undoubtedly highlights the significance of the institutional and structural forms of Hindu discrimination and oppression, if not violence, against Muslims that took place under the banner of Hindu nationalism in India. Its scholarly importance also lies in the fact that it sheds light on the relations between ‘religion’, nation and state power in the context of processes of modernization and the global circulation of ideas. To this day, Indian art music remains the non-Western world’s main last stand in the face of the global hegemony of European music in its basic form, that is the use of equal temperament tuning and (functional) harmony, as well as different instruments and ensemble playing (van der Linden 2020). Hence, expectedly, since the late nineteenth century Indians and a great number of Westerners generally saw it as the critical essence of the nation’s ‘spiritual’ culture, whereby they assumed that the ‘tradition’ had largely survived the imperial encounter unscathed. However, this chapter argues that the patronage, performance practice and reception of Indian art music changed remarkably under colonial rule. Thus, like ‘religion’, music became part of the global process of transforming pre-modern ‘tradition’ into national ‘culture’. By taking music, that quintessentially non-representational medium, as a lens through which to view this fundamental transformation, I am basically reiterating a point I made earlier (van der Linden 2008), namely the inadequacy of ‘religion’ as an analytic concept for understanding what happened in modern India.<sup>3</sup> To conduct a comparative study of national ‘cultures’ in global interaction,

conversely, the focus must be upon the modern institutionalization of (scientific) rational and moral thinking, economic competition and politics by numbers in the context of processes of nation-state formation.

Obviously, Hindu and Muslim identities existed among musicians in pre-colonial India too, if for different reasons: for instance, numerous Hindu musicians converted to Islam (Manuel 1996: 122–123; Scarimbolo 2014: 432–451; Subramanian 2006: 4649). Likewise, it cannot be accidental that at the courts of Hindu rulers most musicians were Hindus, as in Gwalior during the century before Indian independence or in Benares, with its Hindu maharaja and numerous temples. Even so, these Hindu and Muslim identities were definitely fuzzier in comparison to those of modern times. Decisive in this transformation were the modern national music reforms by elitists, mostly Hindu Brahmin and English-educated reformers, first in Calcutta (now Kolkata) and Western India (today's Mumbai and Maharashtra). These were the immediate consequence of the rapid social and intellectual transformations that Indians experienced during the imperial encounter. In the context of an emergent modern public sphere in north India, Indian music reformers began to ask new questions about their own musical culture. In what ways did Indian music differ from Western music? How could Indian music be changed in order to make it modern and, indeed, 'scientific'? In relation to the latter, for instance, music notation gained much attention. Also typical was the fact that the Western harmonium, with its well-tempered tuning, was widely adopted by musicians so that by the first decade of the twentieth century it had replaced the *sarangi* (a bowed, short-necked string instrument) as the main accompanying instrument.

Most significantly, while Hindu music reformers imagined and defined Indian national music in light of European musical practice and history as well as texts on Indian music, they located the origins of Indian music in a pre-Muslim golden age of 'Hindu music'. Moreover, they incorrectly argued that Hindustani music had declined because it had fallen in the hands of the 'illiterate' Muslim hereditary musicians, who 'secretly' kept their knowledge to themselves rather than share it with Hindus. Quite the reverse, however, the nineteenth century was an important and creative period of transition for north Indian art music, with new instruments like the *sitar*, *sarod* (a fretless, plucked lute) and *tabla* (a pair of tuneable

Indian hand played drums), and relatively new genres like *khayal* and a modernized *thumri*, replacing the instruments and styles associated with the Mughal court. All the same, Hindu national music reformers construed and institutionalized a 'classical' north Indian music on a par with the European classical music tradition, among other things through music schools, music conferences, canonical repertoires, concert arrangements, (staff) notation and theoretical elaborations. In this way, Hindustani music was made respectable for the emerging Hindu middle class, especially for its women, and a commercial market for music education and performance was created at the same time. Into the twentieth century, then, the Hindu community became the mainstay of Hindustani music in terms of students, resulting in an ever-increasing number of professional musicians and audiences. Through this 'Hinduization' of north Indian art music, moreover, music reformers took music away from the private world of princely courts and hereditary musicians, of whom the great majority were Muslim, and into the modern concert hall and the public sphere at large.

To be clear, north Indian art music is an oral tradition to a great extent based upon the 'improvisation' of formerly studied, and often strictly defined, patterns that are specific to a certain *raga* (a tonal framework for composition and improvisation). Hence, rather than composers, as is common in European classical music, one must think in terms of specific performers and their musical lineages. Moreover, Hindustani music does not have European musical concepts such as harmony, counterpoint, chords or modulation. In its place, highly individual soloists and their accompanists 'improvise' solely with melody and rhythm, whereby the microtonal 'ornamentations' around the notes are as important as the actual notes or semitones, the smallest difference between two pitches in European music. Actually, one of my key arguments in this specific musical context is that because of Hindu national music reforms and the subsequent 'Hinduization' of north Indian art music, which led to a process of musical standardization, the divergent knowledge of the Muslim *ustads* was increasingly undermined.

In general, this chapter builds upon certain publications that were partially triggered by Janaki Bakhle's *Two Men and Music: Nationalism in the Making of an Indian Classical Tradition* (2005), the first monograph

that straightforwardly discussed the Hindu nationalism underlying the making of modern Hindustani music, and which afterwards created much scholarly debate. In particular, Bakhle was criticized for her ‘rather simplistic picture’ of ‘Muslim loss and Hindu gain as the *raga* tradition was classicized throughout the twentieth century’ (Slawek 2007: 507). In what follows, therefore, I will repeatedly emphasize that the stigmatization and subsequent marginalization of the Muslim *ustad* was anything but a linear process but, as so often in history, to a considerable extent the outcome of the unintended consequences of human initiatives. In reality, for instance, many Hindu and Muslim musicians continued to work together. A great number of Hindus studied with Muslim musicians who themselves sometimes played important roles in modern music reforms. A few well-known examples are Maula Baksh, Abdul Karim Khan and his daughter Hirabai Barodekar, and Karamatullah Khan (Bakhle 2005; Katz 2017).<sup>4</sup> On the other hand, singers like Abdul Karim Khan were famous for their interpretations of Krishnavite devotional songs (*bhajans*) and numerous Muslim musicians, among whom India’s most famous *shehnai* (Indian oboe) player Bismillah Khan in Benares, continued performing in Hindu temples. Be that as it may, the legendary Allauddin Khan was compelled ‘to take on a Hindu name at least twice during his life in order to avoid “anti-Muslim ostracism”’ (Scarimbolo 2014: 449).<sup>5</sup>

The chapter is divided into three sections followed by a conclusion. The first section discusses the importance of European Orientalist knowledge—mainly the discovery of Sanskrit, which led to the idea of a ‘Hindu’ golden age, and the historical view of Muslims as outsiders to the subcontinent—to the stigmatization of Muslim musicians by Hindu national music reformers. Over time the latter institutionalized music theory and practice in a modern and rational manner. Continuing this theme, the second section shows how, into the twentieth century, the Muslim *ustads* were marginalized in music institutions, both for their supposedly ‘unscientific’ music practices and for their immorality, and Hindustani music in general was ‘Hinduized’. The final section considers the growing violence against Muslims as a minority in Indian society in the face of Hindu nationalism since the late nineteenth century and—especially after the Partition of British India into India and Pakistan in 1947—the difficult

position therein of the ‘secular’ Muslim musician, who increasingly had to live and perform in a ‘Hindu cultural sphere’.

## Stigmatization: Hindu National Music Reforms and the *Ustads*

In his classic *Indian Music and the West* (1997), Gerry Farrell argued that the roots of Hindu national music reforms lay mainly in the British colonial imagination:

When India was discovered as a cultural entity by Orientalists in the late eighteenth century, the study of music, like language, had to suit their project of discovering and reconstructing a pristine Hindu past, free from Muslim influences. Hence the ‘dead’ music of Sanskrit texts was more revered than the living Indo-Muslim tradition. (Farrell 1997: 1–2)

In particular, the works of William Jones and N. Augustus Willard were crucial to the Indian reception of the idea of ‘Hindu music’ and its degradation under Muslim rule. In *On the Musical Modes of the Hindus* (1792), Jones not only peddled the myth of Indian music being on the verge of extinction but also, like other Orientalists glorifying Sanskrit sources, directly combined it with the loss of the ‘Hindu music’ of a supposedly golden age. Although he had a great affection for Persian literature, Jones only trusted Sanskrit music treatises in studying Indian music while arguing that Muslim writers had mystified the tradition through their poor translations of these texts.

In his *Treatise on the Music of Hindoostan: Comprising a Detail of the Ancient Theory and Modern Practice* (1834), N. Augustus Willard emphasized that the study of books alone was not enough to bring about the revival of ‘Hindu music’. One also had to gather information from performing musicians, even if they were generally ‘ignorant of the theory of music’ and were ‘the most immoral set of men on earth’ (Willard 1834: 3, 29, 122). Moreover, although Jones was ambiguous about the role of the Muslim period in the decline of ‘Hindu music’, Willard openly blamed Muslim rulers for what had supposedly happened. Having failed

to patronize music's theoretical tradition properly, he argued, Muslim rulers had brought about the 'defection' of its theory from its practice and caused music to fall into the hands of 'illiterates' (ibid.: 2–3). Still, whereas he made a division between musicians and musical theorists, Willard never specifically identified the musicians he was so critical of as Muslim. On the contrary, he wrote, for example:

I have not confined myself to the details in books, but have also consulted the most famous performers, both Hindoos and Mussulmans, the first Veenkars<sup>6</sup> in India, the more expert musicians of Lucknow, and Hukeem Salamut Ulee Khan of Benares, who has written a treatise on music. (Ibid.: 12)

Hence, the stigmatization of the *ustads*, which became so dominant later, cannot be unambiguously attributed to Jones or Willard. The decisive step to anti-Muslimness was taken up only by later British colonial writers and, especially, Hindu nationalist music reformers.<sup>7</sup>

The role of India's first modern musicologist, Sourindro Mohun Tagore (1840–1914), was crucial. In 1871 in Calcutta he founded the Bengal Music School and, a decade later, the Bengal Music Academy for the teaching of 'Hindu music' on scientific principles. On the basis of courses, syllabuses and degrees devised by Tagore himself, these institutions offered systematic music education. He saw music notation as an essential component of any advanced musical system and accordingly he endorsed a Bengali letter notation system. Between 1872 and 1896, he published numerous books and articles on Indian music for the expanding market of amateur musicians, including manuals on how to play *sitar* and harmonium. At his own cost, moreover, Tagore distributed these and collections of Indian musical instruments to learned institutions, museums and heads of state in many countries around the world. For him, music became a central means to propagate the greatness of Hindu civilization to the West, and accordingly he corresponded with numerous scholars around the world. More immediately, Tagore seized the latent criticism of the *ustads* from the British colonial writings of Jones, Willard and others and incorporated an explicit anti-Muslim argument into it. In his editorial in the 1872 volume of *Sangit Samalochani* (The Music

Review), he was among the first modern Hindu music reformers to specifically dismiss Muslim musicians as unwilling and ‘illiterate’ teachers. It is ironic that Tagore himself had been taught by several Muslim teachers (Scarimbolo 2014: 351), whom he now condemned as responsible for the decline of ‘Hindu music’:

Within this royal lineage of invaders there have been born one or two knowledge-loving emperors who, understanding the exquisiteness of Hindu music, contributed their enthusiasm towards its advancement. But be it through chicanery or might, they started converting exponents of Hindu music to their own religion. We think this is the outstanding reason why cultivation of music is so rare among Hindus, and it is due to this that one sees more music-exponents among Muslims [...] What is a matter of even greater sorrow is that Muslims are not easily inclined to teach music to Hindus. Even if they are favourably inclined, they are ignorant regarding how to teach in a simple way. Therefore, learning music from Muslims is not easily forthcoming. (Basu 2011: 336)

Earlier, in fact, Tagore’s guru and the chief instructor at the Bengal Music School, Kshetra Mohan Goswami, had argued in his *Sangitasara* (1869) that the ‘great intellectual tradition of Sanskrit learning in music died out with the usurpation of musical practice by Muslim *ustads*’ (Katz 2017: 134).

India’s most important modern music reformer, Vishnu Narayan Bhatkhande (1860–1936), best exemplifies the Indian music reformers’ adherence to modern scientific knowledge: the Enlightenment search for origins in music, the standardization of music theory and practice, notation, music education and so on. Overall, he sought to revive and re-define Hindustani music scientifically as a national music that would be accessible for a wider Indian public. To this end, he claimed that north Indian art music had a history of only ‘a couple of centuries’ while pointing out ‘the futility of trying to trace India’s music back to the Vedas or even more recent treatises such as the *Natyashastra* or the *Sangitratnakar*’ (Neuman 2014: 288). He based his argument on extensive fieldwork, during which he collected an enormous orally transmitted musical repertoire from contemporary, mostly Muslim performers from different

lineages. This material resulted in the six volumes of *Kramik Pustak Malika* (1919–1937), a collection of compositions in the Indian *sargam* notation. Between 1916 and 1926, Bhatkhande convened five All India Music Conferences at which scholars (mostly Hindu) and musicians (mostly Muslim) came together from all over India with the goal of regulating the standards and boundaries of a national music. In particular, a national system of notation and a uniform description of *ragas* were thought necessary. During the 1920s and 1930s, Bhatkhande's inspiration was a major factor in the founding of music schools in Baroda, Gwalior, Bombay, Nagpur and, above all, Lucknow. Undeniably, his Western education as a lawyer contributed to his systematic approach to music education.

Altogether, Bhatkhande propagated his own research findings, system of *raga* classification and music notation system over what he saw as the 'unscientific' knowledge of the hereditary musicians. Yet, unlike many of his contemporaries, he did not believe that Muslim rulers had been bad music patrons or that the *ustads* had ruined Indian music. On the contrary, he often praised the latter's musicality, including that of one of his main informers, the celebrated Wazir Khan. Likewise, he sent his foremost disciple S.N. Ratanjankar to the illustrious singer Faiyaz Khan for further studies and, at the All-India Music Conferences, he allowed some Muslim scholars and musicians to describe their alternative views on Indian music history. Thus, by challenging the continuity of Indian music since Vedic times and admiring the creativity of Muslim musicians, Bhatkhande softened what by his time had become a clearly defined narrative of Muslim dominance and the decline of 'Hindu music'. Nevertheless, in his search for a textual foundation for Indian music history, he too was very critical of the *ustads*, whom he generally described as ignorant of texts and history, as well as bad teachers. As Janaki Bakhle argued, however, Bhatkhande's irritation was ultimately directed at 'musicians, singers, and instrumentalists—not because of their religious affiliation, but because as performers they did not pay adequate attention to posterity nor, for that matter, to the future' (Bakhle 2005: 123). He simply could not accept that 'musicians were the living archive of music's theoretical history, even if they were his resource for its performative history' (ibid.: 109). Ultimately, he only believed in the Sanskrit music

treatises and Hindu origins of Indian national music. Or, as Justin Scarimbolo put it: ‘Bhatkhande excluded Muslim musicians not because they were Muslim, but because they were *not* Hindus’ (Scarimbolo 2014: 362, emphasis in original). Hence, the reformer’s position was comparable, he continued, to William Jones’s rejection of Persian writings on Indian music, which had nothing to do with being anti-Muslim, but with the fact that ‘for him, India was essentially Hindu, and any claim to authenticity on the part of Muslims was therefore seen as illegitimate’ (ibid.).

In contrast to Bhatkhande, the musician and music reformer Vishnu Digambar Paluskar (1872–1931) straightforwardly argued that ancient ‘Hindu music’ had become degraded in the hands of the *ustads*, and accordingly he made its revival and diffusion among the general public the goal of his life. For this purpose, he propagated Indian national music on behalf of Hindu devotional music (*bhakti*). In Paluskar’s hands, and especially in those of his disciples, music education and public performances became channels for Hindu proselytizing. With the support of two Hindu nationalist organizations, the Arya Samaj and the Sanatan Dharm Sabha, he founded the Gandharva Mahavidyalaya music school in Lahore in 1901. Typically, although Lahore had a large Muslim population and was a prime centre for Hindustani music, the school had no Muslim teachers and only a few Muslim students. The Gandharva Mahavidyalaya was a Hindu music school with prayers in Sanskrit and a major focus on Hindu festivals. Paluskar also developed his own notation system and wrote books on music theory and collections with compositions in different *ragas*. Conversely, he promoted the inclusion of devotional songs (*bhajans*) in the concert repertoire as well as the singing of nationalist songs, especially ‘Vande Mataram’ (on which more later). In 1911, Paluskar founded another music school in Bombay, and it was from here that, after his death in 1931, his disciples under the leadership of Vinayakrao Patwardhan established the Gandharva Mahavidyalaya Mandal to promote the foundation of affiliated schools with a uniform music curriculum, examinations and degrees governing them all. In 1946, this became the Akhil Bharatiya Gandharva Mahavidyalaya (All India Music University Board), an institution that today coordinates the

numerous affiliated music schools set up throughout northern India and which has about 100,000 students sitting examinations every year.

Although use of the term 'Hindu music' at that time was probably not intended to be sectarian as it would be today and may have meant much the same thing as Hindustani music does now, 'it must nevertheless have alienated Muslims to some degree' (Kippen 2006: 55). This is all the more likely because Muslim rule and the *ustads* were increasingly blamed for its decline. In chorus, Hindu nationalists generally adopted beliefs of superiority about the antiquity, complexity and, indeed, spirituality of 'Hindu music'. A sideshow in this process, facilitated by modern print culture, was the growing visual dominance in society of musical images of Hindu gods, such as Krishna playing the flute, Saraswati the *vina* and Shiva as the 'Cosmic Dancer' Nataraj. Above all, however, the agenda of Hindu national music reforms clashed with the *ustads*' study and teaching methods. The notated compositions and overall urge towards musical standardization undermined the diversity of the oral versions in circulation, and sometimes preserved in the hereditary musicians' notebooks. Although the example of Bhatkhande testifies to the latent relationship between the quest for modern scientific knowledge and opposition to Muslim musicians, it simultaneously shows that what happened was part of a complicated socio-cultural configuration. Hindu reformers mainly wanted to be modern and to belong to their times, but it was impossible for them to predict the future results of their initiatives. Nonetheless the ascendancy of a dominant Hindu identity in Hindustani music led not only to the retreat of an important domain of shared music and affective experience but consecutively also to the marginalization of the *ustads* in modern music institutions.

## Institutional Marginalization

In 1926, together with Rai Umanath Bali and Thakur Nawab Ali Khan, Bhatkhande founded the Marris College of Music in Lucknow.<sup>8</sup> As honorary secretary, Rai Umanath Bali would run the College's day-to-day affairs for some three decades. He was an ardent nationalist affiliated to the Indian National Congress and viewed the College as a national effort.

Furthermore, when he wrote down its goals in 1926, he particularly insisted on freeing knowledge about Hindustani music from the grip of ‘illiterate’ hereditary musicians and proposed

[...] to (1) revive old and ancient art of music and to introduce it to high society, which from the last 60 years has fallen in the hands of illiterates; (2) to arrange for new *raga* productions on scientific and systematic lines; and (3) to collect and preserve the great masterpieces of the art now in the possession of illiterates. (Katz 2017: 110)

Thus, from the very beginning, Marris College was imagined as a modern national institution, and elements that appeared as ‘unscientific’ to its founders, its financiers and, over time, its teachers had to be removed.

It can be assumed that, in his use of the term ‘illiterates’, Bali meant the Muslim hereditary musicians. For example, the great majority of the performing musicians at Bhatkhande’s five All India Music Conferences, which preceded and led to the foundation of the Marris College, had been *ustads*. Although David Trasoff’s argument that they ‘were kept segregated from the “respectable” classes’ (Trasoff 2010: 337) most likely did not account for the most celebrated Muslim musicians, one could nonetheless argue that Bhatkhande and others, mostly Hindu music reformers, to a certain extent used the Conferences to scrutinize the *ustads* in a ‘respectable’ setting. Likewise, in the first decade of its existence, the College was heavily dependent on Muslim hereditary musicians as teachers,<sup>9</sup> who were repeatedly praised for their art, but ultimately it did not invest in them. On the contrary, in 1931, while looking back at the College’s first four and a half years in operation, Bali wrote: ‘In short, this institution is meeting the keenly felt need of turning out properly and scientifically trained music teachers from amongst the respectable classes’ (Katz 2017: 110). At the same time, the College became increasingly Hindu-centric, for instance, by celebrating Hindu holidays in a grand style and later appointing Hindu teachers from Benares (*ibid.*: 122–3). By 1940, then, a radical shift in the ratio of Muslim to Hindu teachers took place, although as Max Katz has recently stressed:

The marginalization of Muslim hereditary musicians and the ennobling of middle-class Hindus [...] was a nearly inevitable consequence of the ideological base on which the College was founded, and thus should not be ascribed to the bias or prejudice of any specific individual. (Ibid.: 127)

At the Partition of British India in 1947, a great number of Muslim musicians left for Pakistan, especially from Punjab and Delhi, and those who had decided to stay on in independent India now increasingly (had to) represent(ed) themselves as ‘secular’ Muslims, a point I return to later in this chapter. More importantly, and perhaps predictably, the institutional marginalization of the *ustads* became more open, to begin with at All India Radio (AIR), which for decades was the largest organization employing musicians. Under B.V. Keskar, Minister of Information and Broadcasting (1952–1962), AIR hired thousands of musicians as regular or part-time employees. Keskar was nonetheless a convinced Hindu nationalist and a resolute follower of the reforms of Bhatkhande and Paluskar. By and large, he sought to reassert Hindu cultural influence in Hindustani music by purging the ‘Islamic influences’ which, he argued, had led to its ‘eroticisation’ and its drifting away from its ‘spiritual’ core. While he believed that the state of Indian music had been waning under both Muslim and British rule, he particularly blamed Muslim musicians for this. In his view, the *ustads* had ‘appropriated and distorted the ancient art, turning it into the secret craft of exclusive lineages, the *gharanas*, and, ignorant of Sanskrit, divorced it from the religious context of Hindu civilization’ (Lelyveld 1996: 55). In Muslim hands, he continued, music was no longer ‘spiritual’ but had become the special preserve of ‘dancing girls, prostitutes and their circle of pimps’. It was therefore hardly surprising that respectable Hindus had turned away from it in disgust (ibid.). As to be expected in this ideological context, Keskar mainly wanted to employ musicians at AIR with a qualification from one of the modern music institutions. With the help of Paluskar’s student Vinayakrao Patwardhan and Bhatkhande’s disciple S.N. Ratanjankar, he developed an elaborate audition and selection system whereby musicians were graded as A, B or C on the basis of a brief performance and their knowledge of music theory. Only some of the most famous musicians, both Muslims and Hindus, did not have to go through this. As a matter of fact, in line with their

overall civilizing mission, the British had established AIR in 1936 partly to cultivate good taste among Indian audiences, and the efforts of Keskar, Patwardhan and Ratanjankar should undeniably be seen as a continuation of this moral ideology. Although many *ustads* obviously made their way on to AIR, the point is that in doing so they not only had to perform in a disciplined manner in a recording studio, to some extent they also had to adapt their ways of music-making to those propagated by Hindu music reformers.

While *ustads* were thus more or less marginalized at Lucknow's Marris College, AIR and Paluskar's schools, they were, as expected, expelled entirely from Benares Hindu University (BHU). Formerly known as Central Hindu College, BHU had been a centre for the dissemination of Hindu nationalist ideas since its foundation in 1916. The Theosophist Annie Besant, who was actually the President of Indian National Congress in 1917–1918, had established Central Hindu College in 1898, and for a long time it was closely linked with the Theosophical movement. As is commonly known, Theosophists generally played an important role in the making of Indian nationalism, especially because they propagated the 'spirituality' of the Hindu (and Buddhist) traditions as superior to Western 'materialistic' civilization (van der Linden 2013: 16, 18–20). BHU's College of Music and Arts was founded in 1950 and headed until 1957 by Paluskar's disciple, Omkarnath Thakur (1897–1967). Besides being an influential teacher (formerly at the Gandharva Mahavidyalaya in Lahore and at his own music school in Bombay), Thakur was a celebrated singer who performed widely in India and Europe. As a steadfast Hindu nationalist, however, he urged his Indian audiences to shout 'Jai Shri Ram' (Victory to Lord Rama) after his recitals (Dasgupta 2006: 3862). Thakur generally scorned Bhatkhande's work and his system of *raga* classification in particular. Hence, between 1938 and 1963 he himself published six influential textbooks titled *Sangitanjali*, which dealt with the theory and practice of *ragas*. On the whole, Thakur believed in a golden age of 'Hindu music' and declared that Hindustani music practice had to reflect the ancient Sanskrit music treatises. His student Prem Lata Sharma, who from 1966 onwards led India's first Department of Musicology at BHU, did the same (Powers 1992: 19, 49). That said, like

Paluskar, Thakur continued to teach and sing compositions by Muslim hereditary musicians (Dasgupta 2006: 3862).

To different degrees, Marris College, Paluskar's schools, BHU and other modern musical institutions cultivated a 'Hindu cultural sphere' (about BHU, see Slawek 2007: 507). Almost all students and, eventually, teachers were Hindus and, over time, these institutes also delivered an ever-growing number of Hindu professional musicians, teachers and informed listeners, many of whom were women. Indeed, in contrast to what has been repeatedly argued (Bakhle 2005: 253; Neuman 2014: 288; Slawek 2007: 508), institutional music education was successful in producing Hindu professional musicians. A number of Paluskar's students became celebrated singers, including his own son Dattatreya Vishnu Paluskar, Vinayakrao Patwardhan, Omkarnath Thakur, Narayanrao Vyas and B.R. Deodhar. Likewise, under the directorship of S.N. Ratanjankar between 1928 and 1957, Marris College produced Balasaheb Poochwale, D.T. Joshi, Chinmoy Lahiri, Dinkar Kaikini, Sumati Mutatkar, V.G. Jog, K.G. Ginde and S.C.R. Bhat. Some may argue that these musicians do not belong to the very best performing artists and that, on the contrary, those who do were trained within long-term personal teacher-disciple relations known as *ustad-shagird* or *guru-shishya*, away from modern institutions. Yet, it should be emphasized simultaneously that in the twentieth century, and especially since Indian independence, it became increasingly difficult to learn in this traditional way, and that only a few of those who did eventually so also succeeded as concert musicians. To a great extent, therefore, post-1947 references to the traditional teacher-disciple relationship belong to the realm of 'romantic' recollection. Moreover, the comparison remains generally out of place because, as with Western conservatories, institutional music education in India only aims to provide a basis for further musical development.

In any case, Bhatkhande and Paluskar, and their disciples in particular, created a network that led to a highly influential sense of historical continuity in musical institutions, canonical compositions, teaching methods and so on. The curriculum developed by Bhatkhande and Ratanjankar was adopted by all the universities with Hindustani music departments and at numerous music colleges and schools. Indeed, there is no doubt that, through his writings, system of *raga* classification and music

notation system, which generally replaced all other existing systems, Bhatkhande had a definite influence on modern Hindustani music teaching and practice, including indeed on traditional learning and performing. As Daniel Neuman has emphasized, although generally *ustads* 'would be loath to acknowledge much of anything from Bhatkhande', they nonetheless occasionally appeal to him as an authority 'when they feel the need to look learned or corroborate a claim' (Neuman 2014: 289; cf. Dasgupta 2006: 3862). In addition, among other things, music recordings, radio performances, the modern concert format and music tours to the West led to greater professionalization and standardization in Hindustani music.

Conversely, the 'Hinduization' of the oldest extant festival of Hindustani music in India, the Harballabh Festival (since 1875) in Jalandhar, Punjab, may be mentioned in relation to the marginalization of Muslim musicians. The festival's origins are associated with the death of Swami Harballabh, whose guru had taken over the site, which was originally a Muslim Sufi shrine. Although it is not clear whether the festival was merely a continuation of the earlier celebrations of the Sufi saint, the majority of the performing musicians were initially Muslims. Yet, partly due to Paluskar's involvement at the beginning of the last century, what was originally a music fair and an impromptu gathering changed into a modern annual music conference and concert event with admission charges. Furthermore, Paluskar himself not only popularized the *khayal* singing style over that of *dhrupad*, which was earlier the dominant genre at Harballabh, but generally also turned it into a festival of Hindu devotional songs (*bhajans*) with his own disciples, among whom were Omkarnath Thakur, Vinayakrao Patwardhan and Narayanrao Vyas, as main performers over time (Kapurja 2018: 27). Needless to say, fewer Muslim and Sikh musicians and audiences attended the festival over time, especially since Indian independence.

Yet, as I have already remarked, many Hindu musicians, including most of those mentioned so far, continued to study with Muslim musicians, although often only temporarily. While as a result musical knowledge from different lineages was more or less maintained, one could simultaneously argue that it was partially—and, once again, largely unintendedly—'Hinduized', in the sense of being taken away from the *ustads*

and appropriated into a reformist musical idiom and/or in a modern institutional setting. One most significant result of this process was the emergence of a whole new generation of ‘respectable’ female singers from a Hindu middle-class and generally upper-caste background, especially in Maharashtra. For example, two of the greatest female singers of the first half of the twentieth century, Kesarbai Kerkar and Mogubai Kurdikar (the mother of the eminent singer Kishori Amonkar), studied with Alladiya Khan. Together with Hirabai Barodekar (the daughter of Abdul Karim Khan), Gangubai Hangal and others, they subsequently paved the way for Dhondutai Kulkarni, Manik Bhide, Veena Sahasrabudde, Padmavati Shaligram, Ashwini Bhide-Deshpande and others, away from singing at private gatherings (*mehfils*), as was common for women of previous generations, to public concerts. The point, of course, is that the great majority of the female singers, and often dancers, at these *mehfils* were unacceptable as role models for middle-class Hindu women because they belonged to the courtesan class and were Muslim. Thus, due to Hindu national music reforms and the overall ‘civilizing’ morality of elitist Hindus, these courtesans, known as *tawaiifs* and *baijis*, and indeed their male accompanists on the *sarangi*, of whom the great majority were Muslim too, were stigmatized and marginalized during the early twentieth century. In fact, one of the first policies of AIR after Indian independence was to ban singers and musicians associated with courtesan culture and indeed anyone ‘whose private life was a public scandal’ (Lelyveld 1996: 57).

## The ‘Secular’ *Ustad* at a Time of Hindu Nationalist Majority Politics and Violence

From the final decades of the nineteenth century onwards, Hindu majority politics became progressively dominant in the north Indian public sphere in the context of processes of modern state formation. Among other things, the growing use of essentialized census categories of religious communities and the foundation of religious-nationalist political parties, such as the Muslim League and Rashtriya Swayamsevek

Sangh, not only led to the assertion of antagonistic Hindu and Muslim identities, but periodically also to Hindu violence against Muslims. In fact, Muslims were confronted with the pairing of anti-Muslim chauvinism and music in society as well. Best known are the ‘music before mosque riots’, which generally occurred in the major cities after ‘the deliberate display of a musical procession, usually accompanying a Hindu festival, in front of a Muslim place of worship, causing offence and, very often, violence’ (Lynch 2012: n.p.). The following commentary from *The Times of India* for 10 October 1924, about a riot during the celebration of the Hindu Durga Puja festival in the greater Calcutta area, is illustrative of the way in which music had attained an antagonistic kind of power. After a group of Hindus had gathered outside a mosque, one anonymous journalist wrote, ‘[S]tone-throwing was indulged by the Mahomedans within the mosque ... [and the] Hindus *retaliated* by playing band and music’ (ibid., emphasis in original).

Similarly, the use of music during the Ganapati festival in Maharashtra led to confrontations between Hindus and Muslims. The Hindu nationalist Bal Gangadhar Tilak (1853–1920) almost single-handedly reinvented the Ganapati festival, from a devotional one celebrated by families in honour of the popular elephant-headed god Ganesh (or Ganapati), Shiva’s son, into a political one, rejoicing at Hindu nationalist glory. Music was not only central to the reinvented festival; it also included songs with anti-Muslim lyrics. One song, for example, asked of participants: ‘What boon has Allah conferred upon you, that you have become Mussalmans today? Do not be friendly to a religion which is alien, do not give up your religion and be fallen’ (ibid.: n.p.). Another participant straightforwardly asked for action: ‘Disturbances have taken place in several places, and Hindus have been beaten. Let all of us with one accord exert ourselves to demand justice’ (ibid.: n.p.). On the whole, Tilak’s Ganapati festival was a direct attack on syncretic religious practices. While formerly Hindus used to participate in the Muharram celebrations, Tilak now asked them to boycott this Muslim festival, ‘offering Ganapati as a new, and divisive, alternative’ (ibid.). No doubt all this changed the way in which Hindus and Muslims saw each other. In pre-colonial times, Muslims hardly worried about music near mosques, and the standing of Sufism in South Asia was undeniably important. However,

the Muslim socio-religious reformers of the Deobandi Movement (founded in 1867) and the closely related Tablighi Jama'at Movement (founded in 1926) explicitly came to denounce music and dance, as well as Muslim participation in Hindu festivals. In doing so, they too undermined the syncretism of north Indian music.

The coupling of Hindu violence and music in attacks on Muslims continues to this day. Peter Manuel has described the importance of anti-Muslim songs in the Ram Janmabhoomi (literally, Ram's birthplace) campaign. In 1992, this campaign led to the demolition of the Babri Masjid (a mosque built by Mughal Emperor Babar) in Ayodhya by Hindu nationalists and was followed by widespread Hindu-Muslim violence across north India (Manuel 1996: 131–133). Likewise, the tomb of the earlier mentioned Faiyaz Khan in Baroda was heavily desecrated during the Gujarat anti-Muslim pogrom of 2002. Most recently, north Indian DJs have become very popular for their mixing of music with anti-Muslim and anti-Pakistan texts, mainly from movie dialogues and political speeches. The music is often played close to Muslim neighbourhoods and mosques to hurt members of the community and contains passages such as (in relation to Ayodhya) 'Child Ram, we'll go and build the temple there itself ... Scram, men of Allah! The birthplace has been surrounded. Make your mosque somewhere else, this is Ram Lalla's establishment' or (in relation to Pakistan) 'The saffron flag will fly in Pakistan too, you and your father will scream the name of Ram' (Anshuman 2018). This craze can be traced to Pankaj Kushwaj, better known as DJ Lucky, who has a channel on YouTube with over 830,000 subscribers. He took the internet by storm with millions of views, especially of his 'Modi' and 'Yogi' mixes with explicit anti-Muslim and anti-Pakistan texts (i.e. Prime Minister Narendra Modi and Yogi Adityanath, the current Chief Minister of the Indian state of Uttar Pradesh, who both are Hindu nationalists).<sup>10</sup>

In general, Hindu anti-Muslim violence was and is accompanied by rallying cries such as 'Vande Mataram' (Glory to the Mother[land]) and 'Hindu Dharm ki Jai' (Glory to the Hindu Religion). The first of these was actually sung by Paluskar and Omkarnath Thakur, among others, at nationalist gatherings and anti-colonial rallies, and it deserves further attention because of its controversial history as India's 'national song'.

Originally 'Vande Mataram' was part of Bankim Chandra Chatterjee's *Anandamath* (1881), India's first and celebrated, but anti-Muslim, novel (Bhattacharya 2003; see also Julius Lipner's less absolute interpretation of Chatterjee's anti-Muslimness in Chatterjee 2005). Ever since, many Muslims and 'secular' Indians have objected to the song's opposition to Islam, particularly because they regarded some of its verses as idolatrous for addressing Mother India as a Hindu goddess. Ultimately, just the first two verses of 'Vande Mataram' were declared to be India's 'national song', as distinct from the national anthem, 'Jana Gana Mana'. The remaining two verses only refer abstractly to one's mother and motherland; they do not mention any Hindu deity by name, unlike later verses, in which comparisons are made between one's country/mother and the goddesses Durga and Lakshmi. From the very beginning, nonetheless, the attempt to secularize 'Vande Mataram' was resisted by Hindu chauvinists, especially those in the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh. They not only coined the slogan, 'If you want to live in this country, you will have to sing "Vande Mataram"', they also attempted to have the song sung in public schools as an expression of loyalty to the Indian nation. Since the rise of the Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party (the political party of Narendra Modi) in the 1990s, new productions of 'Vande Mataram' have become immensely popular. One 1998 clip sung by India's most famous Bollywood playback singer, Late Mangeshkar, achieved cult success. It is rather belligerent, full of marching, horseback riding and hosting of the flag in different Indian settings. Most interesting are its subtitles, which describe India's population as '700 million below the age of thirty!', followed by 'and home to 150 million peaceful Muslims'. In this way, then, Muslims are excluded from their rightful Indian citizenship and instead categorized as pacified others inhabiting the nation.<sup>11</sup>

Undeniably, this wider context of the joining up of Hindu nationalism and music influenced how Muslim musicians envisaged their position in society, especially in independent India. In fact, during the 1950s and 1960s, Indian Muslims largely voted for the 'secular' Indian National Congress, but afterwards they voted for whichever party that appeared to cater to their interests best. As a minority community that sometimes, and since the 1990s increasingly, is perceived to have sympathies with India's constant military and political enemy, Pakistan, Indian Muslims

obviously could not go in for confrontational politics. Unlike Hindus, moreover, they were not in a position to link music with identity politics, especially because the *ustads* soon realized that their position as musicians would be even worse in Pakistan. For this reason, the famous singer Bade Ghulam Ali Khan returned to India in 1957. On the whole, the Congress Party, which ruled India continually between 1947 and 1977, and for some periods thereafter, propagated secularism and harmony between Hindus and Muslims, and the idea of a syncretic Hindustani music tradition (see particularly Manuel 1996) undoubtedly suited this context. In any case, the government supported leading Muslim musicians by sponsoring concerts, Festival of India tours abroad, scholarships, awards and so on. Over time, concerts in the West became an important source of income, if not the main one, for leading *ustads*, as well as Hindu musicians, and overall this global relationship had a great impact on the Hindustani music scene. The *dhrupad* genre, for instance, had fallen from popularity in India until Western interest from the mid-1960s onwards provided it with both support and audiences.

Since the early twentieth century, and over the last fifty years in particular, Hindustani music has increasingly been performed in a 'Hindu cultural sphere' in both India and abroad. Hence, when *ustads* in independent India chose to invoke Hindu deities publicly (being a devotee of Saraswati, the Hindu goddess of learning, in particular) or religious practices, as they often did when talking about the music being performed, they now regularly did so on a stage 'with the accoutrements of Hindu ritualism, such as incense holders, marigold garlands, and oil lamps' (Bakhle 2005: 261). At present, typically, the *sarod* master Amjad Ali Khan welcomes his audiences with the Hindu greeting *namaskar*, clarifies the significance of the teacher-disciple relationship by using the Sanskrit *guru-shishya* instead of the Urdu *ustad-shagird* and explains the *alap* or slow introduction to a *raga* as similar to Hindu yoga meditation. The point is that all these obligatory celebrations of a 'Hindu cultural sphere' acknowledge that the *ustad's* 'personal faith was a matter of no consequence' (Subramanian 2006: 4649). On the contrary, as if the social meaning of the terms 'Hindu' and 'Muslim' had not changed since the imperial encounter, numerous Muslim musicians began to speak openly about their supposed 'Hindu' ancestry. Members of the Dagar family,

who are leaders of the *dhrupad* genre, repeatedly emphasized their Brahmanical status (ibid.: 4650), and Aminuddin Dagar specifically described his art as ‘an offering to the feet of *bhagwan* [God]’ and compared the *alap* to ‘the ritual decoration (*sringar*) of a Hindu deity’s image’ (Manuel 1996: 126). Of course, syncretic remarks like this have a long history among Muslim musicians, but one cannot deny that their meaning has become more politicized in modern times. In fact, Muslim musicians occasionally adopted secular surnames, as in the case of the renowned *sitar* player Jamaluddin Bharatiya.

Then again, even if high-profile *ustads* such as Ali Akbar Khan, Bismillah Khan, Vilayat Khan and Amjad Ali Khan found their way as ‘good secular Muslims’ (Subramanian 2006: 4649) on to stages in India and around the world, the present-day Indian Muslim community at large constitutes a poor, backward and relatively uneducated minority of around 200 million (still the world’s second largest Muslim community or ‘nation’ in numbers). Unquestionably, other Muslim musicians not only had far fewer opportunities, but also had more direct experience of Hindu discrimination and oppression—which indeed, as Ahmad and van der Veer emphasize in this volume, has extremely exacerbated under Narendra Modi’s prime ministership. I have already mentioned the examples of the Muslim courtesans and *sarangi* players, and Max Katz has recently shown how something similar happened to *ustads* in Lucknow (Katz 2017), yet this important topic definitely awaits further research. Actually, the relationship between Hindus and Muslims in the context of the ‘Hinduization’ of Hindustani music is largely comparable to what happened musically between Sikhs and Muslims in North India. Since its foundation by Guru Nanak (1469–1539), the Sikh tradition had a great number of Muslim musicians (*rababis*) performing devotional music (*kirtan*) from the Sikh Holy Scripture, the *Guru Granth Sahib*. Yet, due to the Singh Sabha reform movement, which led to the ‘classicization’ of *kirtan* and the definition of ‘Sikhism’ at large, these *rababis* were discarded during the early twentieth century (van der Linden 2013: Chapter 5).

## Conclusion

This chapter has shown that the stigmatization and subsequent marginalization of the Muslim *ustad* has a historical genealogy that began at the latest in the late nineteenth century. It has discussed how Hindu national music reforms in the context of processes of modernization and state formation led to the ‘Hinduization’ of north Indian art music and how this undermined the social position and authority of these Muslim hereditary musicians in different ways. Although this was anything but a straightforward trajectory, at least three developments were decisive. Firstly, in the wake of the work of British Orientalists like William Jones, Hindu reformers reclaimed a golden age of ‘Hindu music’ that had supposedly declined under Muslim rule, for which, prejudicially, they blamed the ‘illiterate’ *ustads*. Secondly, as part of this very same process of reviving ‘Hindu music’, reformers of the Paluskar variety in particular highlighted the devotional function of north Indian music, which again they assumed to be pre-Muslim. Hence, musical performance, regardless of the genre (*dhrupad*, *khayal* and so on), essentially came to be understood as a form of Hindu religious practice, with students, for example, worshipping their teachers as spiritual gurus in a manner characteristic of *bhakti* (i.e. emotional devotionism). To some extent, no doubt, European Orientalist thought, including in its Theosophical incarnation, played a role in this nationalist endeavour to recover the ‘spirituality’ of ‘Hindu music’. Thirdly, and probably most significantly, Hindu national music reforms, and especially those introduced by Bhatkhande, directly challenged the ‘unscientific’ knowledge and teaching practices of the *ustads*. Above all, this was because, over time, processes of professionalization led to the theory, performance and teaching of Hindustani music being standardized. The main results of this complex socio-cultural configuration were the marginalization of Muslims in modern music institutions and the fact that Hindustani music was increasingly studied and performed in a ‘Hindu cultural sphere’ largely consisting of middle-class Hindu audiences. In addition, Muslim musicians were faced with a growing link between Hindu chauvinism and music in society, which surely also affected their lives and public appearances. No doubt Hindu

nationalist majority politics was crucial to the marginalization of the *ustads* in all its subtle and complex manifestations.

To conclude, music and ‘religion’ are often similarly conversed about, especially in terms of their ‘spirituality’ and transcendence. Yet, as I have argued in this chapter, they are both closely embedded in society and formative in its construction, negotiation and transformation in terms of both consensus and conflict. Moreover, while the two generally overlapped in pre-modern ‘tradition’, they were equally defined and institutionalized as part of modern national ‘cultures’. Thus, while the transfer from Muslim ‘minority’ community to Hindu ‘majority’ community in modern Hindustani music-making remains unique in global history, this does not mean that it cannot be compared with the cases I mentioned in the first paragraph or similar ones. For instance, underlying the dominant propagation of European classical music over Asian ‘traditional’ art and folk music by imperial (Christian and later communist) Russians and imperial (Confucianist and later communist) Han Chinese is the same complex process as that I have discussed in this chapter, namely of (scientific) rational and moral and/or civilizing modes of thought that become institutionalized under the banner of nationalism and are backed by the state power of a majority community. Indeed, the global history of music not only shows the datedness of the scholarly use of the category of ‘religion’, it above all reaffirms the continuing importance of knowledge of the imperial encounter for a historical understanding of the making of national ‘cultures’ in the global age.

## Notes

1. Peter van der Veer’s writings (for an overview, see Ahmad, this volume) have given me joy and food for thought since my student days. To a great extent this chapter supplements his work on ‘religion’ and nationalism in India (and beyond) and I dedicate it to him with gratitude. Further, thanks to Irfan Ahmad and Jie Kang for their supportive comments on an earlier version of this chapter and for making this volume happen in the first place.

2. In India, a distinction is made between north Indian ‘Hindustani’ art music and south Indian ‘Karnatak’ art music. Although there is a great deal of overlap between the two traditions, especially in music theory, Hindustani music mainly developed in a different manner because of the far more dominant interaction between Indic and Persian–Central Asian music in the north. During the colonial period, however, the two traditions underwent similar processes of musical standardization and institutionalization in the context of nationalism and wider processes of state formation.
3. Of course, my criticism of the use of the concept of ‘religion’ equally accounts for its binary opposition ‘secularity’. Instead of taking these two nineteenth-century categories as a starting point and accordingly argue that ‘religion’ continued to be alive and kicking in a modern world which never became ‘secular’, it seems more worthwhile to me to try to understand what actually happened. About the ambiguousness of the use of the binary opposition ‘religion’ versus ‘secularity’—and indeed the definite importance of majority community nationalism and state power—in modern India, see also Ahmad and van der Veer in this volume.
4. Two famous Hindu students of Abdul Karim Khan, for instance, are Sawai Gandharva (who later taught Bhimsen Joshi and Gangubai Hangal) and Kesarbai Kerkar (although she studied for only eight months with him during her youth and eventually became a disciple of Alladiya Khan).
5. Allauddin Khan was the guru of Ravi Shankar and the father of two other celebrated north Indian art musicians, Ali Akbar Khan and Roshanara Khan. The latter later became a Hindu so as to marry Shankar and renamed herself Annapurna Devi.
6. Players of the *rudra vina*, a large plucked string instrument originating in the Indian subcontinent.
7. The narrative of the deterioration of Indian music and the ‘illiteracy’ of its performers can also be found in pre-colonial Persian sources; yet, it was the British colonial writers and Hindu national music reformers who specifically endowed it with anti-Muslim significance.
8. In 1966 it was renamed the Bhatkhande Music College of Hindustani Music, and since 2000 it has been known as the Bhatkhande Music Institute Deemed University.

9. Unsurprisingly so, of course, because for a long time Lucknow, especially under Nawab Wajid Ali Shah, was the cosmopolitan Islamic cultural capital of north India and a hub for music and dance.
10. 'Modi' mix: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pTs7qb1Xfso>; 'Yogi' mix: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8-PIDCQs9jU>.
11. 'Vande Mataram', sung by Late Mangeshkar (music: Ranjit Barot/ directors: Bala and Kanika), 1998: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=c6PHJg9D\\_Sk](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=c6PHJg9D_Sk).

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# 5

## Muslim Bare Life in Contemporary India

Irfan Ahmad and Peter van der Veer

### Introduction

On 22 June 2017, only a few days before the festival of Eid marking the end of the fasting month of Ramadan, Junaid headed to Delhi to buy new clothes and gifts for himself and his family. A day earlier, he had completed reciting the Qur'an in the mosque in his native village, Khandawali, Ballabgarh, in the state of Haryana. Aged fifteen and son of a taxi driver, Junaid was a *hafiz*, one who has memorized the whole Qur'an, and a student at a madrasa in Nuh, Haryana. To mark the completion of the Qur'an having been recited in the special Ramadan prayer, a community feast was held on 21 June. Junaid also received gifts in cash.

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With ₹1500 (19 euros) in his pocket and accompanied by his brother Hashim (aged 19) and two teenage village friends, next day he joyfully went for shopping to Delhi. In Delhi, they also visited the famous Jama Masjid, where they took a selfie standing on its steps with the Jama Masjid pictured in the background (Junaid loved kite flying and cricket, in which he excelled in batting, bowling and fielding alike). At 5 pm they boarded the Mathura-bound local train to return home.

Little did Junaid realize that it would be his last journey, and of his life itself. The ‘mob’ in the train lynched him to death. As the train stopped at Okhla station, twenty or so people entered the coach Junaid, Hashim and two of his friends were in. One of the new passengers pushed Junaid so hard that he fell on the floor. When Junaid’s friends objected, they too were shoved. Soon, Hashim’s skullcap was tossed up. They insultingly held his beard. When they protested, the mob started assaulting the four boys. Left with no option, they tried to get off the train. They were not allowed to. Instead, the ferocious assaults against them continued.

What was the reason for this repeated assault? It was plain: they were Muslims. They were humiliated and labelled ‘terrorists’, ‘traitors’, ‘Mullē [Muslims]’, ‘beefeaters’, ‘Pakistanis’ and ‘circumcised [*katullē*]’. ‘Not just the men but every passenger in the coach shouted at us, saying, “*Mullē, Kattālē sālē. Mārō sabkō. Mārō. Mārō* (these Muslims, the circumcised sister-fucker ones. Kill them all. Kill them. Kill them)”, recalled Shakir, another brother of Junaid whom Hashim had telephoned for help. Shakir and his friends reached Ballabgarh station, their destination. Instead of letting the four boys alight, the mob pulled Shakir inside the compartment as well. As the train gathered speed, so did the attacks. The mob led by Naresh began to stab the Muslim boys. Junaid received 55 stab wounds, Shakir 17 and Hashim 3. At Asaoti station, the mob threw the boys out of the train. As the blood-drenched body of Junaid lay on the platform in the lap of his brother (see Fig. 5.1), who, himself drenched in blood, begged for help, the crowd silently watched like full-time spectators. According to the officials, no police were present on the scene. In another account, the police stood nearby but chose to ignore what was happening.

Located less than thirty kilometres from the scene of Junaid’s murder, neither the Twitter-savvy Prime Minister Narendra Modi nor any of his



**Fig. 5.1** Photo of Junaid ‘lynched on a train, moments before his death’. (*New Indian Express* 2017)

ministers in New Delhi posted any tweet, let alone paid a visit to the family of the victims of this horrific communal attack.<sup>1</sup> Not only was any word of ‘sympathy’ for the victim lacking, in other cases the victims themselves were arrested and jailed. In November 2017, Mohammad Umar, a cow trader, was lynched in Rajasthan. Two of his associates, Tahir and Javed, managed to save their lives by fleeing. Both were arrested and jailed on charges of cow-smuggling (Afreen 2017; *Asia Times* 2018).

Returning to Junaid, this lynching was not the first since Modi won power in 2014. A series of such lynchings has been organized throughout India (Rath 2017), from Jhajjar, Jharkhand, Dadri, Latehar, Una and Alwar to Hapur, the last one occurring in June 2018 (there were more cases of lynching after 2018 at the end of which we finished writing this chapter). In Hapur, a video of the crowd lynching Qasim (the victim) and the latter’s crying out for water in the scorching heat and help was widely shared on social media. Most incidents of lynching were based on a rumour that Muslims were either planning to cook beef or smuggling cows, deemed holy by most religious Hindus (Korom 2000). So frequent has lynching become that it has been practically normalized, no longer igniting outrage, as the first lynching probably did. According to one study, sixty incidents of cow-related violence and lynching took place

between 2010 and 2017 in which 84 per cent of victims were Muslim, and 97 per cent of the attacks took place after Modi became prime minister in 2014 (Sharma 2018).

To expect Modi to speak out against lynching is probably illogical because he himself is wedded to the religious cause of 'cow protection' and opposed to dietary freedom—a phrase absent from the public debate. During the election campaign that made him prime minister, he promised to protect cows. Deploying the dog-whistle politics of the so-called pink revolution—beef meat looks pink—he vowed to stop it by branding Muslims as foreigners (Ahmad 2019: 29). Modi's religious impulse is not limited to cow protection; he views himself becoming prime minister as a case of divine election, as do his followers such as Lokesh Chandra, chairperson of the Indian Council for Cultural Relations, according to whom Modi is an avatar of God; indeed, 'Modi is God' (*First Post* 2014).

What does the lynching of Junaid and many others, as well as the religious Hindu politics, mobilization and ideology that undergird it, say about democracy in India? Does it signify what Atul Kohli (2001) calls the 'success of India's democracy' and others describe in such superlative terms as 'Indian exceptionalism' (Jayal and Mehta 2010: xxi), 'genius' (Ganguly 2011), 'wonder' (Varshney 2012), 'uniqueness', 'model democracy' (Kesavan 2007), 'unique model', 'next superpower' (Banerjee 2012) and so on?<sup>2</sup> Our key argument here is that we should critically examine such self-congratulatory accounts of Indian democracy in order to lay bare its religiously ethnic and divisive character. When liberal democracy, or its variant of deliberative democracy inspired by Jürgen Habermas (Gutmann and Thompson 2004), is presented as the only political telos (Fukuyama 1992) for humans everywhere, we should remind ourselves that liberalism has rarely been democratic and democracy scarcely liberal (Foucault 2008: 321). Violence, legal or otherwise, is not simply an occasional aberration in a democratic polity, but an integral part of democracy (Ahmad 2019; Keane 2004; Mann 2005). With the nation as its lynchpin, both liberalism and democracy are anchored in notions of territorial and ethnic unity (Brennan 2016; Ross 2006). Obviously we are not arguing that democracy be abandoned in favour of monarchy or some other 'un-modern' form of politics. On the contrary, we aim to restore democracy, in the words of the classicist political theorist Josiah

Ober 2008: 3–4; ff.; Ahmad 2014), to its ‘original meaning’. The original meaning of *demokratia* in Greek was the ‘capacity to do things, not majority rule’. In contrast to *monarchia* (*monos*: one or solitary) and *oligarchia* (*hoi oligoi*: the few), *demokratia* makes no reference to number but connotes a collective body of people. Since nowhere is any people monolithic, the capacity to do things must be diverse and multiple, like cultural goals and political idioms. It was the critics of democracy in Greece who argued, pejoratively, that democracy and majority rule were the same. In some ways, our argument resonates with Jacques Derrida’s (2004, 2005) notion of democracy in that we are concerned more with its potentiality than its bare actuality.

One of the great achievements of the anti-colonial struggle in many parts of the world, including India, was the formation of nation states in which the people were no longer subjects of colonial rule, but citizens with political rights guaranteed in constitutions. In South Asia, the post-colonial struggle immediately led to the formation of two nation states, India and Pakistan. India called itself a secular nation state, while Pakistan was a ‘homeland for Muslims’. The Partition of British India following widespread communal violence immediately draws attention to the particular origin of the Indian citizenship regime. Its secularism was primarily geared to the avoidance of further escalations of religious conflict. Though combining both *jus soli* and *jus sanguinis* (Roy 2006; Ahmad 2020), in the wake of Partition Indian citizenship was largely construed as based on birth on Indian soil and the sense that Hindus were more ‘sons of the soil’ (*bhūmīputra*) than others continued to loom large in the political imaginary. Until the recent ascendancy of the Hindu majoritarian Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), however, although Muslims (and also Christians) might have been regarded as second-class citizens with less claim on India than Hindus, their citizenship tended not to be disputed (cf. Zamindar 2010). However, the recent introduction of the Citizenship Amendment Act of 2019 (CAA) offers all undocumented migrants from Pakistan, Bangladesh and Afghanistan access to Indian citizenship provided they are not Muslim. The attempt to distinguish between different categories of aspiring citizens—specifically Hindus versus Muslims—goes back to Partition, but in its new form it will extend beyond refugees and migrants to the entire population. It will be aided by the

introduction of a National Register of Indian Citizens (NRIC), making it likely that Muslims will be subjected to more frequent demands to prove their citizenship status and to higher standards of documentary evidence to do so. In short, citizens will be distinguished from mere residents on Indian soil. Following the classical Greek distinction between political life and bare life, on which the philosophers Hannah Arendt (1958) and Giorgio Agamben (1998) have commented, the removal of Indian Muslims from political agency can be interpreted as their being reduced to 'bare life'. Agamben (1998: 4) linked Arendt's understanding of this classic distinction to Carl Schmitt's (1922 [1985]) Nazi doctrine of sovereignty and the development of concentration camps in Germany during the Second World War. We find Agamben's theory of the nature of sovereignty inspiring, but do not want to extend his analysis of Nazi totalitarianism to the postcolonial situation in India (see Mbembe 2003; Jarvis 2014). Nevertheless, the current construction of detention camps in India is an ominous sign of the possibilities that are being explored by the Hindu nationalists. Although these legal changes do mark a substantial escalation of anti-Muslim politics in India, we argue that this is an intensification of what had already been present over a much longer period. To pursue our analysis, we focus on religious violence and religious conversion in the making of the Hindu nation. Against the dominant tendency in scholarship that treats contemporary Hindutva as a new phenomenon, we maintain that it represents continuity with the past rather than a rupture from the past. For instance, contemporary lynching in the name of 'cow protection' has roots that are traceable back to the nineteenth century (Pandey 1992; van der Veer 1994; cf. Banerjee 2006). Likewise, the subject of religious conversion, including the current vulgate or neologism of 'love jihad', has a longer genealogy. Our main thesis is that majoritarian religion continues to be a strong vector of nationalism, which informs and is informed by religious violence as much as religious conversion. Probably nothing demonstrates it so starkly as the reduction of minoritized Muslims to the status of bare life in contemporary India, which is manifest, inter alia, in the Muslim camps that were set up after anti-Muslim political violence such as the pogroms in Gujarat in 2002 (Ghassem-Fachandi 2012) or the anti-Muslim violence in Muzaffarnagar in 2013 (Ahmad 2013b).

## Secular Sovereignty

The sovereign nation state should be the guarantor of religious freedom and the protector of its citizens. Multilateral treaties and international organizations may put pressure on nation states and even, in extreme cases, may intervene in them, but the nation state is still the sovereign power. In many nation states, the state faces the problem of accommodating different religious groups while at the same time unifying the people into a nation, two aims of the nation state that are contradictory. This predicament is made worse by the politics of numbers in modern electoral democracies in which religious groups are reconfigured as majorities and minorities. Political theory (Rawls, Habermas, Taylor) argues that a secular polity is necessary if religions are to be treated equally and neutrally, but even liberal secularists have to admit that if freedom of religious expression is allowed, more often than not religion will play an important role in mobilizing and antagonizing people in the democratic process. However, electoral democracy is not the only cause of communal unrest, since even in communist regimes, like China and Vietnam, where we do not have electoral democracies, the aim of national unity confronts the aim of accommodating religious diversity.

Since the nation state and nationalism are crucial in religious and political practice everywhere, it is clear that what the philosopher Charles Taylor (2007) calls ‘the Secular Age’ extends beyond the West. The point he makes is that the secular frames the religious everywhere in societies that have the nation-state form. Asia is no exception here. According to Taylor, the rise of the nation state and its mobilization around a national identity have been crucial in developing a secular modernity. He proposes that a national society becomes ‘reflexive’, in analogy with the reflexive individual, in taking a critical stance to itself and devising ways of transforming itself (Taylor 2016: 14–15). According to Taylor, ‘we become modern by breaking out of “superstition”. The enchanted world was one in which spirits and forces played a big role. The enchanted world was one in which these forces could cross a porous boundary and shape our lives, psychic and physical’. In Taylor’s view, we are now ‘buffered’ selves, no longer porous selves. This line of reasoning is obviously influenced by

Max Weber's notion of *Entzauberung* or 'disenchantment'. In our view, Weber and Taylor, like a whole tradition of Enlightenment thinkers (including Rawls and Habermas), miss the magic of the modern state, which was much better captured by Zygmunt Bauman (1989). Not long after Weber died, Germany saw the rise of a movement that did anything but disenchant society. One of its striking aspects was that it mobilized society to grasp state power. After succeeding in this, it effected a thorough rationalization of its bureaucratic apparatus in order to execute commands in a state hierarchy that had synthesized state institutions and party organization. There is nothing *entzaubert* (disenchanted) about this: it is precisely state power that is magical, assuming one can still use that term if one rejects the evolutionary distinction between magical and rational thought (van der Veer 2014).

Nationalism uses founding myths, ritual and symbolic politics, exorcism and the unpredictable behaviour of charismatic leadership (all also elements of religion) in its mobilization of the people. Nationalism crosses the divide between democracies and communist regimes—that is, between, say, Thailand, India and Sri Lanka on the one hand and Vietnam and China on the other. It also crosses the divide between the Global South and the Global North, since it is clear that nationalism is as much part of British or American politics as it is of Indian or Chinese politics. The magic of the state is often interpreted as populism, but the definition of 'populism' is vague (Samet 2019). It is probably better to understand populism as one possible face of democracy (Laclau 2005). One needs to see that by definition any nation state rests on the idea that the people legitimize the state. The question is who belongs to 'the people' and, more importantly, who does not belong. The related question is how relations between minorities and majorities are ethnically and/or religiously defined. Despite what Charles Taylor suggests (2007), modern people are not 'buffered selves', but 'porous'.

Much of the discussion on multicultural jurisdictions deals with different rights of citizenship that allow religious groups to maintain their own normative universes. This literature shows the tensions that surround individual and group rights (Kymlicka 1996; Shachar 2009). The discussion often focuses on women's rights in traditional religious groups. In India, the most controversial judicial and political case illustrating this

issue has been that involving a woman called Shah Banoo, in which in 1985 the Supreme Court decided that, following their divorce, her Muslim ex-husband had to pay her alimony. Afterwards, under pressure from Muslim groups arguing that the decision was against Muslim law, the Congress government enacted a law shifting the onus of maintaining her on to her relatives or the Waqf Board (Board of Muslim Endowments). Hindu nationalists who argued that this was a politics of ‘appeasement’ of the Muslim minority challenged this politically. However, in this chapter we do not want to focus on the discourse on rights, but on the protection of bare life in the face of religious violence, and then examine the issue of conversion from one religion to another.

## Religious Violence

India is generally seen as a secular state, although the constitution did not originally proclaim it as such. It was only in 1976, during the Emergency from 1975 to 1977 in which democracy was suspended, that Prime Minister Indira Gandhi inserted ‘secular’ and ‘socialist’ in its preamble (Singh 2005: 909; Rudolph and Rudolph 2013: 51n16).<sup>3</sup> The landmark assessment of the secularism of the Indian state is D.E. Smith’s *India as a Secular State* (1963). He distinguishes three interrelated sets of relationships concerning the state, religion and the individual: (1) religion and the individual (freedom of religion); (2) the state and the individual (citizenship); and (3) the state and religion (separation of state and religion). Here we are only concerned with the first. Article 25 (1) deals with individual freedom of religion: ‘Subject to public order, morality and health and to the other provisions of this Part, all persons are equally entitled to freedom of conscience and the right freely to profess, practice and propagate religion’. In an elaborate comment on Smith’s book, the legal scholar Marc Galanter (1998: 258) observes that Smith understands freedom of religion not as freedom of religion *as it is* in India, but freedom of religion *as it ought to be*. He rightly points out that the constitution, and even more Smith’s analysis, shows the spirit of Hindu reformism and the essential interventionist mission of the modern developmental state. The secular state intervenes in religious practice (e.g., by prohibiting the practice

of untouchability). As Galanter succinctly puts it: 'Secularism cannot be entirely neutral among religions when it undertakes to confine them to their proper sphere' (259), which, of course, according to the theory of modernization would be the result of a process of secularization. This was indeed what important nationalists such as Jawaharlal Nehru and Muhammad Ali Jinnah hoped for. However, while there is secularism in India, there is hardly secularization. Nehru and others attempted to portray India as a civilization with tolerance as one of its typical qualities. However, in fact there is no unified civilization but a wide variety of Hindu and Muslim traditions. Communities are not often tolerant of each other in themselves, but attempt to be self-regulating while perceiving others to be in the spirit of hierarchical relativism. It was only in the colonial period that such arrangements became impossible, as religious communities came under the sway of colonial regulations and anti-colonial nationalism. In the imperial encounter, Hinduism was turned into a majority religion by nationalism, while as a public religion it cannot easily be relegated to the private sphere of individual belief (van der Veer 2001).

A pertinent question posed by the political scientist Partha Chatterjee (1998) in this context is whether secularism is an adequate, or even appropriate, basis on which to meet the political challenge of Hindu majoritarianism. It is indeed striking that the Hindu nationalists of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), the ruling party in India today, have not attacked the secular state as such. Instead, they have argued that their rivals in the Congress Party are 'pseudo-secularists', suggesting thereby that they themselves are the genuine secularists.<sup>4</sup> How does one square that suggestion with the undeniable fact that the current Prime Minister of India, when the Chief Minister of Gujarat, condoned and allegedly orchestrated the pogrom against Muslims in Gujarat in 2002? The answer to that question lies in the fact that the institutions of the secular state (police, judiciary) can be used to marginalize and even victimize a religious minority. Secularism in itself is not sufficient to protect the Muslim community in India.

To what extent does the Indian state protect Muslim and Christian lives? It is important to recall that the origins of the Indian secular state lie in a civil war between Hindus and Muslims that led to the Partition of India, the displacement of around 14 million people and the loss of hundreds of thousands of lives. The traumatic series of events from which

Pakistan and India emerged continues to bedevil relations between Pakistan and India, as well as between Hindus and Muslims within both countries. A number of wars followed Partition, the most important of which was the 1971 war in which Bangladesh seceded from Pakistan. In India, a system of riots has emerged especially around elections, mostly targeting Muslims (Brass 2003), despite Congress-led governments since Partition having guaranteed a measure of state protection to the Muslim and Christian minorities. During the 1980s, Hindu nationalists using religious symbolism to mobilize voters on anti-Muslim issues drastically changed the political game in India (van der Veer 1994).

If we consider what is happening in India today under the Modi government as a 'crisis of democracy', we must realize that, rather than a 'crisis', it is the product of democracy. The BJP has achieved democratic success by instigating violence. Showing yourself to be a strong leader by killing scores of people is a not uncommon strategy for electoral success. Obviously nationalism (like religion) acquires some of its hegemonic force by claiming that it only 'awakens' or 'revitalizes' what is always already present, namely a unified, if latent, nation. It constantly fights against both its internal and external enemies, as well as against processes of fragmentation. Region, language, history, caste and class, as well as religion, can all be used both to unify and to diversify. Their alignments are conjectural and are sometimes produced by political strategies, as in the case of the Mandal (caste reservations) versus Mandir (temple) opposition. In fact, in 1984 itself not much attention was given to the campaign to liberate what Hindus believed was Ram's birthplace. More important was the assassination of Indira Gandhi by her Sikh bodyguards (now widely regarded as martyrs by the Sikh community) and the widespread attacks on Sikhs that followed (Das 1985). Today Sikh separatism does not get the headlines, but it is useful to remind oneself of the jigsaw movement of nationalism, with one religious nationalism following another.

The dominance of the BJP in recent elections in India has fostered the idea that secularism in the country has declined and religious nationalism increased. This is partly but not entirely the case. It should be remembered that the Congress Party has been able to keep many factions and directions, including religious nationalist forces, contained within itself for the longest period of time. Mahatma Gandhi himself, despite his

strong religious views, could be called a Hindu secular nationalist, but his broad understanding of nationalism got him killed by Hindu nationalists who were strongly anti-Muslim and therefore rejected Gandhi's attempts to create religious unity.

The history of Hindu–Muslim violence in independent India is a foundational trauma in Indian politics. Events in Gujarat in 2002 illustrate this perfectly. A train bringing Hindu activists back from Ayodhya to Gujarat partly went up in flames near the train station at Godhra. Chief Minister Narendra Modi declared without any evidence that the train had been burned in a pre-planned attack and that the Godhra incident was not a communal incident but ‘a one-sided collective violent act of terrorism from one community’ (quoted in Ghassem-Fachandi 2012: 59). In his account of the pogrom in Gujarat in 2002, Parvis Ghassem-Fachandi has argued that Modi deliberately turned the incident into an act of terrorism against the Hindu nation by a minority that did not belong and allegedly had allegiance only to the enemy state of Pakistan.

When a state turns a blind eye towards pogroms against a religious minority, the nature of citizenship is severely threatened, as are the conditions for religious freedom. More generally, besides direct violence, Muslims have become second-rate citizens in India. The Sachar Report, presented by Justice Rajindar Sachar to the Indian Parliament in 2006, has detailed the widespread discrimination against Muslims in India, but Indian governments have done little to nothing to change this.<sup>5</sup> The Congress government took some half-hearted measures to address some elements of the Report. However, as the Chief Minister of Gujarat, Modi blocked the granting of scholarships to Muslim students on the ground that such a step would be tantamount to minority appeasement. After becoming prime minister, his government removed the Sachar Report from the public domain altogether.

## Religious Conversion

The other issue we want to briefly discuss is that of religious conversion. When Amartya Sen received the Noble Prize for Economics in 1998, Ashok Singhal, the then president of the Vishwa Hindu Parishad (World

Hindu Assembly), commented that awarding this Nobel Prize to Sen was a Christian conspiracy against the nation and that Sen's developmental strategy to promote literacy was connected to Christian missionary efforts to proselytize under the cover of education. For Hindu nationalists, Christian schools are covers for religious conversion.

Although India's constitution allows the propagation of religion, it is generally felt by Hindus that Hinduism has grown from the soil of India, while Christianity and Islam have come from outside India and are foreign to it. They can only exist in India thanks to proselytization among the native Hindu population. According to this view, conversion happened by the sword in the case of Islam and by material inducement under Christian colonialism. In 1977, the Indian Supreme Court ruled that the right to propagate was not necessarily a right to convert, that it was forbidden to convert minors and that adult Hindus wishing to convert had to provide the civil authorities with an affidavit.

It should be recalled that the upsurge in radical Hindu nationalism in the 1980s began with the highly publicized conversions to Islam of untouchable communities in and around the village of Meenakshipuram in South India in 1981.<sup>6</sup> The 'secularist' government of Indira Gandhi warned against the disuniting of India through 'Gulf money', inducing untouchables and tribals to leave the Hindu fold. One can see here already the slippage between 'national unity' and the 'Hindu fold' by a secularist government. Hindu nationalists went a step further in 1983 by organizing a revivalist campaign called the Ekatmata Yajna, lasting over a month and consisting of processions, rituals and rallies all over India and Nepal (van der Veer 1994). This was followed in 1984 by the campaign to remove mosques from places where allegedly there had been Hindu temples before. The anxiety about conversion and the politics of numbers connected with it was and continues to be one of the prime sources of Hindu nationalist mobilization. It is within this wider discourse that we can fully account for the 1990s Hindutva slogan: '*Hindu ghata dēsh bata* (as Hindus decrease, nation will break up)' (quoted in Ahmad 2011: 465).

This anxiety is directed not only at Muslim conversion, although the growth of the Muslim population is always the greatest worry, but also at Christian conversion. In one grisly accident, the Australian missionary Graham Staines and his two minor sons were burned to death by a Hindu

Bajrang Dal (youth wing of the VHP) mob. One of the leaders of the mob was later sentenced to death, a sentence that was commuted to life in prison by the Odisha High Court, a judgement that was upheld by the Supreme Court. In its verdict, a Bench consisting of Justice P. Sathasivam and Justice B.S. Chauhan expressed their opinion as follows: ‘In the case on hand, though Graham Staines and his two minor sons were burnt to death while they were sleeping inside a station wagon at Manoharpur, the intention was to teach a lesson to Graham Staines about his religious activities, namely, converting poor tribals to Christianity’. They went on to add: ‘It is undisputed that there is no justification for interfering in someone’s belief by way of “use of force”, provocation, conversion, incitement or upon a flawed premise that one religion is better than the other. It strikes at the very root of the orderly society, which the founding fathers of our Constitution dreamt of’ (*The Hindu* 2011). This led to an uproar in the English-language newspapers, and in a rare move the Supreme Court expunged the remarks from the verdict. The opinions in the Supreme Court, however, show clearly how natural the anti-conversion sentiment seems to have become even to the Indian judiciary. It is striking that explicit anti-conversion laws are enforced in Jharkhand, Arunachal Pradesh, Odisha, Madhya Pradesh, Chhattisgarh, Gujarat and Himachal Pradesh, all of which have sizeable tribal populations that are deemed particularly vulnerable to conversion to Christianity. On the other hand, conversion of tribals and untouchables to Hinduism is an explicit strategy of Hindu nationalists, who do not face any judicial obstacles being placed in their way. This shows how much the idea that Hinduism is the national civilization of India has come to be common sense in both juridical and political circles. By the same token, Islam and Christianity are not fully national.

The recent controversy over ‘love *jihad*’—that is, alleged conversion by stealth through love—connects individual choices to betrayal of the nation. In the last decade or so, terms such as ‘love jihad’ or ‘Romeo jihad’ have entered the Indian political vocabulary. Rumours, also spread by the media, claim that Muslim ‘fundamentalists’ have plans to convert Hindu women through fake romance (hence the neologism ‘love *jihad*’). In many places such as Delhi, Uttar Pradesh, Kerala and Karnataka various fronts working for Hindutva have organized meetings and

distributed pamphlets against the danger of ‘love *jihad*’, according to which Muslims receive foreign funding to lure Hindu girls into marriage. In some instances, cases have even been filed in courts against ‘love *jihad*’ (Gupta 2009). Yogi Adityanath, the current Chief Minister of Uttar Pradesh and head priest of a famous temple in Gorakhpur, turned the slogan ‘love *jihad*’ into a rallying cry. He urged Hindus ‘to convert a hundred Muslim women to Hinduism for every one Hindu woman converted to Islam’. In 2005, as a Member of Parliament, he stated: ‘I will not stop until I turn the UP and India into a Hindu *rashtra* [Hindu state]’ (in Harriss et al. 2017: 6). Under Adityanath’s administration, ‘anti-Romeo squads’ were dispatched to parks, colleges and public places to monitor and stop romantic encounters among young people (*Washington Post* 2017). The bogey of love *jihad* should not merely be construed as a tool to gain power, as most Indian analysts are wont to claim: it is as much about state power as about the disciplining of interpersonal relations. Such concerns about Hindu girls on the part of Hindu populists resonate with *Mein Kampf*, according to which, ‘[t]he ... Jewish youth lies in wait for hours on end, spying on the unsuspecting German girls he plans to seduce’ (in Pulzer 1964: 58); similarly, ‘uncouth Jews seduc[e] ... innocent Christian girls and thus adulterat[e] ... their blood’ (in Shirer 1960: 26).

## Conclusion

To return to the lynching of Junaid with which this chapter began, in March 2018 the High Court of Haryana and Punjab granted bail to Rameshwar Dass, a health inspector in the Municipal Corporation in Delhi and one of the five accused of attacking Junaid. According to the High Court, the dispute between the accused and Junaid, his brothers and friends was ‘only regarding the seat sharing and abuses in the name of castes and nothing more’. ‘There is neither any evidence of any pre-planning’, the Court further observed, ‘to cause [the] incident deliberately or intentionally or to create disharmony’. The High Court’s judgement was completely at variance with the trial court, which, in framing the charges, had observed as follows: ‘so far as [the] accused

Rameshwar is concerned, he was accompanying main accused Naresh from the very beginning and had abused the victims in the name of their religion and they also did not allow the victim to alight from the train, and when the quarrel ensued, accused Naresh [and] caused injuries with sharp-edged weapon' (Ahsan 2018). Paddy Hillyard's phrase, the 'violence of jurisprudence', which demonstrates the falsity of the dualism between law and violence to stress how the law is constitutive of state violence (Singh 2007: 16–17), is perhaps best suited to account for the legal case over Junaid's lynching. The violence of jurisprudence goes hand in hand with the violence of the dominant majoritarian culture against the minoritized culture Junaid belonged to such that judiciary sanctifies the cultural violence that the lynching aimed to unleash and achieve.

After Junaid was lynched, the inhabitants of his village stopped displaying any sign of Muslim identity, such as wearing the *kurta pyjama* or sporting a beard and began wearing only 'normal' garments—shirts and trousers—so that they looked like 'normal' Indians (Apoorvanand 2018). The state-sanctioned project to discipline Muslim bodies and dietary choices by terrorizing them is no longer being concealed, if ever it was. The Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) leader Indresh Kumar went on record to say that 'lynchings across India would cease if people just stopped eating beef' (*The Quint* 2018). The fact of Kumar issuing open threats is part and parcel of the much larger project of Indianization through Hinduization or vice versa (Ahmad 2013a) and need not be stressed. It is clear how other Muslims too, beyond Junaid's village, have been terrorized into giving up their way of life simply to maintain themselves as bare lives. In fact, the disciplining and Hinduization of Muslim bodies and culture began, in accelerated forms and with new modalities, with the first lynching in Pune of Mohsin Shaikh by Hindu Rashtra Sena activists (Parth 2018) only a day after Modi became prime minister. Any analysis of democracy that fails to account for the terror that democracy generates to coerce its people to submit to its violently ethnicized national culture is, to say the least, unsatisfactory.

Gyanendra Pandey (1999: 609) has aptly examined the constitution of the 'nationalist core' and the banality of terms such as 'nationalist Muslims' as opposed to the stark absence of its logical equivalent,

‘nationalist Hindus’. He also dwells on such terms as ‘secular’, ‘inclusive nationalism’ on one hand and ‘exclusive Hindu nationalism’ on the other. He rightly notes that the so-called inclusive nationalism of Nehru and his ilk—‘composite nationalism’ being its signature phrase, supposedly distinct from Hindu nationalism—is no different from the majoritarian concept of a nation centred around Hindus and Hinduism either. The former also operated in the same universe, Pandey notes, though it ‘refused to give the same sort of primacy to the Hindu element in India’s history and self-consciousness’.

In a landmark publication, Christophe Jaffrelot has examined the evolution of Hindu political thought on democracy from the interwar period until the 1990s. For Hindu nationalists such as Aurobindo, democracy was born in India and was only making a comeback through the British. The locus of democracy was ‘ancient’ India; the absence of any mention of medieval India and Muslim traditions is stark. Radha Kumud Mukherjee, a professor of history aligned with the Hindu Mahasabha, saw flashes of democracy in Pali texts. Congress leaders such as Purushottam Das Tandon articulated such views in the debates in the Constituent Assembly. Although RSS leaders such as M.S. Golwalkar, Thengadi (who founded the Bharatiya Mazdoor Sangh in 1955) and K.N. Govindacharya were sceptical of democracy, especially in its British parliamentary form, they too supported democracy because Hindus were in the majority. In this respect, there were more similarities than differences between Gandhi and Hindu nationalists. Jaffrelot concludes that Hindus have been enthusiastic about democracy ‘because it is a convenient way to establish the domination of the majority community’ (Jaffrelot 2000: 354, 358, 362–63).

In this context, an observation by Nirmal Kumar Bose (1961 [1929]: 82), an anthropologist, Bengali interpreter and secretary to Mohandas Gandhi, is worth quoting: ‘In this new form of organized action, Gandhi tacitly formed an alliance with those who believed in a restoration of Hindu domination’. This domination was premised on a marriage between nation and democracy to form a national democracy in which nationalism was not a political programme but, as Aurobindo argued, rather ‘a religion that has come from God; Nationalism is a creed which

you shall have to live' (cited in Heehs 2008: 146). Well over a century after Aurobindo, Baba Ramdev, a yoga guru and partisan of the BJP, rearticulated it: 'There is no God greater than the nation ... Nation-god is the greatest god. ... Those who do not love the soil, culture, civilization, and the people of the nation have no right to stay in this country' (in Kanungo 2019: 126). The idea that this nation is based on a religiously communitarian, as opposed to a procedural majority was central not only to outspoken Hindu nationalists or Vallabhbhai Patel but just as much to Nehru himself. After the Constituent Assembly passed Patel's motion, which scrapped all provisions for the political representation of minorities, an elated Nehru congratulated his deputy, Patel, for bringing up the 'historic motion' to discard the 'evil' of communitarian political representation. Nehru revealed his majoritarianism when, opposing a few members of the Assembly who viewed democracy as giving an equal voice to each citizen (Jha 2003), he advocated pure majoritarianism, saying twice in the span of a single minute that in a democracy 'the will of the majority ... will prevail'. Neither majority nor minority in Nehru's usage was procedural or issue-based; it was communitarian because he made his long, fervent speech soon after the motion scrapping provisions for the political representation of religious minorities was passed (Ahmad 2019: 17–18).

Majoritarian mobilization in parliamentary democracies can crystallize around religious antagonism. Majoritarianism can, however, also be found in non-democratic, communist systems like China's. In both cases, a civilizational nationalism that selectively includes and excludes groups in society is a danger to the principle of religious freedom. Therefore, the core problem is nationalism, not so much democratic elections.

Philosophers like Seyla Benhabib (2004) think that the problem of the stranger can be solved in a legal manner by making citizenship rights inclusive, but Muslims in India are citizens already. It is the application of the concept of civilization as the foundation of the nation that excludes groups in society and turns them into strangers who are at the nation's mercy. It scarcely requires repeating that civilization, contrary to its academic usage, is here defined religiously, monolithically and with reference to a national territory.

## Notes

1. Description of Junaid's lynching drawn from Ahmad (2017), Lakhani (2017), Sagar (2017) and Siddiqi (2017). Literary-social commentator Ziya Us Salam's book (2019) is perhaps the first to offer a highly readable and evocatively descriptive portrait of recent lynchings. Kar's (2006) book, focused on West Bengal, is a sociological-statistical account of different types of lynching.
2. This is also manifest in a book written by S.Y. Quraishi (2014), former chief election commissioner of India, the title of which reads: *An Undocumented Wonder: The Great Indian Election*. Also, see foreword by Gopalkrishna Devdas Gandhi, diplomat-politician and grandson of M.K. Gandhi, in Quraishi's book.
3. The insertion of 'socialist' and 'secular' was effected through the forty-second amendment. The original 1949 Constitution mentioned secular only once, in relation to 'the right freely to profess, practice and propagate religion'. Article 25 (2a) clarified that this right would not stop the state from 'regulating or restricting any economic, financial, political or other *secular* activity which may be associated with religious practice' (Government of India 1949, italics authors'). Thus, after the 1976 amendment, the word 'secular' appears twice (Government of India n.d.). The undated Constitution includes amendments made until 2005.
4. Political scientist Rajeev Bhargava (2010a: 270; 2010b) and others maintain that, in calling Congress secularism 'pseudo', because it allegedly does the 'appeasement' of Muslims, the BJP-RSS nonetheless uses the language of secularism. This is taken to be the strength of secularism. Partha Chatterjee (1998: 346) thus writes that, in describing their adversary as 'pseudo-secular', the BJP is 'conceding thereby its approval of the ideal as such of the secular state'. Zoya Hasan (2010: 199), however, warns against drawing any 'conclusion that the BJP is not opposed to secularism'. More recently, in the public discourse secularism itself has been attacked, for instance, by BJP-aligned filmmaker-actor Vivek Agnihotri. In a talk show during the 2014 elections, he said: 'The grassroots reality is that the moment you say "secular", people think you are anti-Hindu' (NDTV 2014). Also note how the BJP-RSS now sarcastically dubs 'secular' as 'sickular'. After Modi's victory, Ashok Singhal said: 'whatever demand the Hindu community has been making ... can all be fulfilled under the Constitution' (Chawla 2014). If the mere

insertion of ‘secular’ in the constitution is a guarantee of minorities’ lives and cultures, then how should we explain the retention of ‘socialist’ in the constitution and the simultaneous relentless expansion of capitalism?

5. <http://www.minorityaffairs.gov.in/reports/sachar-committee-report>.
6. A recent case is the conversion of a Dalit scholar and founder of Dalit Camera, a digital platform, to Islam. Previously known as Ravichandran Bathran, his new name is Raees Mohammed (2020).

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# Part III

China



# 6

## Rising, Becoming, Overcoding: On Chinese Nationalism in *The Wandering Earth*

Jeroen de Kloet

*It is unreasonable to expect humans to stay reasonable.*

The Wandering Earth  
Frant Gwo (2019)

*One thus always needs to ask: who are the people? And what is the difference between 'the old' and 'the new'? While the nation sees itself in the singular, it is always in the plural.*

Peter van der Veer (2016: 149)

### Rising

The third decade of the twenty-first century commences with mayhem: a series of fires in Australia that threatened to burn infernally and eternally, the global COVID-19 pandemic and on top of that the climate crisis. For

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the more dystopian-inclined among us, these may well be signs that the end of the world as we know it is almost here, with health hazards and ecological disasters ringing the death knell for the Anthropocene. Fear is rising: of contamination, of destruction, of the unknown, of the Others. Ironically, the alleged origin of the virus was traced to a country that is seen as a rapidly rising global power—China. Amidst this sense of deepening crisis, I was reminded of a Chinese blockbuster screened in the winter of 2019, *The Wandering Earth* (流浪地球).<sup>1</sup> In this movie, now also available on Netflix, we are catapulted forward forty years, to the year 2061. Directed by the Beijing Film Academy alumnus Frant Gwo (Guo Fan) and loosely based on a novel by Liu Cixin (2000), the story revolves around the imminent danger that the earth will collide with Jupiter. The movie follows a group of astronauts kept busy by guiding the earth away from an expanding sun. The name of their spaceship is quite telling: *Made in China*. The earth has by then been transformed dramatically: cities have disappeared, the earth is frozen and its population has largely been wiped out by catastrophic tides. People now live in underground cities. The looming collision with Jupiter, portended by devastating earthquakes, can only be avoided by igniting Jupiter's atmosphere of hydrogen.

The movie, its sci-fi aesthetics, its dramatic plot and its bombastic soundscape not only bring to mind a strong Hollywood genre style, they also conjure up memories of a host of Hollywood sci-fi successes, particularly the 1998 release *Armageddon* with Bruce Willis in the leading role. This movie features a Texas-size asteroid that is predicted to collide with planet earth in eighteen days. While I was watching *The Wandering Earth* in a Beijing cinema, I was also thinking about this earlier version and about how in general I considered science fiction a Hollywood-inflected genre. I felt somehow guilty for this denial of coevalness, for positioning the Chinese movie as a late and seriously delayed translation of a Hollywood blockbuster. And I was not alone. Indeed, both within and outside China, *The Wandering Earth* has been criticized as a rather soulless imitation of Hollywood. In the *New York Times*, Ben Keningburg (2019) wrote:

It certainly proves that the Chinese film industry can hold its own at the multiplex: It is just as awash in murky computer imagery, stupefying exposition and manipulative sentimentality as the average Hollywood tentpole. Although the film is based on a story by Liu Cixin, it draws on a barely digested stew of planetary-cataclysm movies, with the eco-catastrophe and invasion films of Roland Emmerich serving as the most obvious spiritual guides.

And in his review of the movie, David Ehrlich (2019) claimed:

It's almost impressive how Gwo manages to rip off *Gravity*, *Sunshine*, and *2001*, all at the same time. His secret: blending those inspirations together with such frantic cuts that he completely loses sight of why those movies were worth stealing from in the first place.

The cultural arrogance in both reviews smacks of the worn-out mantra that the West is the best—and will be well into the future. This view seems to be shared in China as well, as a professor at the Beijing Film Academy confided in me: 'It's just a copy. We need to make movies with Chinese characteristics; we need our own style.' As I show later in this chapter, others already saw Chinese characteristics in *The Wandering Earth*, praising its humanistic underpinnings and reading the movie as articulating quite a specific Chinese worldview. In both cases—whether negative or positive, whether it is considered a copycat or a specifically Chinese product—what I want to emphasize is that a comparative framework is at work. *The Wandering Earth* is read vis-à-vis Hollywood science-fiction cinema. For the critics the Chinese rendition is certainly a bleak translation at best, whereas in the more upbeat assessment, we detect a desire for a cultural product with Chinese characteristics. It is this comparative approach, in relation to thorny issues of cultural translation and their cultural and geopolitical ramifications, that I wish to engage with in this chapter.

This brings me to the work of Peter van der Veer.<sup>2</sup> In his 2016 book *The Value of Comparison*, he makes a forceful argument for a comparative approach, rightly claiming that we are always driven by comparisons, which we nonetheless tend to ignore. Our ignorance makes us favour

locally specific studies that are ‘concerned with cultural specificity and cultural diversity’ (van der Veer 2016: 3). The book’s strong plea for a comparative approach comes with a simultaneous warning against falling into the trap of producing generalizations. He observes: ‘there is a seemingly indomitable desire for generalization in the name of theory that has revived an interest in large data-sets’ (ibid.: 4). Van der Veer’s scepticism of such generalizing approaches is quite wonderfully evident in his critique of the work of the Sinologist Edward Slingerland. Using a distant ‘scientific’ reading of religious texts, according to Slingerland, it is wrong and orientalist to assume a direct opposition between Western dualistic thought and Chinese holistic thought (2013). This makes Slingerland conclude that for comparative research ‘an approach that combines the best knowledge and practices of both the sciences and the humanities is our most promising way forward’ (2013: 43–44). Van der Veer could not disagree more. It is worth quoting him at length, as his words attest to his lucid, critical and, dare I say, rather direct, presumably Dutch way of engaging with his interlocutors, a way I admire and that has inspired me a lot.<sup>3</sup> He writes:

Surely, the sinologist Edward Slingerland is right in arguing that the early Chinese did not lack concepts of body-mind dualism but wrong in thinking that he has found anything significant. His entire debunking of the way leading sinologists have assumed a radical difference between Western (dualist) and Chinese (holistic) thought by showing evidence that dualism also existed in China is based on the premise that one can reduce complex arguments to simple oppositions. (Ibid.: 6)

This is a devastating critique eloquently substantiated by showing how the method of distant reading, in combination with ideas about universal human propensities, produce abstract generalizations that indeed have little or no significance. Van der Veer subsequently questions the generality inscribed in totalizing ideologies like nationalism and religion, just as he questions the idea that a Confucian civilization unifies all of China (ibid.: 7).

The point that we are *always* driven by a comparative approach is an important one that is manifested, inter alia, when we use ‘Western’

concepts to analyse 'Asian' realities: we study Chinese rock music, as the genre is haunted by its allegedly Western origin (de Kloet 2010), and for quite similar reasons we watch *The Wandering Earth*, as I have already shown earlier. To cite him again:

there is no escape from comparison when we deal with 'other societies' as historical sociologists or anthropologists, since we are always already translating into Western languages what we find elsewhere, using concepts that are derived from Western historical experience to interpret other societies and other histories. (van der Veer 2016: 8)

Van der Veer's argument for a comparative approach that resists generalizations comes with a plea to treat anthropology as the discipline par excellence. Anthropology is primarily, in his view, 'an engagement with "difference" and "diversity"'; it has a 'fragmentary approach to social life', it opts for holism instead of generalism and it 'has always taken the body (...) as a focal point of the study of society' (ibid.: 9–10). He writes, 'anthropology is highly equipped to engage problems of translation and of bridging different semantic universes. Its contribution is therefore not to utter always the qualifier *but* when social scientists are generalising, but rather to contribute to radically new and open ways of understanding reality' (ibid.: 11, italics in original). It thus comes as no surprise that the first chapter of the book is titled 'The Comparative Advantage of Anthropology'. Now, being somewhat of a 'fake' anthropologist myself (see note 2), I beg to differ regarding this view of disciplinary privilege. In my view, 'fuzzy' fields like cultural studies and cultural analysis are equally well equipped 'to contribute to radically new and open ways of understanding reality'.<sup>4</sup>

In analysing *The Wandering Earth*, I would like to bring van der Veer's comparative, anti-generalist approach together with Rey Chow's writings on cultural translation. In her 1995 essay, which appears as the closing chapter of *Primitive Passions*—a book that has accompanied me throughout my PhD years, just as Peter van der Veer did—she links the work of Walter Benjamin with the cinema of Zhang Yimou. The idea of translation often alludes to a 'true' and 'authentic' original, the translation of which is ideally approximating to the original as closely as possible. An

example of the commitment to the value of the original as the authenticator can be found in an analysis of the subtitles of *The Wandering Earth*, in which one can clearly find this still dominant paradigm. After discussing different types of ‘mistakes’ in the subtitles of the film, Li and Liang conclude:

for translators, the most important thing is to reduce translation errors as [much] as they can. When translating Chinese subtitles, the first ability a translator should possess is to be proficient in both Chinese and English and be familiar with the culture of [the] source language and target language. (2019: 63)

For these authors, it is important that ‘[t]ranslation with high quality [will] effectively disseminate Chinese culture and improve the soft power of national culture’ (ibid.: 63). Clearly, a generalizing comparative logic is at work here, one that denies the complexities and contradictions of both language and culture.

Drawing on Walter Benjamin, Rey Chow warns us against this danger of reifying the origin as the real and most truthful source when analysing cultural translations (I return to this later). The notion of translation refers etymologically not only to tradition but also to betrayal (Chow 1995: 182). ‘It is assumed that the value of translation is derived solely from the “original”, which is the authenticator of itself and of its subsequent versions’ (ibid.: 184). Inspired by Benjamin’s essay on translation, Chow argues instead for an interpretation of translation as ‘primarily a process of putting together. (...) A real translation is not only that which translates word by word but also that which translates literally, depthlessly, naively’ (ibid.: 185–186). Here the words of Deleuze and Guattari suggest a similar approach towards translation; they write:

Translation should not be understood simply as the ability of one language to ‘represent’ in some way the givens of another language, but beyond that as the ability of language, with its own givens on its own stratum, to represent all the other strata and thus achieve a scientific conception of the world. (1987: 62)

Consequently, translations may produce meanings that remain invisible or unspoken in the ‘original’. In Chow’s formulation, ‘[t]ranslation is a process in which the “native” should let the foreign affect, or infect, itself, and vice versa’ (Chow 1995: 189). Translation from one culture to another thus does not ‘presume similarity between or substitutability of the two: translation is not at the service of comparison; comparison is in the service of translation’ (Ahmad 2017: 13). In an earlier publication, also drawing on Chow’s work, I analysed three Chinese cultural products: a hip-hop band, an artwork and a movie. In my analysis ‘the native is infected by the foreign, just like the foreign is infected by the native—thereby polluting the “origin” that has never been pure in itself. A translation consequently transforms and infects, contaminates, as it were—rather than copies—an already and necessarily impure original’ (de Kloet 2007: 135). Van der Veer’s take on translation resonates with Chow’s, as the former sees translation as an interactive and reflexive process (2016: 148).

To summarize: in the time of a rising crisis as well as a rising China—and given the uncanny connection between both risings—the Chinese science-fiction blockbuster *The Wandering Earth* predicts a looming ecological disaster that endangers the future of planet earth. Its aesthetics bring to mind Hollywood’s sci-fi predecessors—as such, the experience of watching *The Wandering Earth* is always haunted by a comparative logic. I connect this aesthetic logic of comparison to van der Veer’s plea for a comparative anthropology. However, I add cultural analysis to that mix, in particular Rey Chow’s ideas about translation, in which the copy can be as complex, fragmented and multifaceted as the alleged original, if not more.

Let us now return to the movie itself and see how this cultural translation, or what some may see as pollution, is played out in its aesthetics and its narrative. As I will show, *The Wandering Earth* translates the sci-fi genre, with its strong imaginary links to Hollywood and China. Despite attempts to claim its Chineseness, such articulations are bound to fail. This fallacy of Chineseness is emblematic of contemporary Chinese cultural practices—which I will, however, read in a rather positive vein.

## Becoming

*The Wandering Earth* is billed as China's first blockbuster sci-fi movie. The privilege of being the 'first' can also be explained by the fact that science fiction was for a long time banned in China—the Communist Party used to monopolize the country's future, in practice as well as imagination, and considered science fiction a potential threat to that monopoly. Following the eco-critical narrative of the movie, it is not Aliens (whether from the United States or the Moon)<sup>5</sup> that threaten the world, but climate change. *The Wandering Earth* articulates different becomings on both textual and meta-textual levels.<sup>6</sup> On the meta-textual level, it is hailed in China as a sign of China becoming on a par with Hollywood; on the textual level, it presents the earth as becoming frozen and barren post-Anthropocene.

My analysis of these processes of becoming is inspired by a question van der Veer poses in the conclusion to his book, one that also serves as the motto that opens the current chapter. Let me reiterate: 'One thus always needs to ask: who are the people? And what is the difference between "the old" and "the new"?' While the nation sees itself in the singular, it is always in the plural' (Van der Veer 2016: 149). Following the translation trajectory, I find it productive to translate this question into notions of time, place and the people. In the ensuing admittedly rudimentary textual analysis, I ask: what does the movie tell us about time, about its locations and about the people—and what kind of comparative, translational logic can we observe here? Van der Veer describes the nation as being always in the plural. Thus, when Benedict Anderson coined the term 'imagined communities' (1991, originally 1983)—and this chapter is also indebted to that phrase for its inclusion of the role of media—it is important to observe that he too writes in the plural rather than singular. But 'who imagines what' is the question posed by Prasenjit Duara in his *Rescuing History from the Nation* (1996: 7). For Duara, the heterogeneity of the nation is undermined by the hegemonic construction of a causal, evolutionary history. In his view, 'national history secures for the contested and contingent nation the false unity of a self-same, national subject evolving through time' (p. 4). While his concern is to rescue history

from the nation, my concern in this chapter concerns the future: how can we rescue the future from the nation? We can do so, I argue, by probing into the comparative logic that is at work in *The Wandering Earth*.

First, time. Set in 2061, the movie shows how planet earth has turned into a desolate, frozen and barren landscape. In an unliveable world, what remains are large underground cities. While the expanding sun endangers the earth, 10,000 engines have been built to help propel the earth further away, and the cities were constructed under these engines. The right to live in one of the 10,000 cities is decided by lottery (a practice banned in the Maoist era but later allowed; cf., He Xiao, this volume). The movie plays with the known and mixes it with the unknown, which resembles existing genre conventions. In the words of Cornea (2007: 4), 'the reader of science fiction is caught between that which exists outside the laws of a known world and that which might be read as a logical extension of the known world'. References to the old are juxtaposed to those of the new. In the opening sequence of the movie, we see astronaut Liu Peiqiang on the beach with his four-year-old son Liu Qi having a BBQ together with the latter's grandfather. The scene evokes a sense of nature, of being at one with the environment, a sense that is imbued with family values. The scene references the 'here' and 'now'. Looking more closely, one sees a steel structure in the background, like a future or somewhere futuristic. And when little Liu Qi and his grandfather look at Jupiter through a telescope, the father explains to them that he is about to embark on a long space mission, only returning the moment they are able to see Jupiter with the naked eye. Seventeen years later this space mission is about to end and Liu Peiqiang should return home around the time of Chinese New Year. The old and known also returns in a sequence of television news images that are presented from known and familiar channels like the BBC, CNN, KNS (Korea), NHK (Japan) and a Russian channel—all reporting on global warming, the approaching sun and the disasters that are looming and will sweep away the cities. Here, the combination of channels creates a sense of worlding, presenting the imminent disaster as a global crisis that cries out for global measures. Hence, a United Earth Government (UEG) has been established, reminiscent of the United Nations. As the voiceover proclaims, 'mankind united as never seen

before'.<sup>7</sup> The engines are meant to propel the earth out of the sun's orbit, a process taking 2500 years.

In oscillating between here and there, between the old and the new, between now and then—in building on highly contemporary ecological concerns around climate change—*The Wandering Earth* plays around with reason, science and technology (cf. Sontag 1966), reworking an imaginable future and thus injecting science fiction with an assumed dose of reality. It is a story of banal cosmopolitanism, the assemblage of multiple screens from networks around the world (though African and Latin American networks remain absent), the establishment of a UEG—all of which attest to a sense of worlding that the movie tries to evoke.<sup>8</sup> The American genre of science fiction is thus translated by a Chinese sci-fi movie in order to articulate a banal cosmopolitanism in which humanity overrules the nation state. At the same time, such translations are fraught with inconsistencies and contradictions; when we look at how place is being articulated and what characters feature in the movie, this global humanism is shot through by strong sparks of Chineseness.

In times of crisis, we thus witness a double move, one towards globalism-cum-cosmopolitanism and the other towards nationalism. When we move back in time from 2061 towards the contemporary period, a similar paradox can be observed in the COVID-19 pandemic. While we are facing a truly global crisis, amplified by the movements of people and thus of viruses, we simultaneously see a retreat to what I, together with Lin Jian and Chow Yiu Fai, have called biopolitical nationalism. Viruses do not have passports, but despite this it is nation states that are competing with one another to control the virus. As we have argued elsewhere, biopolitics is now 'turned into an aspirational category: we want to be controlled, we want to be controlled more and more effectively, and we are angry that some states have failed to do so! Geopolitical entities are ranked according to their governance and containment success' (de Kloet et al. 2020: 639). Thus, as global crises trigger a chauvinistic nationalism, it should come as no surprise also that in *The Wandering Earth* the global goes hand in hand with ample articulations of Chineseness.

Second, place. While the opening sequences perform a sense of worlding, a banal cosmopolitanism, the movie continues in much more confined spaces, of space stations, underground cities, cars and frozen

highways. And it is here that we are again confronted with multiple signifiers of Chineseness. The world may be one planet, but what we see in the movie are individual Chinese who are destined to protect and save it. Here again, one cannot but draw a comparison with Hollywood, in which it is always the U.S. that is summoned to rescue the world. Whereas in the opening sequence we still see other cities like Tokyo and the pyramids in Egypt, during the movie we mostly encounter Chinese(-inflected) sites, places where people play mah-jong and where the 串 (*chuan*) sign indicates the sale of BBQ meat. We see the Central Business District in Beijing literally frozen in time and the broken stadium of the 2044 Shanghai Olympics caught between huge mountains of ice. Textually too, references to Chinese places and Chinese reality are inserted; for example, Liu Peiqiang tells his son Liu Qi that he will be a star in the sky. Now that Liu Qi is old, he says, '[L]ater I realized it was all a lie: in Beijing, there is no star to be seen', a reference to the heavy air pollution in Beijing. At another point, the grandson asks his grandfather, when seeing the remains of the Olympics site, what happened. The grandfather responds, 'This was grandpa's home. A lot of people used to live here. No one cared about the Sun. Everyone was concerned about the thing that is called money. Grandpa couldn't make a lot of money then, but I was happy every day.' The articulation of place—the remains of Shanghai—comes with a critique of the present reality, in which people are obsessed about money. Again, the future is used to critique the present.

The plot's driving force is the longing to return home. And home has two different articulations: home as your family, and home as the nation that is China. The ambivalence or conflation of them both is embedded in the Chinese word for country, *guojia* (国家), which literally means nation (*guo*) and home/family (*jia*). This conflation is, of course, not particularly Chinese. As Irfan Ahmad points out in a comparative study of Islamophobia in Europe and India, 'The fantasy of nation is driven by the idea of an orderly, nice, cosy home where the heart resides and which heart longs for when it finds itself distant from home' (2013: 241). In the apocalyptic narrative of the movie, the protagonists wonder, 'where is our home?' In any case, the way to return is hope: they claim that 'hope is the only way to guide us home'. And there, you have to 'hug your parents' and 'gather with the family'. The fact that the movie was released around Chinese New Year

and that this is also the scheduled moment for Liu Peiqiang to return home in the movie are both nods to the importance of the family in creating a sense of home. That the spaceship is named *Made in China* also comes as no surprise, just as the ubiquitous presence of Chinese flags throughout the movie continues to remind the viewer that this is Chinese science fiction. Thus, family norms continue to be articulated, along with clear markers of Chineseness. This translation of an American genre consequently comes with an eager emphasis on a specific locality, as well as on family values. These values are, of course, anything but typically Chinese; they could equally and easily be part of a Hollywood counterpart. After all, doesn't Bruce Willis also want to return home to his wife and kids?

Third, the people. Family relations are central, and at the end of the movie the father, Liu Peiqiang, sacrifices himself to save humanity. With the exception of just a few other nationalities that appear in the movie (in which national stereotypes are often used, like excessive vodka-drinking Russians claiming that Russian cosmonauts are invincible in space), it remains a predominantly Chinese world. We see little of other places around the globe. The French are audible when talking to Liu Peiqiang, but they are not rendered visible. One character has a mixed background: 'My dad is from Beijing, my mom is from Melbourne'. Others refer to him as a foreigner and ask, 'why is there a foreigner in your unit?' But, he responds, 'who is a foreigner? My father is from Beijing. I am an authentic Chinese.' It is noteworthy that it is patriarchy that grounds national identification. The movie we are watching is about saving the world, but the people it shows doing so are above all Chinese.

In other words, while the framing of a global environmental disaster and references to the establishment of a United Earth Government all gesture towards a banal cosmopolitanism, the places depicted in the movie, as well as its characters, are by and large Chinese. The professor from the Beijing Film Academy, whom I referred to earlier, also confided in me that he felt the movie lacked character development: there was no love story. Furthermore, he thought that characters were too flat to make it a good movie. One can also read this flatness as a way of deviating from Hollywood conventions, as well as being a way to foreground the larger ecological concerns the movie tries to convey. This, then, brings me to my final step in the analysis: how was the movie received in Mainland China?

## Overcoding

At the start of this chapter, I quoted some dismissive reviews from Western film critics. These reviews are overcoded by a belief that the West is the best when it comes to the production of popular culture. What about reviews of the film in China? Van der Veer's warning about the danger of generalizations in pursuing a comparative approach (and, as we already know by now, we are *always* driven by a comparative approach, in particular when studying 'other' cultures) becomes urgent when reading such reviews. When the negative ones are overcoded by a generalizing logic in which the West is framed as the best in the field of popular culture, in China we see this generalizing logic being flipped, producing equally overcoded narratives. Following Deleuze and Guattari (1987: 41), overcoding refers to 'phenomena of centering, unification, totalization, integration, hierarchization, and finalization'. In a way, it is a term that resonates very intimately with van der Veer's notion of generalism. In the case of China, overcoding often involves articulations of what is assumed to be a unified and unifying long history of 5000 years of a civilizational discourse in which Confucius plays the leading role, and a multiculturalist discourse of 55 ethnic minorities all living peacefully together with the Han majority. The overcoding machinery of the state is mapped onto the China Dream, as it is in the constantly recurring narrative of *X with Chinese characteristics*, in which X may be communism, socialism, capitalism, urbanism, modernity, postmodernism and so on. And, as I will now show, X can also stand for science fiction.

The Chinese critic Zou Songlin (2019: 43) hailed the movie for its homecoming narrative:

What Guo Fan has done is to tell a story about Chinese people returning home on the scale of space. At the core of this story is the emotional attachment and attachment to the homeland in Chinese values. Going back home is the core of Chinese culture, which has been related to our farming civilization for thousands of years. We are a land-locked civilization, so it is very different from the western island and maritime civilization. Here you can see the uniqueness of Chinese culture and help us build our cultural confidence.

We see a clear totalizing, generalizing narrative being mobilized here, one in which Chinese civilization is considered essentially and fundamentally different from ‘Western island and maritime’ civilizations. Here, it is not Confucius but geophysical elements that are used to explain civilizational differences. In the end it produces the idea that Chinese culture is unique and, above all, one.<sup>9</sup>

For the critic Yao Lifan, the movie is nothing less than a declaration that the world is becoming Chinese, connecting Chinese aesthetics as described above to a real space mission from China:

China became the first country in the world to land space probes on the back of the moon. This is a historic step in the international exploration of the moon. Thus, *Made in China* seems to be reasonable. The Chinese elements in the dungeons are looming, dancing dragons, pinching sugar people, and mahjong ... all of them are waiting for the promise of Chinese culture. (Yao 2019: 112)

Finally, Zhan Qinchuan and Wu Gongheng also read the movie as an expression of the China Dream, of a dream that is now mapped on to the world writ large. They write (2019: 93):

*The Wandering Earth* not only embodies the ‘Chinese Dream’, but also defines the ‘reality’ and ‘illusion’ of the world we live in. This film answers what China is like from the perspective of China’s contemporary history. It can be said that the film constructs a future world view belonging to the Chinese. This future world view is based on China’s five thousand years of culture.

The movies’ banal cosmopolitanism, its strong connection with what is globally perceived as a quintessential American movie genre, is exactly what drives Chinese critics to articulate its Chineseness, not only to reclaim the genre itself but also to show how China is perceived as playing a leading role in the world.

The overcoding machine also functions in Chinese academic analyses of the movie, which not only univocally applaud the movie; they are also keen on stressing its unique Chinese characteristics. Characterizing the

movie as a milestone in Chinese science-fiction cinema, Li observes, 'Man and nature form a tense antagonistic relationship in the western philosophy system. Conversely, oriental philosophy pays attention to the unity and harmony between man and nature' (2019: 61). And it is this Taoist philosophy, Li argues, that *The Wandering Earth* propagates, something that Western ecological criticism has taken on board. Li and Liang (2019: 6) commend the movie for promoting the movie industry and gaining international recognition. They write:

This film has become an important factor in promoting the development of China's science-fiction film industry and has been put on the international screen. The film shows a concern for the great history of mankind, which combines science, the common concern of mankind, the common feeling of mankind, [and] the ethical consciousness and values of the Chinese people together well. It has led our film industry to a higher level of development either in art or in the industrial production of the whole film. Such an excellent science-fiction film is also popular abroad and wins a good reputation.

In their analysis, a comparison is made between mankind (unspecified, but most likely referring to the West) and the Chinese people. It is the paradox of nationalism seen through the prism of banal cosmopolitanism and, in the case of this movie, a global ecological humanism. It demonstrates, first, how it is indeed a comparative logic that underpins productions like these and their reception; second, how an overcoding logic is imposed by different parties upon the movie; but also, and third, how such overcoded ideals of the nation in the singular, and of the people as united, are bound to be constantly betrayed.

## Conclusion

I must confess, when watching the movie the first time, I too felt as if I was watching a delayed version of a Hollywood movie. However, watching it again, I started to value it more for its attempt to engage with environmental issues, for its naïve but still relevant articulation of a banal

cosmopolitanism, for its playing with national, including Chinese, stereotypes and for its brief outbursts of criticism, for example, of the air pollution in Beijing or the obsession with money that has overtaken contemporary Chinese society (see He Xiao, this volume). Paraphrasing Prasenjit Duara, I have asked in this chapter, 'how can we rescue the future from the nation?' I think we can start by probing into the comparative logic that seems to be at play at all levels, in my value judgement of the movie as well as in my reading of the movie itself. This comparative logic is also at work, as I have shown, in the film's reviews, whether in the West or in China. And, as Peter van der Veer has argued so convincingly, it is important to delve more deeply into this comparative logic, without, however, retreating to the safe grounds of generalism, universalism or what Deleuze and Guattari describe as 'overcoding'.

Comparison involves cultural translation and, as Rey Chow has argued in *Primitive Passions*, translation always involves betrayal. Drawing in particular on Walter Benjamin, Chow shows how Chinese filmmakers like Zhang Yimou are like the translators of Chinese culture for a global audience: what they reveal is not depth but surface, merely showing the violence with which Chinese culture is 'originally' put together. Critics will say that they do not show the real China, that their works lack depth—but for Chow they become today's ethnographers, the object recorded being 'the West itself as mirrored in the eyes and handiwork of its others' (Taussig in Chow 1995). In the end, such translations betray rather than confirm the idea of a singular Chinese culture; they resist the overcoding idea of 5000 years of Chinese history.

The movie is at once so Hollywood and so Chinese. It shows that Hollywood is not necessarily located in the United States, just as China is not always in the East. It is this confusion, this pollution, that in the end makes it a translation that betrays both its assumed origins and the copy. In the impossibility of being Chinese, or of being American, the movie resists overcoding, resists being caught by generalism. In its superficiality, it confronts its audience with the made-up-ness of that fuzzy idea of 'Chinese culture'. In the end, the point I want to make is much broader, as I hope to have shown here. It might not only be anthropology that can help us resist generalism and that can, through its comparative logic, 'contribute to radically new and open ways of understanding

reality'. It might just as well be a superficial, banal, commercial science-fiction blockbuster from China. In a world where reality is profoundly mediated, where we live life in the media, rather than with the media (Deuze 2013), it is important to include the media in our analyses and to give them a close reading. And for that, closely associated disciplines like cultural studies and cultural analysis are pivotal. They allow not just people, but also objects and media texts to talk back to us (Bal 2002), allowing us to try and tweak reality a bit, towards alternative risings and different becomings, and to continue to resist overcoding.

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## Notes

1. According to Wikipedia, 'the film grossed US\$700 million worldwide. It is China's third highest-grossing film of all time and the third highest-grossing non-English film to date'. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The\\_Wandering\\_Earth](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Wandering_Earth), accessed 20 January 2020.
2. Van der Veer supervised my PhD (1996–2001) on Chinese rock music. Being a theme that was considered rather strange at that time, I remain grateful to van der Veer for his openness and curiosity in supporting such an obscure topic explored by a student who lacked an anthropological background and did not even speak Mandarin. I have come to realize over the years that such openness and versatility are quite unique in academia.
3. It is worth mentioning that van der Veer comes from Groningen, the northern part of the Netherlands, a province famous not only for its left-wing leanings but also for its directness and frankness in communication.
4. Although this chapter does not quite provide a case in point, I do think that disciplines like cultural studies and cultural analysis could (and sometimes do) work very well in tandem with anthropology and that they can learn in particular from anthropology's ethnographic methods and field-

- work practices. Likewise, anthropology can learn from cultural studies and its practice of close reading, in which it is objects rather than people who talk back.
5. 'Alien' is a quite common term used for foreigners at border control and visa documents.
  6. For Deleuze and Guattari (1987: 239), 'Becoming is a rhizome, not a classificatory or genealogical tree. Becoming is certainly not imitating, or identifying with something; neither is it regressing-progressing; neither is it corresponding, establishing corresponding relations; neither is it producing, producing a filiation or producing through filiation. Becoming is a verb with a consistency all its own; it does not reduce to, or lead back to, "appearing," "being," "equaling," or "producing."'
  7. All direct quotes from the movie are based on the subtitled version.
  8. Van der Veer rightly points to how cosmopolitanism is entwined with a Eurocentric universalism and always already entangled with nationalism, in his words, 'instead of perceiving cosmopolitanism and nationalism as alternatives, one should perhaps recognize them as the poles in a dialectical relationship' (2002: 166). A banal cosmopolitanism refers to the experience of 'globality' embedded in everyday life (Beck 2002). However, whereas Beck claims that in banal cosmopolitanism, 'everyday nationalism is circumvented and undermined and we experience ourselves integrated into global processes and phenomena' (Beck 2002: 12), both my analysis and van der Veer's show they merely go hand in hand.
  9. This mapping of civilization on to territoriality brings to mind Deleuze and Guattari's geophilosophical thinking about homogenous striated space, a result of 'the overcoding, centralization, hierarchization, binarization, and segmentation of the free movements of signs, particles, bodies, territories, spaces, and so on' (Bonta and Protevi 2004: 151–152).

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# 7

## Nationalism and Chinese Protestant Christianity: From Anti-imperialism to Islamophobia

Jie Kang

### Introduction

Chinese Christianity is often associated with Western ideology in China because its historical development is inevitably tangled up with Western political and economic expansion.<sup>1</sup> Although Christianity in China had trodden an uneven path before the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, as in the Chinese Rites controversy between the Qing Emperor Kangxi (reigned 1661–1722) and the Holy See, the major conflict was not between nation states on an equal basis but between the centralized authority of the Chinese Empire and Catholic religious organizations (Xu 2007). The Western imperial encounter with China facilitated the spread of Christianity in the Empire as an important part of the Treaties with Britain after the two Opium Wars (respectively 1839–1842 and 1856–1860), which permitted missionaries to enter China. At the same

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time, this permission aroused and sharpened the cultural and political collision between Chinese tradition and Christianity as representing Western ideology. Such encounters not only aroused Chinese patriotic sentiments, as seen in the Boxer Rebellion of 1899–1901, they also significantly stimulated a painful transformation in the Chinese world view, including its self-identification from a proud ancient universal concept of China as Tianxia (under heaven) to acceptance of the Western concept of the nation state. In this process, China was forced to confront and resist Western political ideology and power, while consciously or unconsciously imitating the Western political and economic model of modernization and state formation.

This ambivalent and perhaps contradictory experience vis-à-vis the West can be seen in the historical trajectory of Chinese Protestantism, which has often been regarded as a foreign religion imbued with Western ideology and in conflict with Chinese identity and tradition. The foreignness and conflictual nature of Protestantism are evident in the saying ‘one more Christian, one less Chinese’. Yet, from the early twentieth century until the present, the Western-derived concepts of nationalism and patriotism have always been of great concern to Chinese Protestant Christians, who, as shown in the next section, were actually foremost among the early nationalists.

Western modernity theory often sees nationalism and religion in terms of a dichotomy between modern secularism and backward tradition. However, an increasing number of scholars challenge this view by examining the intertwined relationship between religion and nationalism (van der Veer 2013; van der Veer and Lehmann 1999; Brubaker 2012; Smith 2003; Spohn 2003; Walsh 2020; Nedostup 2009). Following Walsh and Nedostup, who draw attention to the religious elements in the formation of the Chinese secular nation state, this chapter looks at how religion engages with and takes part in the formation of the nation state and the construction of nationalism. The ongoing transformation of Protestant Christianity can be regarded as a process of nationalization in so far as it serves the need for a perceived foreign, specifically Western, religion to be acknowledged by the Chinese state. Echoing historian Prasenjit Duara’s understanding of nationalism, the chapter further illustrates its continuing transformation through the lens of the historical development of Protestantism. Unlike Gellner and Anderson, who view ‘nationalism’ as

expressing a unified and homogenized identity, Duara regards nationalism as a fluid, discursive concept confronting and in debate with different 'nation-views' (Duara 1995: 10). In analysing the historical development of Chinese Christianity in this chapter, I argue that nationalism is not a static concept but has in fact constantly been constructed and re-interpreted. Chinese Christians have demonstrated their manifold patriotism in different political and economic contexts. From the early twentieth century until the 1950s, their nationalism took the form of anti-imperialism, inspiring the independence movement and the emergence of indigenous Chinese House Churches. Following the assumption of political power in 1949 by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), Chinese Protestant Christians fell into two groups because of theological differences. The patriotism promoted by early Three-Self Church leaders was intended to support the CCP and cut the church off from Western influence. In contrast, the pioneering House Church leaders preferred to transform society through individual salvation. Since China's 'opening up' in 1979, the country has experienced an unexpected Christian revival. In addition to the impact of rapid urbanization, it is plausible to say that the exponential growth of urban Christians results from deep patriotic sentiment substituting for the desire for political reform that has seemingly been unattainable since the suppression of the Tiananmen students' movement of 1989.

While early Christian patriotism was harnessed to the state's nationalist aim of ridding the country of the control and oppression of Western imperialism and transforming it into an independent nation state, since 2010 a new wave of nationalist sentiment has emerged to construct an alternative negative otherness—namely Islam, whose followers Chinese Christians believe they are called by God to convert. In both periods, patriotism is generated among Chinese urban Protestant professionals who are well educated and socio-economically well placed not only for fitting into but also partly for leading mainstream Chinese nationalism. Thus, each phase has its respective opponent. While the opponent of early Christian nationalism was political, namely Western imperialism, the current missionary movement has constructed Islam as its religious opponent.

The remainder of this chapter is divided into four sections. Starting with the period from the early nineteenth century until the formation of the People's Republic of China (PRC), the first section shows how the patriotic sentiment of Chinese Protestants of the early independent church movement laid the ground for reducing the influence of Western missionaries and thence expressing support for the state's anti-imperialism. The second section depicts both the founding of the Three-Self Church and the emergence of House Churches in the 1950s. It describes the convergence of Christians' expressed love of China and their caring concern for its people, despite their first theological and later political differences. The third section focuses on the rise of urban Christianity between 1980 and 2000. It looks at three Christian groups that share similar nationalist aspirations for China's rise and prosperity despite differences in agenda and mandate. The fourth section examines the missionary movement of Chinese House Churches since 2000, which are giving voice to a new wave of nationalism among House Church Christians. This narrative centralizes the role of ethnic Chinese and constructs Islam as the new religious enemy, thus inadvertently converging with the state's attitude and policy towards Muslims.

The chapter is largely based on material collected during eighteen months of participant observation in dozens of churches in various cities and villages in Shan Dong province and Beijing between 2010 and 2019. During fieldwork, I conducted nearly a hundred interviews and attended sermons, Bible study groups and their training programmes. I also subscribed to relevant WeChat groups and analysed messages that were important to my research.

## **Chinese Protestantism and Anti-imperialism (Before 1949)**

Peter van der Veer (2013: 657) rightly argues that '[r]eligion has to be nationalized in the modern period'. Ryan Dunch vividly shows how Fuzhou Protestants were deeply involved in building the new Chinese nation state and its citizenry. It was Protestants in the Fuzhou area who

initially used some important Chinese nationalist symbols as national flags and anthems in Protestant churches (Dunch 2001). In the early twentieth century, the main concerns of both Protestants and secular nationalists were to save China from colonial and imperial invasion, construct a strong nation and strengthen the moral education of Chinese citizens. As Dunch points out, after the 1911 revolution the new popular nationalist movement had an ambivalent view of Western nations. On the one hand Western political, social institutions and technology were greatly admired by the Chinese, while on the other hand Westerners' encroachments on Chinese politico-economic sovereignty aroused strong resentment among non-Christian Chinese, as well as among Christians (Dunch 2001: 49). Chinese Protestants were therefore motivated by Christian moral standards and norms in nation-building while opposing the intrusiveness of Western Christian nations.

As part of the nationalist movement, an independent Chinese Christian church movement started in the early twentieth century with the aim of setting up indigenous local Chinese churches as separate and independent of Western missionary control and influence. The movement involved a strong nationalist sentiment determined on saving 'China' as its central theme. Most major Chinese Christian leaders at the time made explicit their intention that the Chinese church should completely disengage from Western missionaries. For instance, the founder of the 'Little Flock' movement, Watchman Nee, promoted an anti-missionary, anti-clerical, anti-institutional movement which publicly rejected Western missionary-based denominations. Based on their unpleasant experiences of working with them, some Christian leaders took a strongly antagonistic view of missionaries. An example of this was John Sung Shang Chieh, an influential evangelist and a leading figure in the revival movement in China and Southeast Asia during the 1920s and 1930s. In his diary, he expressed his strong dissatisfaction with Western missionaries, who he referred to as *xi ren* (Westerners) or *xi jiaoshi* (Western missionary). 'The financial power of the Chinese church [at that time] has been taken by the hand of *xi jiaoshi*. Those who don't listen to them will be dismissed ... regardless of right or wrong. All instructions given by *xi jiaoshi* have to be followed. Thinking of these, [I am] in tears with deep sadness for Chinese preachers' (Song 1995: Chapter 3 (12)). Sung especially disliked the

relative luxury or comfortable lifestyle of Western missionaries, which strongly contrasted with the wretched condition of the mass of their poor Chinese followers. He regarded them as lacking a ‘sacrificing spirit’: ‘the hospitals, schools and churches founded by *xi ren* were the biggest obstacle to church revival’ (Song 1995: Chapter 3(12)). Like the communitarian church of the Jesus Family founded by Jing Dianying, Sung Shang Chieh had the same idea of ‘building an evangelizing village with all preachers living together like a big family. [We] cultivate and farm and preach all together.’ One of the reasons for wishing to build such a Christian utopia was to separate it completely from Western missionaries. Besides, he understood that his calling was indeed to convert the Chinese. On his return to China after a study trip to the USA, he saw Chinese people smoking opium and engaged in gambling. He heard a foreigner remark that ‘a Chinese is no better than a dog’. He recorded the effect this had on him: ‘I have made the decision that I will preach in China even unto death, as long as my countrymen will be saved. I am willing to die for them’ (Song 1995: Chapter 2). Thus, Sung’s object of evangelizing was to save the Chinese through Christian belief. It was his patriotic love for his countrymen that fired this nationalist feeling.

As Dunch states, ‘[t]he 1911 revolution and the Protestant influence in the new Republic sparked great optimism. ... Protestants expressed a confident hope that China would soon also become a Christian nation’ (Dunch 2001: xix). Although the hope was not realized, their love for China as a nation was a central concern of Chinese Protestants that led them to abandon Chinese popular religion, resist ‘Western invasion’ and become actively involved in the revolutionary movement before 1949.

## **The Three-Self Patriotic Movement and the Emergence of the House Church (1949–1979)**

On taking power at the founding of the People’s Republic of China in 1949, the Chinese Communist Party needed to unite religious groups, democratic parties and ethnic minorities in support of the new

government, while also requiring the means and time to regulate religion. Chinese Protestant church leaders had both fears and hopes for the newly established Chinese nation and Communist Party. On the one hand, like the vast Chinese population, Christians were pleased with the unification of China and optimistic about the new government, especially in the early 1950s, when it still supported 'religious freedom'. On the other hand, aware that Communism was ideologically atheist, they were worried that the clergy might be persecuted and the churches closed as had happened in the Soviet Union. Wu Yaozong, a Protestant Christian leader, countered this threat by visiting many churches in various cities in 1950 and proposing to reform them by eliminating Western imperialist influence through self-governance, self-support and self-propagation. Thus came into being the 'Three-Self Patriotic Movement'. As its name suggests, patriotism was central to the movement. However, the patriotic sentiment shifted its focus from a spiritual concern to 'save China' to a focus on the anti-imperialist revolution and nationalist loyalty to the Communist government. While the former asked an open-ended question resolvable through internal interrogation of beliefs and ideology, the latter left no other alternative but to support and obey the new Communist government. Besides, Wu Yaozong had been in favour of Communism since the 1930s; rather than viewing the two movements as contradicting each other, he believed that Christianity and Communism had 99% in common (Wu 2010). He nevertheless held that major social conflict was caused by capitalism as instituted by the Chinese Nationalist Party, so in 1951 he refused to work for it. Wu's son Wu Zongsu published an article entitled 'While the falling flowers pine for love, the heartless brook babbles on'. The message in these words was that the fact that his father was actively involving himself in the Three-Self movement was derived from his theological understanding, particularly his deep patriotic and then nationalist sentiments. This involvement was expressed in the words 'falling flowers pine for love'. However, his efforts did not win the trust of the government, which persecuted the Christian church, referred to as the 'heartless brook babbles'. It seems that in the early 1950s, patriotism was not only the driving force for Wu Yaozong founding the Three-Self movement, it also drove many Christians to follow him and sign 'the Christian Manifesto'<sup>2</sup> declaring that Christian churches should follow and obey the

new government. It was a love of China that led the vast Chinese population, including many Christians, to believe deeply that only the Communist Party could save China, which gave them great expectations and hope in the new Communist government.

Although the Three-Self movement politically mobilized many Christians, Wang Mingdao, the leading figure in the indigenous Chinese Christian church since the 1930s, and some other Christians refused to join the Three-Self Church. The reason behind their refusal was originally not political but theological: most of the founding members of the Three-Self movement were 'theological modernists' opposed to the fundamentalist thinking of the new indigenous church. Wang (1997: 53) claimed: 'I totally cannot join the Three-Self movement, because some people among them don't even believe in God. How could I be with them?' In 1955, he published an essay in the journal *Spiritual Food Quarterly* (*Ling shi jikan*) entitled 'It's for our faith' (*women shi wei le xinyang*), in which he sharply criticized modernist self-proclaimed Christians as '*bu xin pai* (an unbelieving faction)'; in his view, they did not believe in fundamental Christian doctrine. It was obviously unacceptable for Wang to follow a '*bu xin pai*'-led movement. He claimed, 'The Three-Self movement, being led by people against God, is in effect a tactic to eliminate Christianity from the internal church' (Wang 1997: 39). That said, we should note that the conflict between modernist and fundamentalist Christianity in China actually dates from the 1930s, long before the Three-Self movement. Wang Mingdao himself first used the term *bu xin pai* in 1929 in his essay entitled 'How long will you be double-minded' (Li 2003) and followed it with a series of essays criticizing the modernists in the 1930s.<sup>3</sup>

The theological differences thus developed into a political conflict between the pro-government Three-Self Church and non-cooperating Christian groups. The latter were the predecessor of the House Churches, with Wang Mingdao being called the 'Dean of the House Churches' (Harvey 2002). Wang Mingdao believed that the Church's most important task was to evangelize rather than engage in social reform, since 'Men cannot build a heaven by themselves'.<sup>4</sup> He regarded himself as the 'Jeremiah of China' whose divine mission was to be 'a fortified city, an iron pillar and bronze wall against the whole land' (Lin 1982). Jeremiah was also known as the 'weeping prophet'<sup>5</sup> for his absolute patriotism and

deep love of Israel and the Jewish people. Because of his love for his nation, he wept at the fall of Jerusalem and the destruction of the Holy Temple while condemning the sins of the people of Israel. Like Jeremiah, Wang Mingdao's love of China was evident in his devotion to converting Chinese to Christianity rather than relying on any secular political power. The reason for his non-reliance was his deep disappointment with what he saw as a totally corrupt society and associated institutions, including the Communist government. His political views influenced many Christians in the House Church movement who have long been apolitical.

The theological differences between the Three-Self and House Church movements and their opposed theological approaches to engaging with society resulted in a deep division between them over how to interact with the Communist government. For Fundamentalist or House Church leaders, individual salvation is the only way to save the society, while modernist, Three-Self leaders believe a good society will produce good individuals. Therefore, while Three-Self church leaders tend to be actively involved in social work, political reform and aim to change society, early House Church leaders keep their distance from politics and focus on evangelization and the transformation of one's life through Christian faith. The former are often keen to cooperate with the government; in contrast, the latter resist any form of collaboration with the government, to which they are not only religiously but also politically opposed while stopping short of political confrontation. Moreover, the Modernist, Three-Self Church's theological emphasis on love and unity is seen as more compatible with the state's discourse on national unification and the construction of a harmonious society, while the Fundamentalist House Church movement emphasizes a separation between God, the Church and His people, and a world portrayed as being ruled by Satan.

Despite their opposed approaches and different theological understanding, both churches share a primary concern to care for China and the Chinese people, just as both, together with the Chinese Communist Party, opposed Western imperialism in the early 1950s. However, the conflict between the Three-Self Church and House Church movement since then has intensified as an internal division within the Christian church. It has resulted in two types of Protestant church in China—the government-registered Three-Self Church and the unregistered House

Churches. Historically, we can see that it was not the intention of the House Church group to oppose the Communist government directly but to seek autonomy and independence from any government control, including the Three-Self Church, the official China Christian Council and the Bureau of Religion. Although the Chinese Communist government has tolerated the existence of the House Churches to some extent, it sees their independence as a challenge to the principle of government control. House Church leaders are aware of their semi-illegal status and their political experience of surveillance, suppression of their activities and occasional persecution rather than toleration and religious freedom. Generally speaking, however, most House Churches aim to evangelize rather than challenge government. This situation helps us understand the House Church group's later development of a wish to minister to and missionize among Muslims, for, in attempting to reduce the presence of Islam, they are sharing an aim of state-promoted nationalism.

## **Communism, Patriotism and Christianity (1980–2000)**

Chinese Protestant Christianity has grown surprisingly exponentially in the last few decades (Start and Wang 2015; Yang 2012, 2016; see also note 1). Along with China's recent political and economic global expansion, the powerful development of Chinese Christianity has led to the creation of its own global network in which personnel and financial resources flow extensively, and religious knowledge and values are disseminated rapidly. As the country rapidly urbanized, mass conversions started in rural areas in the 1980s. From the 1990s onwards, conversion also spread to the cities (Fulton 2015; Kang 2016; Leung 1999; Huang 2014). The rural Christian church has continued the Chinese fundamentalist tradition of focusing on suffering, repentance, individual salvation and miracles of healing and exorcism in Chinese villages. Although Christians in villages prioritize kindness and reliability in social interaction, they have limited education, and their rural status marginalizes them politically. The distinction between the Three-Self Church and the

House Churches is consequently blurred in rural areas (Kang 2016). Despite their distance from politics, House Church adherents' deep patriotic love for China is vividly evident in the song 'China's five o'clock in the morning', composed by a Chinese Christian peasant, Xiaomin.<sup>6</sup> This lyric clearly shows the Chinese Christians' affection for China and their concern for its well-being and protection.

*China's five o'clock in the morning, rising [to] the sound of prayer.  
 May God bring peace and prosperity, unifying and triumphant,  
 China's five o'clock in the morning, rising [to] the sound of worship.  
 Everyone gives sincere love and one's whole heart for China.  
 China's five o'clock in the morning, rising [to] the sound of prayer.  
 Leap over thousands of mountains and rivers, melt cold hearts.  
 Never have bonds and never have wars,  
 May [God] bless China to have a harvest again by having changed fate.*

Before the 1990s, therefore, the revival of Christianity was mainly a rural phenomenon. For instance, there was no Christian group or leading figure involved in the urban June the Fourth students' movement of 1989. Having lost faith and hope in the Communist government, many students and intellectuals attempted to find an alternative belief system or ideology. This may explain the subsequent mass conversions in urban China, including of former leaders of the June the Fourth students' movement and the emergence of so-called cultural Christians among Chinese intellectuals. The year 1989 is perhaps the turning point when the belief in Communism ideology was uprooted among many if not most young Chinese, who instead started either focusing on economic pursuits or turning to other belief systems. Communism as an ideology had lost its power to attract and mobilize the Chinese people.

As more urban churches consisting of university-educated students and middle-class professionals had been established since the late 1990s, the main distinction between the House Church and Three-Self Church in cities has shifted from a purely theological difference to one concerning the question of registration. The Three-Self Church and House Church have in reality been working completely separately and, with the passing of the early generation of House Church founders, the previously

hostile attitude has gradually disappeared. The Three-Self Church is no longer the enemy of the House Church. In fact, as I observed during my fieldwork, in addition to the state-sanctioned Three-Self Church, there are now three types of Chinese Christian groups operating, each with its own nationalist expression and mode of political and religious opposition.

1. House Church Christians with an evangelizing mandate act very cautiously with regard to the government and do not oppose or challenge the state's authority. They respect the Communist government as God-given and therefore as legitimate. Their focus is on Christian ministry inside and outside China, the safety of the Church and its followers being their priority, which it protects by conforming to central and local government rules and regulations. As shown in the next section, this group of Christians may not believe in Communism, but it does accept the Communist Party as the political organization governing China. As such this group refrains from taking an antagonistic position to the government. Ironically, despite being subject to strict government control and surveillance, it welcomes the state's nationalist stance, as is evident in their support of the House Churches' territorial 'back to Jerusalem' missionary movement, which has generated similarly strong nationalist sentiments among Chinese Protestants.
2. House Church leaders and followers with a political mandate, such as Pastor Wang Yi<sup>7</sup> and the Beijing Shouwang Church, take a more active, sometimes provocative stance towards government. They regard themselves as 'the city on the hill' and 'the light on the stand' that should not be hidden. Their direct conflict with the state often starts when their religious activities are banned, and the government curtails the pursuit of religious freedom and protective legal arrangements. Significantly, since some of the church leaders in this group—for instance, Wang Yi—have an educational background in law, they try to change society through reform of the legal system. Despite being the object of government criticism and attack, most in this Christian group do not aim to overthrow the Communist regime but seek rather to implement social reforms creating more 'healthy' political and legal institutions, especially regarding the regulation of religion. However, their stance is not supported by most House Church

leaders, perpetually worried about government crackdowns. In other words, this activist group is a small minority of the wider House Church membership. However, it attracts considerable attention in the international media.

3. Apart from the two afore-discussed groups, a third, broader group consisting of overseas Chinese Christians in the USA and churches in Hong Kong and Taiwan is explicitly antagonistic towards the Communist Party. Many leaders of the June the Fourth students' movement have converted to Christianity in the USA over the last thirty years. Some of them, such as Zhang Boli, Xiong Yan and Yuan Zhiming, became influential pastors.<sup>8</sup> Pastor Yuan Zhiming founded the 'China Soul for Christ Foundation' and made a series of historical documentaries (from 2000 onwards) about China from a Christian perspective. One example of this is 'China's confession', a reference to Shenzhou, a poetic name for China translated as 'Divine Land'. In 2002, Fu Xiqiu founded an international non-profit Christian human-rights organization, 'China Aid', which aims to promote religious freedom in China by exposing abuses and encouraging the abused to defend their faith and freedom.<sup>9</sup> This Christian group is critical of the Chinese Communist government and believes that only through conversion to Christianity will 'democracy and freedom' be achieved in China. According to Zhang Boli, 'Now we are evangelizing the gospel and spreading the Christian message. As soon as one believes in the Lord, he/she definitely will no longer believe in Communism.'<sup>10</sup>

Although the three groups have different political and religious agendas, they are united under the patriotic umbrella and name of 'China'. On 7 December 2008, 'The Consensus in San Francisco' organized a 'Gospel for China' conference, which was attended by more than 300 mainland and overseas Chinese pastors and preachers comprising the three groups. The Consensus contains a strong patriotic sentiment shading into Chinese nationalism, with a focus entirely on China and the Chinese people. The starting point of the Consensus is to delineate Chinese identity, despite the fact that many of its participants have lived in the USA or other countries for many years. 'We are a group of Christians from China gathering in San Francisco and participating in a

meeting witnessed by a generation.’ The text claims that ‘China is undergoing an unprecedented radical transformation’ which is ‘different from the past three thousand years. It is a transformation of the cross.’ A prayer for Chinese political authority is included in the hope that the government will transform society into one of harmony and peace. The Consensus ends with a further focus on the Chinese people: ‘We pray, may God be kind to the Chinese, that they prosper, that the Chinese people become the blessing of all humanity.’<sup>11</sup>

The Consensus has been criticized by some Christians, who claim that ‘patriotism’ was the leading theme of the entire conference. ‘Patriotism has obsessed the heart of Chinese Christians. Loving the country has surpassed love of the Lord. Therefore, one cannot see the Lord for China’ (Xiaoguang 2011). Regardless of its correctness or otherwise, the strong patriotism manifested in the Consensus evidently inspired the love of many Chinese Christians for China.

It might not be a coincidence that the Consensus was agreed in 2008, right after the Beijing Olympic Games, when patriotism reached its highest point in China since 1989. Chinese Christians, especially the former leaders of student movements abroad, might then have hoped that the Chinese government would carry out political reforms. Perhaps on the back of this patriotism, state-promoted nationalism has continued to increase over the last ten years. But political reform has become if anything even less likely. Ironically, the global and domestic expansion of Chinese political and economic power has unintentionally reinforced and supported the missionary aims and movements of Chinese Christians.

So far, the chapter has illustrated the changeable features of a nationalism that is embedded in and delineates the major phases in the development of the Chinese Protestant churches and their relations with politics.

In the section that follows, I focus on recent the missionary ambition to convert Muslims to Christianity, an ambition reinforced by the churches’ strong nationalist emphasis on the role of China and ethnic Chinese in combatting the alleged rise of Islam.

## Chinese Missionary Movement and Nationalism (2000–Present)

During the last two decades, Chinese Protestant Christian House Churches have embarked on a great and widespread mission to convert Muslims to Christianity. It has become the sacred calling of Chinese Christians to undertake the ‘great mission’ of evangelizing among peoples who are the most difficult to reach and persuade. It is believed that Jesus will come again once the gospel is sent back to Jerusalem. The movement has been given the name ‘Back to Jerusalem’, which means proselytizing from China to Israel and the Middle East, thus covering an area where the three religions of Islam, Buddhism and Hinduism have their strongholds (Hattaway 2003: xii). Chinese Christians, who share the divine mandate of Christian Zionism in the US (Durbin 2019), believe that returning the gospel back to Jerusalem is the sign of the end of time and of Jesus’ second coming. They thus act upon the mission by actively involving themselves in missionary work among Muslims. The theological continuity between American and Chinese Christians in linking the end of time with returning the gospel to Jerusalem and Jews may be transmitted through the work of Korean missionaries who impart theological education to Chinese Christians.

It is believed that Chinese Christians have certain advantages in seeking to convert Muslims. First, because of their own experience of working underground in China, they can make contact with Muslims surreptitiously, hidden from the government’s political surveillance. Second, since the sheer number of Chinese equals the global Muslim population, it is believed that they are numerically better able than other nationalities to make contact with the latter. Third, in comparison to the West China’s relations with Muslim countries are generally better, and Christians believe it is less likely that Chinese missionary work will be targeted or banned. This reasoning may be over-optimistic, but it sustains the missionary zeal. Converting Muslims is regarded as Chinese Christians’ ‘burden’. For instance, every year the Chinese church holds thirty days of prayer for Muslims during Ramadan and organizes prayers alongside the Silk Road. Some WeChat<sup>12</sup> prayer groups have been set up to disseminate

news or reports of missionaries in Islamic countries such as Pakistan. A major Chinese Christian missionary meeting has reportedly planned to train and send out 30,000 Chinese missionaries by 2030. Moreover, Chinese House Churches and their missionary movement have been greatly influenced by the Korean Church, including their missionary tactics. While visiting a Korean church with a Chinese House Church delegation in 2010, for the first time I heard a Korean pastor expressing the view that the Korean church was ‘the match that lit the torch’ of Chinese Christianity, which would ‘bring light’ to Muslim areas in China and to Muslim countries in the Middle East and Central Asia.

The recent mission movement is active largely among the Chinese House Churches with an evangelization mandate and has established a huge network, both nationally and internationally. It has also become financially strong enough to support and send missionaries at a time of China’s rise both economically and politically. Most House Church leaders involved in the missionary work keep a low profile and stay underground. As noted earlier, they do not oppose the authorities and keep their distance from the government. This Christian group has sent missionaries to work in selected villages of Xinjiang, Ningxia and other Muslim-majority areas. While doing missionary work, they often run small businesses. Their working assumption is that doing business or teaching always provides good protection for Christians in early missionary work. Investing in companies or farms in Muslim areas is another common strategy for evangelizing and at the same time making contact with the local people by providing them with more job opportunities. Like Wenzhou Boss Christians (Cao 2011, 2012), the recent missionary movement is closely linked to business operations, including Chinese economic expansion to neighbouring countries, as well as African and Islamic countries in the Middle East and East Asia. Some churches have promoted a training programme called ‘business for the mission’.

As Brandner (2009: 322) points out, domestically the movement focuses on ethnic Chinese. The vision of converting Muslims is regarded as the ‘special and most difficult inheritance to the people in China’. It has given meaning to the suffering endured by the Chinese people over the last hundred years and provided a new understanding of Chinese history. In particular, China’s recent rise politically and economically is seen

to have a spiritual purpose (on which, see below). The Chinese have become the 'chosen people' entrusted with the task of fulfilling God's master plan of salvation, which was given first to Israel, then successively to Rome, Europe and North America. The Chinese Christian groups believe that earlier Christian nations, such as those of Europe and even America, have lost their Christian tradition and values. They attribute this loss to the prevailing environment of theological liberalism, political correctness and secularism. For Chinese Christians, God's hand has left those people, and now He blesses China. Thus, it is China's turn to save the entirety of humanity by converting the most difficult obstacle in the history of the Christian mission, that is, Muslims.

Moreover, the missionary movement seems to be driven by the spirit of 'martyrdom'. In June 2017, two Chinese citizens were killed by ISIS in Pakistan. The Chinese state-controlled newspaper *Global Times* blamed this on Korean missionary groups recruiting young Chinese to carry out missionary work in dangerous places, including the Middle East. The news drew enormous public attention in China. There had also been a lot of debate among Chinese Christians about whether young Chinese Christians should do missionary work in such dangerous places. However, asking individual Christians about this in various churches in China, I was often told that 'the blood of the martyrs is the seed of the Church'. 'Unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it bears much fruit' (John 12:24). Becoming a 'martyr' is honourable and highly regarded. To die for Jesus and His church is deemed to be God's special grace, which only a few people could ever acquire. As shown in a Chinese popular Christian song, 'Unless a seed', scarifying one's life like a dying seed for the sake of the Christian ministry is desirable; therefore it generates great passion among Chinese Christians to go on missions to the world's most dangerous places. It may explain why two young Christians were willing to be sent to such a dangerous place and eventually die there, as the lyric of 'Unless a seed' shows:

*Unless a seed consents to fall into the field,  
Though all time can pass in waiting,  
The seed remains alone;  
If it consents to be used up, its life to yield*

*For the new life it's creating,  
Soon a harvest is grown!  
It's my desire, Lord, I desire,  
To be a seed that falls into the field,  
Giving up my life to live anew!  
It's my desire, Lord, I desire:  
All of my rights and my pride, I will yield  
To obey Your word and follow You.*

Moreover, unlike the antagonism felt towards Western missionaries in the 1950s, Chinese House Church Christians have adopted a positive and affirmative view of them since 2000. Western missionaries have become role model among Chinese Christians by being prepared to sacrifice their lives for the sake of the gospel. I am often told that 'Chinese Christians are indebted to Western missionaries for the Gospel'. In 2016, Pastor Yuan Zhiming and the China Soul for Christ Foundation produced a three-episode historical documentary series, *Missionary: A Historical Study of Gospel in China*, which has been widely disseminated among Chinese Christians. In the documentary, Western missionaries are greatly praised for their contribution to the Chinese Church, education, health and medical care, women's liberation, charities and so on. By acknowledging the contribution and sacrifice of Western missionaries, Chinese Christians are empowered to follow them and to enter foreign lands for the sake of the gospel. It is thus now China's turn to repay the debt of the gospel by sacrificing their lives carrying out missionary work in dangerous places.

## **China's Rise as God's Blessing**

In many ways, the revival and transformation of Christian churches is coterminous with China's social and political transformation over the last three decades. Chinese Christians point to the apparent fact that every major policy change in China has unintentionally led to the major growth and transformation of Christian churches in China in the following respects:

- The policy of opening up the country from 1979 onwards resulted in greater mobility for Christians, the expansion of the Christian ministry in China and the growth of rural churches.
- The policy of rapid urbanization from the 1990s resulted in educated young people converting to Christianity and contributing to the growth of the urban church, with a focus on theology as a discipline, the professionalization of church leaders and rational discussions taking the place of emotional appeals.
- Economic growth from the 2000s led to the urban churches acquiring wealth and being able to support various training programmes and missionary work.
- An easing of travel restrictions and the rise of tourism in and from China facilitated missionary work outside China.

Cao Nanlai vividly shows how spiritual nationalism as an ‘alternative form of nationalism’ (2012: 28) has emerged among Wenzhou Christian businessmen who passionately promote ‘God’s China vision (*Zhong guo yi xiang*)’ by integrating the Christian faith into China’s political and economic development. It is believed that the rise of China has occurred not only in the economic and political sphere but also ‘in the spiritual realm and [that China] will transform itself from a missionary-receiving country to a missionary-sending one’ (Cao 2012: 27).

The most recent example of the rise of China’s political influence internationally is the ‘One Belt One Road’ initiative, which allowed Chinese Christians to further their great mission of converting Muslims from about 2010 onwards. In his book *Back to Jerusalem*, Hattaway (2003) notes that Jerusalem and China were connected through the Silk Road 2000 years ago. Ten years after the publication of Hattaway’s book, in 2013, the Chinese government initiated its ‘Belt and Road’ policy with the explicit objective of expanding trade and increasing China’s political power and influence. Chinese Christians claim that this is a sign that God has opened the door for Chinese churches to enter Islamic countries through implementation of this trade policy. China’s model of state-led global expansion is not only opening the most difficult door for Chinese Christians and unblocking the hardest routes into regions where the

gospel has not yet reached, it also helps legitimize Christian missionary identity through trade and work in the receiving countries.

Thus, for Chinese Christians, God's hand is behind China's rise, which is therefore based entirely on the Christian faith. The Chinese Communist government and its top leaders have become an instrument of God's work and of support for the Chinese mission, including God's master plan for China to convert the world's Muslims. This is all regarded as evidence of God's great sovereign plan to facilitate the Back to Jerusalem mission.

## Constructing (a New?) Otherness

Since the July 2009 riots in Urumqi, and especially after the 2014 attack in Kunming, a general, nationwide distrust of Islam has grown up among non-Muslim Chinese.<sup>13</sup> This is evident on media WeChat, where Muslims are seen as a potential threat to national security and are often linked to terrorism. House Church Christians express distrust of Islam in the same way as non-Christian Chinese do. Anti-Muslim sentiment has grown and become prevalent among those Christians who are worried about the expansionary tendency of the 'Lü hua 绿化', or Islamization of the world, especially in Europe, and potentially in China as well after the 'One Belt One Road' policy has been implemented.

I follow Gottschalk and Greenberg's basic definition of 'Islamophobia' as 'social anxiety toward Islam and Muslim cultures' (2007: 5). While the concept is widely used and debated among Western intellectuals and media, it is discussed less in China. Fear of Islam and Muslim culture is nevertheless evident among Han Chinese, though with differences. Ahmad points out that 'Islamophobia is indeed constitutive of western liberalism', for Islam is seen as 'a betrayal of the west's liberalism' (Ahmad 2013: 248). While Western Islamophobia thus largely arises out of an ideological conflict with Western liberalism, Chinese Islamophobia rests on a concern for the Chinese state's sovereignty and unity. While the US and European countries are opposed to the political authoritarianism of Muslim-majority countries, the Chinese state finds common ground with them and may collaborate with them in its own ideological conflicts

with the West. Moreover, Western (European and American) Islamophobia is a fear, first, of Muslim jihadist physical violence and, second, of being overwhelmed by Muslim migration, lifestyles and ideology. The Chinese state also fears violence, such as that committed by Muslim separatists attacking Chinese territorial sovereignty and thereby questioning the authority of the Communist Party. An example is the physical attacks on Han Chinese by Uygur separatists in Xinjiang, whose goal is to establish a separate state of East-Turkestan that would be independent of China. However, Western and Chinese Islamophobia both share the same concern for the security of the nation state. As Ahmad rightly points out, the concept of “nation-state as home” ought to be pivotal to our understanding of the hostility to and fear of Muslims’ (2013: 37).

Unlike the Chinese state, however, Chinese Christians’ Islamophobia is more a fear that people will convert to Islam instead of Christianity. It is not so much fear of Muslim jihadist violence (which is secondary) that exercises them, but more of a loss of Christian religious followings in China, its bordering countries and beyond. Therefore, it is argued that Christians must urgently carry out missionary work to prevent the alleged global Islamization, for instance, of France and England. An essay entitled ‘Realizing the true face of Islam’, written by a Christian, drew an analogy between ‘the Muslim and the wolf in sheep’s clothing’. The author claims that ‘in fact, if we read carefully the Islamic doctrine, one realizes that every Muslim is an extremist, unless he/she has been secularized or is not faithful’. Chinese Christians often take a positive view of the government’s tight control over the Muslim Uygur, as it is resulting in a decline in their religious activities and identity. They claim that this is therefore the perfect time to convert the Uygur to Christianity.

Moreover, most Han Chinese, including Christians, take a negative view of refugees from Islamic countries and point to the supposedly adverse effects of Angela Merkel’s refugee policy to allow a massive number of Islamic refugees into Germany. Interestingly, German far-right political views have been translated into Chinese and spread via WeChat and the internet. For instance, an article on ‘the rapid rising of Neo-Nazism in Europe: the ghost of Hitler is gradually reviving’ has recently been widely disseminated on WeChat and other Chinese websites.<sup>14</sup> Starting with the introduction of Thilo Sarrazin’s recently published book

*Hostile Takeover: How Islam Impairs Progress and Threatens Society*, the article depicts terrifying scenes of an Islamized Europe in which Muslims are rapidly replacing white Europeans and Christianity will disappear in the near future because of the prevalence of political correctness. The reason behind the rise of Neo-Nazism, the popularity of Trump and the emergence of Populism is that ‘people need a way out and a saviour who does what people don’t dare to do’. This view is strongly supported by Chinese Christians, who often circulate similar messages within their WeChat groups and networks, with Western society often being portrayed as secular and losing its Christian values. Because of ‘political correctness’ and the encouragement of (religious) pluralism, tolerance and freedom, specific biblical values have been undermined. Fuelling the fear of Islam is the apparently rapid growth of global Islam through the migration of Muslims, including refugees, to European countries.

Despite similar antagonism towards Islam by both Chinese Christians and the Han Chinese population, they differ in terms of their actions. While most Chinese generally rely on the Communist government to take action in dealing with Muslims, Chinese Christians are actively involved in the missionary movement to convert Muslims to Christianity.

## Conclusion

The distinction between nationalism and patriotism is often unclear (Backhouse 2013; Brubaker 2004). Some scholars differentiate a person’s relationship with their ‘country’ from their relationship with their ‘nation’ (Vincent 2002). The former is seen as ‘patriotism’ based on pure love and affection for one’s country, sometimes embedded in the concept of a benign state. ‘Nationalism’, conversely, presupposes more than love but also loyalty to a particular nation, to be defended against or sometimes imposed on other nations through state organization. This gloss portrays patriotism as an inclusive, positive and ideologically ‘pure’ sentiment that is generally unconcerned with foreign subjugation. But both concepts are essentially similar in appealing for legitimacy on the basis of common language(s), history and culture (Backhouse 2013: 5), differing only in how these common elements are used in relation to other countries or

nations. The well-known German theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer was regarded as a staunch Christian patriot for his opposition to Nazi nationalism. He was killed by the Nazis at the end of World War II. He had expressed his patriotism passionately in the language of land, tradition and culture, as did the Nazis, who did not, however, couch their nationalist language in the idiom of Christianity. This blurring of nationalism and patriotism also applies to China, especially in the context of Christianity. I see patriotism basically as 'love of and devotion to one's country', referring not necessarily to a sovereign state but sometimes to a socio-cultural, territorially defined region. A patriotic sentiment celebrates the customs and values (culture) of a region. We can think of it as primarily an inward-looking sentiment. However, if forced to defend its values against outside threats and forces, patriotism may move in the direction of 'nationalism'. Nationalism, as the term suggests, refers to a sentiment and sometimes actions, which exalt or pitch one nation over and against other nations. It is more exclusionary than patriotism and looks out beyond itself for comparisons with other nations and nationalities. Under conditions of rivalry and conflict between nation states, however, nationalism may harness patriotic sentiments and use them to express such competitiveness.

Thus, underlying the Chinese government's emphasis on inclusive patriotism and its avoidance of blatant nationalism, the focus remains on 'Love the Country, Love the Party'. This slogan appeals to both inclusive patriotism and communist political affiliation. Moreover, since Xi Jinping came to power, the Chinese government has vigorously conducted the propaganda of 'Patriotism Education (*ai guo zhu yi jiao yu*)', which promotes the Chinese Communist Party's achievements and contribution to the country's efflorescence. The slogans 'The People have faith; the country has strength; the nation has hope' and 'Remain true to the original [communist] aspiration and keep our mission firmly in mind' prevail everywhere in China. However, in not following this government propaganda, Chinese Christians' sentiments of nationalism and patriotism do not extend to the love of the Communist Party. They do share in the government's rhetoric of China as a proud, resourceful and beautiful land with a long history and abundant culture, hoping for the revival and flourishing of the great Chinese nation, including its tradition of repelling external threats by excluding outsiders, such as, formerly, the agents

of Western imperialism and now those seeking to expand radical Islamism. The key difference is that, while the core of nationalism and patriotism promoted by current Chinese political authority is Communist ideology and the glory of the CCP, Chinese Christians have as their core interpretations of patriotism-cum-nationalism drawn from the Bible and Christian doctrine. In regarding China's global rise as the work of God and as benefitting their own expansionary missionary ambitions, as well as in sharing a common antipathy towards Islam, the theological stance of Chinese House Church Christians' in effect tacitly supports the Communist Party and the Chinese state. The theological and political thus inadvertently merge.

## Notes

1. As the title suggests, the chapter focuses on Protestant Christianity. Catholicism has a longer history in China than Protestantism. Though remote from the Vatican, it is still controlled by and dependent on the Vatican. Catholicism's limited family and community bases in China have resulted in its slow growth compared with Protestantism, which has flourished by independently meeting the challenges of the country's rapid urbanization in the last three decades. Demographically, the proportion of Catholics in the Chinese population has remained under 1% since 1949, when their number stood at 3 million. In contrast, the percentage of Protestants has increased from less than 0.2% (800,000) in 1949 to currently about 4.3% (60 million). See Madsen (2020: 439).
2. 'Direction of Endeavor for Chinese Christianity in the Construction of New China', commonly known as 'The Christian Manifesto' or 'The Three-Self Manifesto', was published in 1950 (Tze Ming Ng 2012: 174).
3. See the essay 'It is for our faith' <http://www.jonahome.net/files/wmd/wmd9/chapter03.html>.
4. Wang Mingdao in *Spiritual Food Quarterly* (*Ling shi jikan*), issue 17.
5. Jeremiah was the prophet of Israel and the author of the Book of Jeremiah and Lamentations. He proclaimed many prophecies of the God of Israel, including Jerusalem's destruction from 626 BC to 587 BC. His ministry was unwelcome and rejected by the people, and he was therefore persecuted.

6. Without any theological or musical education, Lü Xiaomin has composed many Christian songs 'through the work of the holy spirit'. Her works are widely known and extremely popular not only on the mainland but also in Taiwan and among overseas Chinese. In 2016, Canaan Hymns (Jianan shi xuan) published 1682 songs composed by her (Jianan shi xuan 2001).
7. Wang Yi was a public intellectual in China and the pastor of a House Church, the Early Rain Covenant Church, in Chengdu. He and over a hundred church members were detained in December 2018 because of his provocative attitude towards the government regarding the June the Fourth students' movement and religious freedom.
8. See the article 'Where are the leaders of the June Fourth Democratic Movement now? 民运领袖六四叱咤风云, 今在何方.', <https://www.voachinese.com/a/a-21-w2009-06-03-voa69-61401672/1031288.html> published on 03.06.2009. Accessed on 14.05.2019.
9. See the website of the ChinaAid organization. <https://www.chinaaid.org/>.
10. See the article in footnote 8.
11. See <https://baike.baidu.com/item/%E6%97%A7%E9%87%91%E5%B1%B1%E5%85%B1%E8%AF%86> accessed on 16.05.2019.
12. WeChat (Chinese Weixin) is a multifunction mobile app which is the most popular social media platform, with vast numbers of active Chinese users. Because of its all-in-one multifunctional feature, WeChat is called a 'Super app' that can be used to send various types of messages (text or voice messages, pictures or videos), payments and broadcast messaging similar to Western Twitter and Facebook.
13. The tensions leading to violence in Xinjiang province resulted from some Uygur seeking a separate state against the wishes of the Chinese state. For instance, on 1 March 2014, a group of Uyghur separatists attacked passengers with knives at Kunming railway station, with the loss of 31 civilian lives and injuries to 140, while on 5 July 2009, according to the state's official report of 18 July, a series of violent riots broke out in the provincial capital Urumqi in which a thousand Uyghur allegedly targeted Han Chinese, killing 197 and injuring 1721. The state justifies its so-called correction centres as a necessary response to the violence.
14. See <http://bbs.tianya.cn/post-worldlook-1862334-1.shtml> accessed on 20.05.2019 and [http://k.sina.com.cn/article\\_5471517814\\_14620bc7601900gwb3.html?from=mil](http://k.sina.com.cn/article_5471517814_14620bc7601900gwb3.html?from=mil) accessed on 20.05.2019.

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# 8

## Digital Imaginaries and the Chinese Nation State

Samuel Lengen

### Rockets, Smartphones and the Race for Technological Development

In December 2014, the Chinese spacecraft Chang'e landed on the moon and sent out its rover Yutu to roam the surface. Discussions of the Chinese lunar probe highlighted the modernist and technologist aspirations of the Chinese nation state. International reporting portrayed China's technological achievement as part of an international competition. 'Japanese media focus on the Chang'e: the best proof that China is now a space power'<sup>1</sup> the news platform *China News* proudly proclaimed (2013). Moreover, the *New York Times* called the moon landing a Chinese effort to 'demonstrate that its technological mastery and scientific achievements can approach those of any global power' (Wong and Chang 2011). Even though, as *The Economist* (2013) noted, Yutu was exploring the Moon's surface more than forty years after the USA had sent a man to the moon, this success nevertheless made China the third nation, after Russia and

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the USA, to reach the moon. As these examples show, both Chinese and foreign newspapers discussed the moon landing as part of the larger history of national competition and technological development. Importantly, the event also suggested that China was in the process of 'catching up' with the West.

When the news of the moon landing broke, I was doing fieldwork in Beijing and could not help but notice how the event failed to excite my young and urban interlocutors. Of course, their (non)responses were not representative of China's entire population (see de Kloet's excellent chapter, this volume), but nonetheless it struck me as interesting that the topic of space exploration did not stir their excitement. Technological development has long played a crucial role in the quest for modernity in China, and my interlocutors were as excited about it as anybody. However, as members of the post-1980 generation, they cared more about mobile apps than rocket launches. They had grown up in China in which digital platforms provided them with new forms of consumption, communication and community. The innovations that drove the broader cultural and social changes in their lives were orchestrated by digital platforms. Of course, in part, the moon landing is a digital achievement. However, I would argue that it is not primarily seen as such. What I am considering here, therefore, is how digital platforms inform everyday experiences of digitality. In comparison, in failing to provide my interlocutors with participatory experiences, the moon landing seemed too far removed from their lives.

When I asked some of my interlocutors how they felt about the news, they bluntly told me that it didn't interest them. The day after the moon landing I visited Bai Hang,<sup>2</sup> one of my interlocutors who accompanied me in my quest to buy some newspapers covering the moon landing. After we ventured out to buy the day's papers, it quickly became evident that he had no idea where in the vicinity of his flat we could find such a thing. Like most of my informants, he got his news online. While online newspapers did report the moon landing, there was very little mention of it in my informants' social media feeds, an absence made all the more significant by their exuberant enthusiasm for digital advances in China, be they ride-hailing apps, online payment systems or social media platforms in general.

A historical quest to modernize and thus strengthen the Chinese nation state reverberates through China's project of space exploration. China's moon landing continues a Cold War history of competing superpowers and thus gives expression to a technological and modernist Chinese nation state that is rapidly asserting itself as a global power. I do not mean to suggest that the moon landing did not generate a sense of excitement in China. Rather, I want to use the lack of interest among my own network of interlocutors as an opening to consider the following questions: How have digital platforms shaped their experience of national development? What makes explicitly digital visions of progress more appealing to them? And, how do digital platforms inform Chinese imaginaries of the nation state? Instead of expressing an interest in the new heights of Chinese space travel, my interlocutors, most of whom worked in the digital economy, raved about the supposed flattening effect of the Internet and spoke of grassroots entrepreneurship and the low entrepreneurial thresholds of China's digital economy. These views echo governmental discourses on digitization that frame Chinese modernization as a participatory project.

In this chapter, I examine the production of such national visions as digital imaginaries—collective visions of a nation state rooted in the promise of digital technologies.<sup>3</sup> I argue that the power of such digital imaginaries of the nation state relies on everyday experiences of digital platforms as participatory. I also examine how digitality informs Chinese imaginaries of the nation state. Digital platforms, I argue, support the production of the nation state as a unitary space and inform visions of a participatory Chinese modernity at a time of growing socio-economic difference. The following discussion is divided into three parts. Part one considers the historical dimensions of digital imaginaries of the Chinese nation state. Part two examines contemporary Chinese discourses about the digital as a decentralizing and flattening force that enables widespread participation. Here I draw on Anagnost (1997) to explore how such discourses enable the narrative production of the nation as a unitary subject. Finally, Part three turns to the question of how such digital imaginaries gain purchase. Here, I draw on Meyer's work on 'aesthetic formations' (2009) to argue that digital imaginaries rely on everyday experiences of digital platforms as participatory environments.

## Digital Imaginaries

Digital technologies have long played a central role in Chinese modernization efforts. Chinese digitization policies have rapidly and thoroughly transformed Chinese socio-economic landscapes. The speed of Chinese digitization was truly staggering. After the first email was sent overseas from China in 1997, as Christopher Hughes and Gudrun Wacker (2003: 1) observed in their seminal volume on digitization politics, the number of Chinese Internet users rose to thirty million in six years. In their introduction they concluded that Chinese politics could no longer be understood without examining ‘the social impact of information and communication technologies’ (ibid.). Since the publication of the edited volume in 2003, the number of Chinese Internet users has risen from 30 to more than 770 million (CNNIC 2018: 7). Importantly, the fast and far-reaching change to Chinese society was not a side-effect of digitization but its declared goal.

Hughes and Wacker called their volume *China and the Internet: Politics of the Digital Leap Forward* for two reasons. The first was to highlight a belief among Chinese politicians that information and communication technologies could allow China to ‘leapfrog’ stages of national development. The second was to emphasize the historical continuity of such efforts by hinting at Mao Zedong’s ‘Great Leap Forward’ (1). Scholarship has continued to read China’s politics of digitization against the background of a historical effort to leapfrog development (Damm and Thomas 2006: 2, Damm 2007: 279–280, Liu 2011: 41–43). Apart from a historical desire to supercharge and rapidly speed up development generally, China’s strategic interest in digital development can be traced back to writers such as Alvin Toffler and his notion of the ‘Third Wave’ (Dai 2003: 8). The American futurologist’s work was well-received in China in the 1980s (Damm 2007: 279). Toffler, among other sources of influence, popularized the idea that so-called developing countries could leapfrog past the industrial stage of development to a third stage characterized by advanced informatization. Starting in the 1980s, Chinese efforts to modernize the nation state thus began to rely heavily on informatization.

Beijing's Zhongguancun technology district, where I conducted research during thirteen months of fieldwork between 2013 and 2015, was the product of a digital development strategy of this sort. It was also an example of the comparative dimensions of China's nationalist project of modernization. Narratives of 'catching up with the West' discursively reinforce the unity of the nation state as a comparative unit. In addition, these narratives also reveal a global history of exchange spanning national boundaries. Zhongguancun, to borrow a concept from Peter van der Veer, is an example of an 'interactional history' (2001: 12) linking China and the United States, the outcome of a series of Chinese reimaginings and reproductions of Silicon Valley. The area acquired a strategic focus to emulate Silicon Valley-style technological entrepreneurship and, as such, highlights how imaginaries of the Chinese nation state emerged in the process of global exchange.

Having visited the United States shortly after the reform and opening-up policy of 1978, Chen Chunxian, a researcher and professor with the Chinese Academy of Science, returned convinced that Zhongguancun, with its high density of research institutes and universities, had the potential to become a similar environment for technological entrepreneurship (Tzeng 2010: 114). The area in Beijing's north-west became an experimental zone for high technology in 1988 precisely because it was seen to share certain characteristics with Silicon Valley, most importantly its proximity to several institutions of higher education (*ibid.*). Thus, not unlike China's moon landing, the existence of Beijing's technology district is evidence of a desire to emulate what is perceived as 'Western' progress. It highlights a comparative nationalist project that is rooted in a teleological understanding of modernity, one in which 'catching up' is a prerequisite for national strength.

This drive to catch up with Western powers is an exercise in comparative nationalism. Like the moon landing, Chinese experiments in fostering a tech industry are set in a strongly expressed comparative national framework, in which development is framed as a national race for superiority. It exemplifies how 'nationalism and the nation-state are not singular phenomena', as van der Veer (2013: 660) has argued, 'but emerged during a process of European expansion and the creation of a world-system of economies and states'. Within such an emerging world-system,

China's traumatic encounter with colonial powers in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries created a desire to become a 'modern' nation state. The gap in development between China and Western colonial powers and 'the specter of China's exclusion', as Lisa Rofel (1999: 8) phrases it, brought out a strong Chinese desire for modernization. This desire led to an at once highly comparative and competitive nationalism in which the ambition to catch up with foreign powers shaped Chinese modernist imaginaries and, ultimately, gave rise to projects of digital development.

This interactional history of technological entrepreneurship and its place in national strategies of digital development efforts were consequential. Even in the wake of the global financial crisis of 2007 and 2008, China's digital economy continued to boom. Domestic Internet companies and their digital platforms, it suddenly seemed, had not just caught up with the West but exceeded it. Giving voice to this notion, a *New York Times* headline read: 'China, Not Silicon Valley, Is Cutting Edge in Mobile Tech' (Mozur 2016). During my fieldwork, one event in particular appeared to confirm this view. In September 2014, the Alibaba Group entered the New York Stock Exchange. The outcome was sensational: Alibaba raised \$25 billion, making it the highest initial public offering in history (Noble and Bullock 2014). Whereas China's efforts in space travel were still a matter of drawing even with other global powers, the e-commerce giant's success signalled that the country was already at the forefront of the world's 'digital revolution'. Sustaining hopeful visions of Chinese modernity at a time of economic slowdown, the digital economy, and digital technologies more generally, are at the heart of contemporary Chinese aspirations.

## Digital Flattening

The digital economy is playing an increasingly central role in China's effort to catch up and eventually overtake the 'West'. As production numbers fell following the world financial crisis of 2007 and 2008, China's booming digital economy became a key site of national ambition. Just as importantly, it became an important site of personal aspirations. As such, the digital economy supports a discourse of national

development in which governmental and popular desires are aligned. The digital imaginaries of the Chinese nation state employ an aesthetics of connectivity, access and participation. They draw on prevalent understandings of digital platforms as economically decentralizing and democratizing. In addition to censorship and online nationalist discourse, scholarship must consider how conceptions of the digital inform imaginaries of the nation state. Chinese discourse on the meaning of digital platforms is crucial to understanding their political significance. To this end, a closer look at China's digital economy as a space of national imaginations is in order.

As techno-cultural formations, digital platforms make apparent this discourse of national strength and personal opportunity. Alibaba is a particularly clear example of this narrative of mutual benefit. Its success often appears an expression of China's swift modernization and growing power. However, just before the Alibaba Group went on to claim the highest initial public offering (IPO) in history, CEO Jack Ma explained that it was the company's mission to support ordinary Chinese that was guiding the development of Alibaba's platform ecosystem (A Ke Si Jinrong 2014). Ahead of Alibaba's listing, Jack Ma explained the company vision in a video. The clip, which I first encountered on a blog called 'grassroots dream'<sup>4</sup> (2014), begins by explaining that the dream of Alibaba's founders had been to support small businesses. 'At Alibaba', Ma asserts, 'we fight for the little guy' (2014). Towards the end of the clip, he proclaims that they are proud to 'help entrepreneurs fulfill their dreams' (2014). It is this overlap between the digital ambitions of the Chinese nation state and the personal aspirations of the individual that is crucial to understanding China's digital politics. The trope of the digital platform allows the Chinese government to present digital development as a participatory project.

In 2013, China saw a boom in Internet entrepreneurship as growing numbers of entrepreneurs sought to create their own Internet start-ups and businesses. Picking up on this trend, the Chinese government introduced a 'Mass Entrepreneurship and Innovation'<sup>5</sup> (State Council 2015) policy aimed at incorporating the booming field of digital entrepreneurship into a national development strategy. One specific aim of the policy was to channel the efforts of early-stage or grassroots entrepreneurs into

national innovation and growth. At the heart of this new policy was the notion that informatization had lowered the threshold for entrepreneurial endeavours benefiting China's so-called masses (State Council 2015), making them an increasingly important resource in a project of national innovation. The national ambition expressed in this policy presents a very different narrative than that describing China's space exploration. In this tale of digital development, Chinese citizens are not merely its spectators, as users, costumers and entrepreneurs they occupy a leading role in it.

The embrace of Internet users by the Chinese government is a limited one. The Chinese government has continuously sought to maintain control of its national online sphere. Online liberties are granted by the Chinese government, and the administrative and physical control of the Internet remains firmly in the government's hands (Herold 2011: 1–2). While a firewall restricts access to a range of news and social media outside China, contentious keywords are blocked and 'offending' content quickly removed on the Chinese Internet. Much of this work of controlling online media is outsourced to online service providers who self-censor to avoid the anger of the government. These techniques and technologies of censorship are augmented by more subtle forms of control, in particular efforts aimed at 'public opinion channeling' (Gang and Bandurski 2010: 56). Of particular note in this regard is the employment of paid Internet commentators referred to as the 'five cent army' or *wu mao dang* (Shirk 2010: 14). While online debate definitely exists on the Chinese Internet (e.g. see Yang 2009, Yang and Calhoun 2008), these measures to control China's online sphere highlight the government's efforts to establish a tightly regulated national digital sphere.

The rise of the digital economy in China points to a governmental politics of limiting freedom of expression online while striving to create a more 'open' and 'creative' economic environment. In China's digital economy, the creative potential of digital media—one heavily regulated, as the government tries to ban memes, censor social media and blacklist keywords—reappears as a source of economic development. Despite the apparent success of China's digital economy, this vision of popular creativity highlights the government's balancing act of encouraging innovation through digital media while censoring expression online. What must be noted here is how this approach politicizes the digital on two levels. In

addition to the government targeting the content of digital media, it is the meaning of digital platforms itself that becomes a site of politics. Thus, along with the issues of censorship and the control of online media, it is necessary to explore what Brian Larkin has described as the ‘systemic efforts of governments to stabilize the symbolic logic of infrastructure’ (2008: 3). Digital platforms are not just politically significant because of how they are used—their perceived significance is a matter of politics.

An article posted as an explanatory policy discussion on the Chinese State Council’s official website cited Premier Li Keqiang as proclaiming: ‘We say that the world is becoming flatter; a very important reason for this is the birth of the Internet’<sup>6</sup> (Guangmingwang 2014). This narrative, which is also prevalent in Chinese start-up culture, articulates a promise that digitization will allow China’s population to participate and access opportunities. Li’s statement is significant as part of the government’s broader efforts to present the Internet as an equalizing force. Importantly, both the Chinese Government and start-up entrepreneurs discuss the Internet in terms of its ability to connect all grassroots entrepreneurs and thus flatten the social, cultural and economic landscape.

Alibaba and other big Chinese Internet companies are inspiring examples of success through the Internet, so are the life stories of their founders and CEOs. Perhaps like no other, Jack Ma embodies dreams of entrepreneurial success. His life and work are studied and discussed extensively. ‘Jack Ma is a feature article in the great story of the “China dream”’,<sup>7</sup> Wang Chuantao (Wang 2014) argued in an online news article. For many of my informants, he embodied a truth about every entrepreneur’s digital potential for near unlimited success, however unlikely or difficult to achieve it may be. Jack Ma, the popular discourse maintains, had the right idea at the right moment in history, anticipating the potential of a Chinese digital economy, and was thus able to go from being a schoolteacher to becoming the founder and CEO of a multi-billion empire. His example charges the Internet’s flat topography with imagined potential, which is often framed as a connection between what is seen to be the flat, horizontal and distributed nature of the Internet on the one hand and visions of nearly unlimited entrepreneurial success on the other. This digital narrative, I argue, has become a crucial element in the production of the Chinese nation as a unitary space.

## Digital Unification

In the Alibaba video clip discussed in the previous section, Jack Ma recounts the beginnings of Alibaba and his founding dream of building up a company to serve millions of small businesses. Today, he explains, this vision remains the same, as they continue their mission ‘to make it easy to do business anywhere’ (A Ke Si Jinrong 2014). During this last statement, the clip cuts from what looks like a clothing business led by women to a group of young men in sports clothes, huddled around smartphones on a hillside against the backdrop of a mountain range. Additional personal success stories feature a female art student in Shanghai who likes to shop on Alibaba’s Taobao platform and who proclaims that ‘Alibaba is a lifestyle’ (2014). Another scene shows a painter with a physical disability in a rural town in Sichuan province who found hope after selling her work on Taobao. ‘Without it’, she asks, ‘how would I sell my work in this little town?’ A Tibetan shop owner in Qinghai remembers how isolated he felt before Taobao. ‘A physical shop can only reach local customers’, he reflects, ‘but a Taobao shop is open to customers around the world’ (all quotes from A Ke Si Jinrong 2014).

Alibaba’s clip presents a China united by the company’s platform ecosystem. In it, class, gender and ethnicity do not appear to challenge the unity of the nation, nor does the rural-urban divide, despite being exacerbated by decades of marketization and economic reform. The idea that digitization will dissolve regional differences and inequalities is not entirely new. Beyond fuelling visions of international competitiveness, China’s digital development strategies have long held out a promise of temporal and spatial unity. The Chinese government, Karsten Giese has argued, believed that its informatization strategy could not only raise international competitiveness but also help overcome ‘interregional development gaps’ (2003: 30) in China itself. Alibaba’s video clip, although produced by a private corporation, resonates strongly with government accounts of national unity achieved through the digital. Its framing of Internet entrepreneurship as a unifying and universally accessible vehicle for success is closely aligned with government discourse around the same issue.

Mediations of digital entrepreneurship and consumption such as Alibaba's clip present a particular mode of narrating the nation as a unitary subject. Of course, regional differences and inequalities of various kinds have existed and exist in China, despite growing numbers of Internet users. 'The nation-space', Anagnost has argued, 'is never unitary but multiple within itself' (Anagnost 1997: 4). The fact that the Internet has not simply brought an end to such multiplicity, but in some ways exacerbated it, was most evident when, following riots in the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region, the Chinese central government cut the region's access to the Internet between summer 2009 and May 2010 (Herold 2011: 2). More recently, accounts of the internment and digital surveillance of Uyghurs has shed light on how mobile technologies sustain a vast apparatus of control targeting China's Muslim minority (Byler 2019). It is because of such ruptures and inequalities within the space of the nation, according to Anagnost, that nation states must continuously narrate and perform their own unity. The impossibility of such unity makes this an ongoing effort aimed at bridging temporal and spatial gaps.

Alibaba's discourse about its own platform ecosystem, alongside government strategies of digital modernization, envisions a unified national space. Difference does not disappear in Alibaba's video clip. Rather, the video presents a world in which digital platforms make regional, ethnic and class differences irrelevant. In it, the unification of national space stems from equal access to a capitalist and digitally mediated modernity. While many people in China will experience a reality that contrasts strongly with this audiovisual narrative, everyday experiences of connectivity and access do give some traction to promises of a digitally mediated and participatory Chinese modernity. This became evident to me during dinner with Bai Hang and his ex-girlfriend, Yu Ling, when the conversation turned to coffee. Yu Ling, who worked for an online company selling paintings and frames, had become interested in drinking good coffee ever since gaining access to a coffee machine at her workplace. When she asked me if I could recommend a good brand of coffee, the only one that came to my mind was one I had a habit of buying when I lived in Switzerland. I was convinced that it was not available in China and told her so. When she asked me to search for the brand's name on her iPad

Air, it turned out that the product, coffee beans roasted in Switzerland, was for sale on Taobao for 60 Yuan Renminbi.

My point is not to say that Bai Hang and Yu Ling completely accepted the notion of a digitally united nation. Rather, this episode supports the case about the participatory nature of Alibaba's pioneering success in global modernity. As opposed to the moon landing, the company's triumph on the New York Stock Exchange suggested that Chinese Internet users were already part of and contributing to a strong and modern China. If only through consumption, Alibaba made them part of a capitalist space of global modernity. If only for that moment, the gap between China and a perhaps loosely envisioned 'Western modernity' closed down. China caught up not through a symbolic technological achievement far removed from their lives, but in the mundane yet pleasurable moments readily afforded to them by digital platforms. 'Not only does the nation mark its impossible unity in relation to time', Anagnost has argued, 'but also in space' (Anagnost 1997: 4). The significance of Bai Hang and Yu Ling's use of Taobao is that it affected how they experienced China both spatially and temporally.

The government's efforts to stabilize the meaning of digital platforms draw on everyday experiences and seek to connect them to a national project. Its claims about the potential for national unity and strength through digitization gain purchase in relation to the everyday experiences of a global digital modernity. Alibaba's narrative of a unified national space draws on a familiarity with its services that anyone in China who has used Taobao to shop for goods would have. Such consumption is an intimate part of people's lives, a personal experience that provides a crucial foundation to claims that the Internet facilitates access, participation and connection across China. Experiences of the spaces and temporalities of global capitalist modernity on digital platforms like Alibaba's Taobao inform understandings of the digital as a connective force. Such participatory experiences of technological development are a crucial experiential foundation on which digital imaginaries of the Chinese nation state gain purchase. In the following section, I consider the relationship between experiences of the digital and digital imaginaries of the nation state.

## Digital Experience

To understand the power of the digital imaginaries of the Chinese nation state, I argue that scholarship needs to consider how corporeal experiences of digital platforms support the narrative production of the nation as a unified space. Benedict Anderson (2006: 37–46) famously pointed to the role of print capitalism and the creation of new spheres of communication as a central factor in the creation of ‘national consciousness’ and imagined communities. It is only a small step to extend his discussion to the Internet in China and ask how digital media support national imaginaries. However, as I have argued, a critical analysis has to move beyond an analysis of discourse to consider the corporeal experiences of digital platforms.

The digital imaginaries of the Chinese nation state gain power in relation to bodily experiences of digital platforms. What makes this emphasis on the corporeal important is the question of how imaginaries find traction in people’s lives. To address this issue, I draw on Birgit Meyer’s (2009) critique of Anderson’s emphasis on imagination in the formation of communities. Her intervention seeks to shift our conceptual gaze from the mind, imagination and judgement to the senses, experience and the body. My discussion of digital platforms and national imaginaries similarly tries to highlight the crucial role of corporeal experience in sustaining national imaginations.

A consideration of the corporeal experiences enabled by digital platforms, I contend, is crucial to understanding how digital imaginaries of the nation state find traction in people’s lives. Meyer (2009: 3–5) argues that Anderson’s concept of the imagined community fails to consider sufficiently how communities materialize. For this purpose, she introduces the concept of ‘aesthetic formations’, through which (2009: 6) she hopes to shed light not only on the ‘modes through which imaginations materialize through media’, but also on how such materializations produce sensibilities ‘that vest these imaginations with a sense of truth’. By giving more room to materiality and sensation, Meyer hopes to broaden Anderson’s argument while holding on to his focus on media and mediation.

In previous sections, I have highlighted the important role played by discourses around digital platforms. Such discourses, however, must find purchase in people's lives. How, then, does the discourse of the participatory and unifying potential of digital platforms become an experiential truth? Imaginations, Meyer argues, are invested and become matters of truth by becoming 'tangible outside the realm of the mind, by creating a social environment that materializes through the structuring of space, architecture, ritual performance, and by inducing bodily sensations' (ibid.: 5). Her argument is directed against 'a representational stance that privileges the symbolic above other modes of experience, and tends to neglect the reality effect of cultural forms' (ibid.: 6). Drawing on her discussion, I argue that corporeal experiences of digital platforms as participatory and unifying can invest digital imaginaries of the Chinese nation state with a sense of truth.

This very truth of digitally mediated communities has been questioned in scholarship, which considers affective experience an insufficient basis for real communities. In online spaces such as blogs, social networks, twitter and video platforms, Jodi Dean (2013: 95) argues, affect is 'a binding technique' that is produced through reflexive communication: 'Every little tweet or comment, every forwarded image or petition, accrues a tiny affective nugget, a little surplus enjoyment, a smidgen of attention that attaches to it, making it stand out from the larger flow before it blends back in'. Such affective links, however, she argues, do not result in 'actual communities' but 'produce feelings of community'. Her argument appears to suggest that online communities aren't quite real.

However, as with any other kind of community, what matters is that digital communities are experienced as true. Like national communities in general, digitally mediated communities, national or otherwise, become very 'real' when they are experienced as such. The more important question, therefore, is how digital platforms invest feelings of community with a sense of truth. Instead of questioning the actuality of China's online community, I suggest, we should investigate how uses of digital platforms and the affective experiences they afford support the digital imaginaries of the nation. Crucially, this mediation draws on a digital aesthetics of access and participation. How China's online

community is experienced is therefore central to the production of digital imaginaries of the nation.

Beyond simply facilitating a national online sphere and a national digital economy, digitality can invest the imaginaries of a participatory Chinese modernity and a unified nation state with a sense of truth. Efforts to unify a wide range of experiences within the framework of the nation state seek to control the meaning and political significance of digital platforms. This stabilization of the meaning of the digital, however, takes place in relation to corporeal experiences, specifically in relation to experiences of digital platforms as participatory. Digital platforms provide a grammar through which a strong and unified China can be envisioned. They also afford the experiences in relation to which digital imaginaries gain purchase. Accordingly, the digital narration of the nation cannot be reduced to the imagination of a mind, but also needs to include bodily experience and the work performed on digital platforms, including online environments such as Taobao.

Digital experiences aren't homogenous in China, and promises of digital participation and ultimately unification certainly won't convince everyone. However, those who experience digital platforms as a positive force in their lives are more likely to find the promise of a participatory Chinese modernity and a unified nation state convincing. The widespread use of the Internet in China thus provides legitimacy to depictions of a nation that is spatially and temporally unified. To understand the power of digital imaginaries of the Chinese nation state, scholarship must consider how digital platforms afford experiences of access and participation, as well as show how such experiences are in turn used by the Chinese government as evidence of a digitally flattened and unified national space.

## Conclusion

In some ways, China's moon landing and Alibaba's platform ecosystem could not be more different. The moon landing is an extraordinary event and a relatively rare display of technological skill. Meanwhile, Alibaba's platforms are used by Chinese citizens daily in countless routine transactions. However, what I have shown in this chapter is that, like the moon

landing, digital platforms are important elements in a comparative and competitive nationalism that sees China as being in a global race for technological development. By beginning a discussion of the digital imaginaries of the Chinese nation state with an anecdote of China's moon landing, I have aimed to ask a question about the power of digital imaginaries.

I have argued that we must consider the participatory nature of the digital imaginaries of the Chinese nation state. Like the moon landing, digital technologies inform narratives of national development that frame technological innovation as a global competition between nation states. As opposed to space technology, however, digital platforms are an intimate part of people's lives. Like the politics of Mao Zedong's 'Great Leap Forward', China's 'Digital Leap Forward' claims to be a mass movement—not the sole achievement of an exclusive and remote research laboratory, but a collective achievement involving its over 700 million Internet users.

Chinese digital innovation strategies such as Mass Entrepreneurship and Innovation speak to such participatory visions of national innovation and technological development. Ultimately, despite the persistence of profound divisions in China, imaginaries of digital unification fuel comparative and competitive nationalism in the country, for it is the vast number of Chinese Internet users that currently makes possible the size of its digital economy and the success of its digital platforms. It is also this collective of Internet users that fuels Chinese aspirations to become a digital superpower. In my research, it was this participatory dimension, however limited, that made the success of companies like Alibaba nationally significant.

My discussion of Alibaba has shown how the success of Chinese digital platforms echoes and reproduces imaginaries of the Chinese nation state in which users play a central role as actors in Chinese modernization. In such narratives, connectivity comes to signify the inclusion of China's population as a whole. Alibaba's narration of its platform ecosystem as a unifying technology is neatly aligned with a government discourse proclaiming digitization as a means to overcome the differences and divisions contained within the space of the nation. To challenge such digital imaginaries, it is important to consider the divisions and inequalities that

continue to make up China's digital politics. In some instances, digital experiences of access and participation may give validity to the government discourse of digital unification; in others, however, experiences of disenfranchisement, persecution and inequality will far outweigh them.

At the same time, stories of digital innovation as participatory cannot be reduced to governmental or corporate discourse in China. The Chinese government's promise of digital development draws on a popular and widespread belief in the decentralizing and inclusive effect of digital technologies and incorporates them into its nationalist frameworks. It utilizes widespread enthusiasm for technologies that have often been perceived as the very source of new ideas and possibilities in recent decades. New online venues of exchange, participation and consumption have changed the spatial and temporal experiences of a large part of China's population, providing digital imaginaries of the Chinese nation state with a crucial experiential foundation. To assess the digital imaginaries of the Chinese nation state critically as involving a participatory modernity, we need to consider how government discourses draw on existing experiences and understandings of the digital as an equalizing force.

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## Notes

1. *Ri mei guanzhu chang'e luo yue: Zhongguo chengwei yuzhou daguo zui hao zhengming* (this as well as all subsequent translations are the author's).
2. To protect my interlocutors' anonymity, I use aliases.
3. My discussion of digital imaginaries is indebted to Charles Taylor's (2002) work on 'social imaginaries' and, more specifically, to Christopher Kelty's (2008) exploration of open software as a kind of social imaginary. I use

the concept of digital imaginaries to highlight the importance of digital technologies in shared imaginaries of Chinese modernity.

4. *Caogenmeng*.
5. *Dazhong chuangye, wanzhong chuangxin*.
6. *Women shuo shijie bian ping le, yige hen zhongyao de yuanyin jiu shi hulian-wang de yansheng*.
7. *Ma Yun shi 'zhongguo meng' hongda gushi zhong de yige textie*.

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# 9

## Moral Labour, the Nation and the State in Contemporary China

Xiao He

Since economic liberalization and the opening-up policy of the early 1980s, China has become more connected to the global market. With the flood of foreign commodities and increasing global competition, the concerns over and search for national dignity, spirit and tradition have also been on the rise since the 1980s. Within China, the developing market economy has brought many rural people into the cities and connected them with an extended national space. Scholars of nationalism have long noted its connection with modern capitalist development. As Gellner notes (1983), industrial development requires a mobile workforce oriented towards a standardized, effectively shared medium of national culture. Anderson (1983) also notes how colonial officials' common career trajectories made them pioneers of nationalism, thereby enabling imagined national communities. In the spirit of Peter van der Veer, whose work situates nationalism in a global encounter and investigates how societies forge their national imaginations in specific contexts, this

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chapter investigates how modern labour organization and the market economy are related to the nation's formation in contemporary China. I address this issue with reference to rural migrants in Shanghai with whom I conducted ethnographic research in 2013. I also made multiple follow-up trips until 2019.

Rural-urban migration in China developed in parallel with the de-collectivization of the rural economy and economic liberalization in the early 1980s as the state has gradually lifted its limits on the free movement of people. However, the household registration system (*hu kou* 户口), a particular institutional legacy of Maoist socialism, still controls the distribution of important welfare goods (education and health insurance, for instance). While any person can move from a rural area to work in any city in China, their children still have to go back to their hometown where the household is registered to attend high school and take the national college examination. They thus form something of a 'floating population' and are excluded from urban citizenship. The state maintains a highly unequal distribution of public goods between urban and rural citizens, and openly classifies rural migrants as a 'weak group', thereby recognizing their disadvantages and their need for protection (Holbig and Neckel 2016). Rural migrants are included in the national community not through legal citizenship but through their hard work, suffering and sacrifice—a kind of moral labour. The socialist state elevates working people's labour as a symbol of the nation. Although the national ideology of hard work provides a language for building a positive public identity beyond social inequality, it also highlights the paradox of egalitarian expectations and increasing social inequality.

While migrants perform the public identity of the hard worker, they also cultivate an alternative imagination of the nation through emerging markets. Money mediates the imagination of the nation, yet it also contests the value of labour and highlights the social inequalities between rural and urban citizens, the rich and the common people (*laobaixing* 老百姓).<sup>1</sup> Money-making events that combine a hyper-inclusive market with an opaque state often enable rural migrants to imagine their inclusion in the nation.

In this chapter, I first contextualize the socialist ideology of hard work since Mao's era. The second part examines rural migrants' ambivalent

attitudes towards hard work. The third part analyses how labour is devalued through the dynamics of money, creating social disjunctions within the nation. The final section examines how rural migrants imagine their inclusion in the nation through various forms of small-scale investment.

## The State, Labour and the Socialist Utopia

Responding to Western and Japanese imperialism, 'Saving the nation' has been an important slogan in China since the early twentieth century. Margherita Zanasi (2006) has noted that, in the first half of the twentieth century, the Chinese nation was often envisioned as being composed of producers united by their common goal of increasing production and thereby saving the nation.

After the communist revolution,<sup>2</sup> the socialist state was less concerned with saving the nation than with creating a new communist society. Socialist revolution and socialist production were taken as bridges to the future society. Labour was encouraged more than consumption. The new socialist state claimed that the new socialist person was created through labour. Unlike in capitalist societies, in the new socialist society, one's social position was determined by one's work and ability, rather than one's social origins and property. Work was not a shameful burden but a glorious and courageous activity. Mao criticized Confucius for slighting labour. The new state expected people to develop comradeship through collective working, comradeship that could be extended to one's fellow countrymen and even to working people all over the world.

However, the Maoist state institutionalized the distinctions between rural and urban, peasant and worker through its strict regulation of mobility. It also promised that the differences between peasants and workers, the rural and the urban, manual and mental labour would be erased in the future communist society with the development of socialist productivity and the transition to communism. Mao encouraged civil servants, artists and intellectuals to participate in physical labour, urging that education should also be connected with production. At the same time, workers were encouraged to learn the theories of Marxism and Maoism and become experts in them. The state media extolled the heroic

achievement of model workers and the glory of labour, thus emphasizing the virtues of physical and productive labour.

We can see a tension here between the material and spiritual dimensions of labour. In the period of the Great Leap Forward (1958–1960), the *People's Daily* had to argue that 'socialist hard labour', to be performed for the whole of society and thus become a source of happiness, was different from the exploitative 'capitalist hard labour', which was a form of slavery. The slogan of this period was 'bitterness first, sweetness later'. Around the period of the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976), the utopian mobilization of hard work during the Great Leap Forward was criticized as smacking of utility and selfishness; the radical Maoist leadership attempted to channel the nation's energy into class politics and revolution instead. Daring to endure hard work was glorified as a form of revolutionary sacrifice for the people.

The socialist state recognized the material interests of workers who received compensation and benefits based on the quantity and value of their labour. The state also expected people not to consider the material benefits. There was a tension between selfless sacrifice for the collective and nation, and the concern for material distribution. As noted by van der Veer, the high socialist experiment is full of contradiction and paradox: 'it is a combination of the ascetic rejection of materialism and a utopia of material abundance; despite the failure of the Great Leap Forward, Mao's charismatic leadership still kept the revolutionary momentum' (van der Veer 2013: 134).

In the post-Mao era, the realization of communism has been postponed, material incentives have been reintroduced and the state has reoriented itself to economic development. Hard work is used to justify wealth: those who are capable of working hard will become rich first. In the aftermath of the reform of state enterprises in the earlier 1990s, the *People's Daily* published some stories about how laid-off workers had become entrepreneurs through their hard work. The post-Mao state continues to promote a spirit of heroic labour in which model workers dare to work hard and sacrifice for the nation, treating their own health and kinship ties lightly.

The post-Mao state also has to confront two forms of inequality. First, the market economy inevitably creates a gap between rich and poor. The

state tries to create a national community in which everyone works hard and those who become rich first help those of their co-nationals who have been left behind. The recent state-led poverty-alleviation campaign aims to eradicate absolute poverty and establish a ‘moderately prosperous society’ by 2020 (*BBC 2021*). The communist dream is to articulate a national community in which people help each other. Second, though the socialist state still exalts hard work as a national virtue, it also realizes that its labour-intensive economy is of low quality in the global hierarchy of production: the words ‘knocked up in China’ almost becomes a national embarrassment. The state attempts to foster high-quality development and highlights the importance of technological innovation and creativity beyond visible labour.

Economic growth connects hard work to the national spirit and rejuvenation. Hard work and frugality are affirmed as traditional and revolutionary virtues. Dedication to work is one of China’s Present Xi Jinping’s core socialist values (prosperity, democracy, civility, harmony, freedom, equality, justice, the rule of law, patriotism, dedication, integrity and friendship). The moral codes of citizenship also require citizens to love the country, the people, labour, science and socialism. Xi defines ‘hard work’ as the key spirit of the nation. In his 2015 Labour Day speech, he said, ‘the Chinese nation is a hard-working nation. The quality of a labourer is very important for the development of the nation and state’ (Xi 2015). He extolled the virtues of labour as making history and the nation: labour is the source of wealth and happiness, the path to the realization of the Chinese dream, namely national rejuvenation, which depends on people’s honest and diligent work.

With the arrival of economic development and material abundance, however, concerns have been raised about the declining spirit of hard work, especially among the younger generation, in the family, the schools and society at large. Labour education has been re-emphasized in school programmes. The Ministry of Education even issued a Labour Education Opinion in 2015 (Ministry of Education 2015), encouraging schools to develop a labour curriculum and extra-curricular labour education. Students are encouraged to plant trees, repair electronic appliances, do interior decoration and even raise animals.

## The Rural-Urban Divide, Hard Work, Inclusion and Exclusion

Post-Mao economic development entails labour mobility, on which the state has slowly lifted restrictions. However, the household registration system (*hu kou* 户口), a particular institutional legacy of Maoist socialism that controls the provision of social welfare and the movement of people, still marks one's social status and has effects on one's employment. Migration and contacts often reinforce the rural-urban divide.

For example there is a discursive distinction between local Shanghainese (*shanghai ren* 上海人) and outsiders to the city (*waidi ren* 外地人) both at work and beyond. In the peri-urban village of Shanghai, rural migrants rent housing from local Shanghainese, who, former peasants turned landlords, now live off migrants' rents. Most local Shanghainese have moved out of their homes and live in gated communities elsewhere, only returning to enjoy their leisure time with old friends. Rural migrants often say that local Shanghainese's wealth was not earned through their hard work but came from the state's welfare assistance or real-estate developers' compensation payments for relocation. When migrant workers compare their hard labour to the 'laziness' of local Shanghainese and the ways in which the urban rich effortlessly obtain money from the state, they are demanding a kind of recognition that goes beyond legal definitions of citizenship.

Without urban citizenship and educational degrees, my informants often told me that they were willing to work hard. Job advertisements still include this as a condition of employment. Among migrant workers, one's ability to work hard and to 'eat bitterness' (enduring hard work) is also judged by family members, friends, neighbours and employers. One's inability to endure bitterness—reflected, *inter alia*, in idleness—would often cause harsh judgements to be voiced behind one another's backs. Migrants in an urban village often judge each other in terms of whether a person is capable of 'eating bitterness'. When migrants form temporary work teams to carry out subcontracting work, they often include acquaintances who are prepared to work hard.

Bosses also use the popular discourse of 'eating bitterness' to discipline workers. Some even participate in labouring themselves, thereby personalizing the spirit of hard work. Their attitude towards bitterness is at the very least ambiguous. Their hopes for their children are that they will attend university and find better occupations, thus allowing them to escape from hard work.

The capacity to work hard is less an ideal virtue than a performative quality. During fieldwork I often heard migrants from a particular region saying that they were more capable of working hard than migrants from other regions, thus claiming that they were better candidates for employment. They often showcased their ability to work hard in front of outsiders. In doing so, they aimed for market gain and a positive identity beyond legal citizenship.

Within intimate circles of friends and family, people would nonetheless admire the cunning of avoiding hard labour while on the job. My informants were happy to share stories with me in which they fooled their bosses rather than working hard for them. Some proudly told me that they were good at 'loitering' while working, which requires cultivating a good relationship with your boss rather than working hard.

Working too hard for a boss is in fact a source of other's suspicions. One day Luo came to me to complain about his friend Mao Jie's excessive work ethic. Mao Jie was famous among his acquaintances for being extremely capable of eating bitterness. Luo usually praised his ethic of hard work and considered it a sacrifice for his four sons. On that day, however, Mao Jie asked Luo to work with him for a boss. At 12:50, lunch had still not arrived, and Luo was growing both hungry and impatient. The boss said he was not hungry. Luo said, 'He was not doing the work, so of course he was not hungry'. He blamed the late lunch on his friend Mao Jie: 'He was too devoted to work and to the boss. The boss might give him several thousand yuan. But you should not let your workers feel hungry.' On that occasion, Luo saw his friend Mao Jie's habit of working hard as selling himself out.

While my informants often recognized the importance of hard work when making public statements, they also acknowledged that their achievements were constrained by their low educational credentials, nonlocal status and the precarious moral economy of personal

connections. Within the work place, the employer-employee relationship was also often mediated by personal relationships. In light of the lack of open and efficient enforcement of the law, my informants rarely invoked the legal protection of employment rights. To protect their autonomy and benefits at work from being violated by the arbitrary exercise of power, they often had to resort to personal connections instead.

Some justified their interest in cultivating connections with reference to Chinese tradition. They claimed that, unlike foreigners, the Chinese emphasize human connections (*guan xi* 关系): cultivating proper human ties is an important element of Chinese ritual. The national tradition also allows hard work and personal connections to co-exist. One street promoter told me that he was reading the Chinese classics. He hoped to cultivate relations of trust with potential clients through his own gradual but sustained efforts. For him, the Chinese classics can provide eternal rather than ephemeral inspiration for everyday conduct.

The reference to supposed national characteristics sometimes leads to criticism. Many informants would complain that success in Chinese society relied on personal connections rather than on hard work. One 55-year-old male migrant expressed a sense of nostalgia for the supposedly honest labour of Mao's period and a sense of grievance towards some entrepreneurs who had taken advantage of privatization in the post-Mao reform period. He continued, 'Their money is earned without effort. They did not experience any bitterness in getting the money. They got it from high up.' The hard work migrants did give them a moral advantage in criticizing the rich.

In his ethnography of a Chinese village, Hans Steinmuller (2013) has identified a gap between the state-promoted discourses of hard work and the many lived experiences of success and failure. In her ethnographic work on rural Sichuan, Anna Lora-Wainwright (2013) also dwells on the ambivalence about hard work among her informants, especially the younger generation. On the one hand, aware that less strenuous alternatives to making a living are available to those with better social networks and education, villagers resented the continued necessity for hard work. On the other hand, they also recognized that hard work played a key role in reproducing family and community relations. The socialist state promotes a national spirit of hard work in trying to create a labour-based

national community. Paradoxically, the national ideology of hard work provides a vantage point from which to criticize the social inequality and corruption brought about by dubious state institutions and personal networks.

## Labour, Money and the Nation

The socialist experiment in Mao's period aimed to turn labour into the ultimate source of value and restrict the circulation of money. In the People's Communes of that period, the value of labour and its remuneration was based on a work points system. Peasants in rural communes rarely received cash, their everyday livelihoods mainly being provided through redistribution by the state. The restricted use of money did not eradicate social or economic inequality but rather perpetuated the hierarchy between rural and urban, socialist industrial workers and peasants. Wages and welfare of all kinds provided great security for people in urban areas. Wages were once seen as a privilege of government officials and urban citizens; only those working in the state sector would receive a regular wage and various supplementary payments in both money and kind.

The market development and labour migration of the post-Mao period, by contrast, has provided many rural people with an opportunity to access waged employment in the cities that is paid in cash. Many informants claimed that government officials, medical doctors and teachers in the state sector, once thought of as occupying superior positions outside the 'society' of ordinary people, now also work for money and even take 'gifts of money' (i.e. bribes) from ordinary people. There is no moral hierarchy in term of occupation. Some informants even exaggerated the effect of money in negating the power of any state institution, arguing that money could fix everything. My informants often celebrated money's freedom-giving potential.

The state's household registration system defined my informants as rural citizens whose welfare benefits were connected to their villages. In the 1990s, lacking urban citizenship, their children were not allowed to enter the urban public schools sponsored by the government. Since 2010,

migrants' children have been allowed to attend urban public primary and junior high schools, but they still have to transfer to high schools in their rural hometowns for the college entrance examinations. Moreover, despite this progressive policy, migrants' children still had to meet complicated requirements for enrolment in urban public schools. After a few days' futile search for a primary school for his children, one migrant asked: 'If we all use the same RMB (Chinese currency), why can't my children attend the same primary school here?' When facing rural-urban discrimination in their everyday lives, my informants would ask the rhetorical question: 'Does RMB make distinction?'

While the state still maintains a distinction between rural and urban citizens, the flow of money criss-crosses the boundary between them. Rural migrants participate not only in the national labour market but also in a national consumer market. They also point to the newly built house, new furniture and appliances and marvel at how far rural livelihoods are now integrated into the national market. In the harvest season, one return migrant told me: 'You see how much change has happened here. I do not know what life will look like in the next few years. In the city, now nearly every family has a car. We also have many cars in our village. In the future, every rural family will have a car too.'

Post-Mao labour migration has coincided with the expansion of the market and the money economy. Here it is not equal legal citizenship that mediates the nation, but money and currency. The Renminbi, China's official currency, literally means 'people's money'. Currency mediates the imagination of a common national space and serves as the symbol of national unity. My informants often extended the metaphor of money in order to understand 'Chinese society' at large in the context of the expanding money economy and migration. Money provides a vantage point from which an enlarged national space can be imagined.

Even as money mediates national unity, it also highlights social differences. As rural migrants are remunerated in money, the value hierarchy of labour is immediately evident. Ying, now the owner of several wood-flooring manufacturers, first came to Shanghai in 1992. One Shanghainese friend helped him find a job in a food workshop owned by Wenzhou merchants. 'I worked there for seven days, from early morning until late at night. I then asked how much I could earn. The boss said I could earn

six yuan on average every day. At that time Shanghai was a very xenophobic city. I was treated as a country bumpkin. What are country bumpkins? They are of low quality, cheap, and they cannot get a proper wage. I was such a strong labourer, yet I was only paid six yuan a day, the same as a female worker received.’ He only worked there for seven days before deciding to set up his own small business.

Money also connects rural migrants’ labour immediately to everyday livelihoods through a growing consumer market. I often heard my informants say: ‘You do not have food if you stop working’. Their everyday subsistence and livelihoods had to be arranged through money and the market. They often highlighted the fact that they had to spend money on vegetables, water and housing. Besides, living expenses in Shanghai have also tremendously shot up. My informants never failed to keep track of the ever-increasing food and housing prices and the other living costs. However, despite occasional nostalgia for the non-commercial subsistence of life in rural areas, my informants told me, with a sense of surprise, that they now have to buy food in their rural hometowns, the prices of which are nearly the same as in the cities. Stranded in both rural and urban areas, my informants found themselves budgeting against rising expenditure in both areas.

Many migrants originally had a kind of romantic imagination of their hometown as providing security—a community away from the insecure market and society at large, the home to which they could return after a period of urban employment. Every time they went back to their hometown, they took with them the cash they had earned, and saved it in a hometown bank. As the banks only paid very low interest rates, their savings also declined. As they observed, the rich, who did not have to rely on jobs and wages, could take advantage of the low interest rates in investing in the housing market and thereby earn money from money. Given the rising consumption in their hometowns and the devaluation of their savings, migrants were now faced with constantly postponing their original plan to return. Sometimes, even a return visit was too expensive.

During a short visit to his hometown, one migrant told me: ‘We do not plant crops any more. We have to buy rice. If we stay at home, we have to “eat” our old savings and could not sustain ourselves for very long. Now the state has devalued our money. Toothpaste originally cost

three yuan; now it costs six: the extra three yuan goes on tax. Petrol now sells at six yuan per litre. The government says that our oil price is linked to the global oil price. We produce 60% of our oil in our country, so why should we link our petrol price to the global market?' As migration and the money economy connected his hometown to a wider national and international world, he claimed his hometown had become a lifeless place abandoned by recent developments. He continued: 'There are no job opportunities. Nothing is worth money here. We are not close to any big cities. We rely purely on money from the outside. When we are short of money, we go out to work, or the local government goes to the higher government to beg for some more. Then we spend it.' He imagined a bleak future for his hometown when the young people had all left and the state provided the last care: 'We are the last men in the village. The state will cover our healthcare and clothing.'

The state is therefore still expected to protect people's livelihoods as a guarantee of its legitimacy. Every Spring Festival (Chinese New Year), government leaders pay a symbolic visit to food market. The price of everyday necessities is expected to be stable. Complaining about the inflation of living costs often enabled strangers to initiate a conversation. These complaints often connected the rise in living costs to the state's manipulative policy, greedy businessmen and increasing social inequality. Their complaints also fostered a sense of belonging to a group of common people (*lao bai xing* 老百姓).

Against the inflated living costs, my informants often complained, their wages were stagnating, while the urban middle class and elites could participate in different forms of investment, such as the stock market and real estate, and associate themselves with economic growth. There was widespread criticism that the privileged were acquiring their wealth not through labour but through invisible and dubious speculation and corruption. My informants often aspired to leave labour behind and become entrepreneurs to lift them out of unequal employment and stagnant wages and give them a sense of a progressive career.

Zhi Guo, a thirty-year-old migrant from rural Jiangsu, worked for a company installing the internet in clients' home. While doing that work, he had many opportunities to meet relatively rich house-owners. These

encounters often enhanced his sense of being discriminated against by city-dwellers, causing him to launch into a moral critique of recent economic developments. He told me about a couple he had met while working in their house: 'They do nothing at home. They just invest in calligraphy work.' He often criticized the rich people he encountered for having earned their wealth through speculation rather than labour and for lacking moral integrity. In his view, contrary to Deng Xiaoping's national ideal of common prosperity, the rich despised the poor rather than helped them.

Since I met Zhi Guo for the first time, he has been considering starting his own business. He saw his current job as transitional in his employment trajectory. His wages only gave him enough for the family to survive; his work experience and expertise were not valued. Once the main internet-restructuring project had come to an end, he discovered that he could not obtain as many assignments as before and earned less money. He eventually left this job and went to stay in his hometown for two years, unable to work up any enthusiasm for his next job.

He often discussed with me the possibility of setting up an agricultural business, an attempt to link his entrepreneurial aspirations to rural development. His aspirations also overlapped with the state's rural vitalization project as part of its policy of national rejuvenation. He explained why he still insisted on pursuing entrepreneurship all those years: 'It is not only about large sums of money. Your enterprise is a place where you can find your footing in society. If you can make a profit, you can also distribute resources equally. I do not want to earn a million alone. Instead, I want to lead a team of ten persons, each of whom could earn 100,000 each.' He stressed the moral superiority of his entrepreneurial dream: it was not intended for speculation, but for the well-being of ordinary people, especially for those in rural areas.

Very much interested in Chinese history, Zhi Guo was highly critical of the country's current development model. He said that technology was still controlled by foreign countries and that the Chinese only produced it, a model that had cost China resources and health. He increasingly extolled the virtues of rural life, since it was rural people who had sacrificed themselves for the republic from the very beginning. He imagined

an alternative view of rural development, a future when the boundary between the city and the village would disappear because of technological development and 'you can work anywhere'. He hoped that China could devise a particular development, one that was different from the current Chinese and foreign models. Though he was highly critical of the state's development policy, he believed that only this, coupled with wise leaders and anti-corruption initiatives, could bridge the gap between rural and urban, thus turning rural areas into a land of hope.

My informants often extended the metaphor of money to understand 'Chinese society' at large in the context of the expanding money economy and migration. Money provides a vantage point from which to imagine an enlarged national space. Paper money, as a fiat currency, symbolizes pure trust in the state and the national community (cf. Nakhimovsky 2011). As Peter van der Veer has noted,

Indeed the welfare of the nation as well as the effectiveness of the state depends on monetary value. Inflation, devaluation, revaluation, exchange value, the value of one's labour, all are signs of the health of the polity and the trustworthiness of political leaders. The state guarantees the value of its money, and people hold a strong belief in that invisible power of the state when they hold visible coinage in their hands. The state is held accountable for the functioning of the market, and this is in effect more important for people's political judgment than most other fields of political action. Nevertheless, the value of money depends on invisible market forces that are not controlled or only partly controlled by the nation-state. (2016: 55)

While money mediates national unity, it also creates disjunctions between devalued labour, inflated living costs and stagnant wages. For my informants, the assumption is that the state can control the market, or even overtly manipulate it. The state is imagined as a machine for printing money and controlling prices; it is responsible for the devaluation of labour and price inflation. The failure to protect the value of labour and the livelihoods of people enables my informants to criticize the state's and elites' lack of care for the people, as well as to anticipate the state's interventions. Against such a powerful and manipulative state, rural migrants have a sense of belonging to the 'common people' or the grassroots of the 'nation'.

## The Nation as a Utopia of Investors

It was the 2010 Shanghai Expo that first brought me to the urban village where I finally did my fieldwork. The shabby urban village where the rural migrants were living was just three subway stops away from the Expo pavilion complex. Despite aggressive eviction by urban management officers, during this nation-staging event, migrants in the village were busy selling fake Expo souvenirs around the pavilion complex. When I returned to the urban village in 2013, I constantly heard rumours about its second coming, even though the large area of the complex had been torn down and redeveloped. Pointing to a red car parked in the road, one migrant told me that its owner was a former neighbour of his, whose family had made 400,000 yuan out of a souvenir wholesale business during the Expo. He said that he hoped another big fair would come along again. As an important national event, the Expo attracted people from all around the country and, for my informants, it materialized the nation as a market. The Expo souvenir business had only a low entry barrier and thus was very inclusive; nearly everyone in the urban village could participate with just a little start-up capital.

This shows how rural migrants can turn a national event into an entrepreneurial opportunity on the fringe. They also need investment opportunities in order to be included in the nation. As Ellen Hertz (1998) demonstrates in her ethnography of the Shanghai stock market in 1992, recently introduced by the state, this stock market attracted investors from all walks of life and launched a general investment fever, with many scattered players (*san hu* 散户) joining in. However, this is not all about making money. Investors see the stock market as one of the few truly egalitarian forums for making money. The stock market fever created a strong sense of bottom-up egalitarianism.

While market investment, gambling and lotteries were strictly forbidden by the state in Mao's era, they flourish in contemporary China. Since the 1980s, the socialist state has been running a lottery in the name of helping the elderly, the disabled, orphans and the poor. Different forms of get-rich-quick Ponzi schemes—scams offering high returns to early investors compensated with funds obtained from later investors—have arisen in China in

the 1990s, a period concurrent with the rapid migration and market reform. They were also widely present among my informants.

Cui, a 33-year-old house decorator, was a regular buyer of lottery tickets. Though the lottery is legal, it is still morally ambiguous. Buyers of lottery tickets were often criticized for dreaming about unearned wealth. Cui always stressed that he was not addicted to the lottery; he just played it and kept calm. In contrast to his fellow decorators, he argued, who often squandered money on gambling and eating afterwards, his enthusiasm for the lottery was more in the nature of a productive investment.

He recognized the importance of hard work but often regretted that the golden year of opportunity in his trade had already passed. He once said that the lottery provided more opportunities than his trade did. But he rarely won anything. He mainly attributed his failure to the manipulation of the state:

When you purchase a lottery ticket, the state keeps a record. There is a computer in the headquarters of the lottery. Every day the computer registers all the numbers people have chosen. The staff count and see which numbers people have not chosen. OK, that is the winning number. Of course, they sometimes let you win a prize, encouraging you to continue buying.

Despite the suspicion of corruption, he always encouraged me to figure out the pattern of winning numbers. After another loss, Cui said that he would go to a bigger lottery shop next time because it had big chart showing all past winning numbers. He also held that it would be good to have software to analyse each number's chances of winning.

It did not matter whether or not Cui had won a prize; buying a lottery ticket could at least help him demonstrate his own potential for nearly making it. To rationalize his buying of tickets, he often told me that only one number was wrong or missing. Even if he did not win, he claimed, buying a lottery ticket was his small contribution to national welfare.

Compared to the lottery, Ponzi schemes were criticized more harshly by my informants as an immoral and frantic way of gaining wealth without labour. In public, they would often connect Ponzi schemes to the moral corruption of Chinese society—people cheat each other and want to earn money without doing honest labour. However, many of my informants were involved in various Ponzi schemes. It is through investment

in these schemes that they imagine themselves being part of a national project, one that promises them upward mobility and equality.

Li Hai was a young migrant whose construction materials business had failed, so he began working in a factory. Not an enthusiast of the lottery, he still cited both the lottery and the stock market as examples of a new economic model—the virtual economy. A friend asked him to join a virtual-economy investment project, telling him that this was now the main sector in foreign countries and that it would soon become the main trend in China. I expressed my doubts and told him that I had read some reports about dubious Ponzi schemes representing themselves as belonging to the virtual economy. Li Hai explained to me: ‘My idea is like this. After joining the WTO, our country now faces great international competition. The government now also notices the problem of pollution. Is it possible that the state will initiate a new policy of virtual economy?’ He also felt that social inequality was increasing: the common people lacked a good platform for investment and were becoming even poorer. Now only rich people can invest. This project was said to be a platform provided by the state: common people could participate in investing and get their share with a small amount of money. The state also planned to initiate the project first in Shanghai and then extend it to the less developed provinces. Despite the fact that he had once been invited to join a Ponzi scheme and his fear that this might be another one, he still did not want to miss taking up such a good opportunity. In the end, though, it did indeed turn out to be a Ponzi scheme.

Sometimes it is difficult to tell whether an investment scheme is a Ponzi scheme or a real investment opportunity. Direct sales companies also ask existing salespersons to recruit more distributors ‘downline’, a form of multilevel marketing that sometimes turns into a Ponzi scheme. I was invited to attend a direct sales company’s multilevel-marketing training section by a young woman migrant. My informants often had an ambivalent attitude towards the company, but doubted whether it was in fact a Ponzi scheme. The training was organized in a salesperson’s home. It started by expressing gratitude to the woman hosting the meeting and praising their highest leader, an overseas Chinese. It was said that the leader’s father had left China, but he was asked to return to do business in China. The company wanted to save money in China and open Chinese schools abroad. The most important activity was encouraging

newcomers like me to join their team. We were promised the opportunity to travel to attend the company's meetings in Guangzhou and Macao that summer. A sixty-something laid-off Shanghainese woman told me the excitement she experienced when she attended the meeting last year: 'You did not experience the Cultural Revolution, right? You could only experience this in the Cultural Revolution. When you enter into our company's meeting hall, you just see a sea of people. Those successful salespersons shared their experiences. They just looked like you, but they had made it. You felt you could make it too.'

The young woman migrant told me that multilevel marketing provided her with a platform for experimenting with entrepreneurship besides her secretary's job. This opportunity is just like any other marketing opportunity except that it is even better. It provides a 'genuine' and inclusive community that is different from the ambiguous 'society' in which they are living. It brings together two groups of people who are otherwise hostile towards each other: laid-off Shanghainese and migrants. It highlights mutual help and provides a sense of communal intimacy that is often lost in cities. Most importantly, it claims to provide a transparent and equal platform. First, everyone starts equally: no matter when you join the team, you have the same chance to succeed. Secondly, the wage incentive is transparent, and the results are equal. There are said to be two satellites monitoring the sales on earth, so everyone will receive their fair reward. Thirdly, there is a world of unlimited opportunities: you can always recruit new members, and their sales can add to your performance. Your income does not have to rely solely on your own labour.

In contrast to their highly competitive and unequal type of employment, entrepreneurship, the lottery and various forms of Ponzi scheme provide a utopian space of equality and mobility, as well as accessible routes to an inclusive national community. These small-scale investments also turn national projects such as nation-branding Expo, national welfare and national development into money-making opportunities. The state plays a mystical role in the construction of these investment opportunities. State agents control the fringes of the Expo complex randomly, manipulate the lottery system and devise opaque development policies. It is in their engagement and competition with the mystical state that my informants imagine themselves being part of the nation.

## Conclusion

The 'nation' as a collective identity is always ambivalent and incomplete (Giesen and Seyfert 2016). Drawing on a patchwork of socialist ideology, Chinese tradition and the Communist Party's revolutionary tradition, the socialist state has attempted to elevate the labour of working people to the status of a national symbol. Post-Mao economic development requires a mobile work force. The state encourages market development and mobility, but restricts migrants' access to public goods and equal citizenship. The organization of labour is always conditioned by the state's categorization of the rural and urban citizen. With the flows of money and people between village and city, an imagination of national space emerges through the expanding market and money economy. In the absence of the provision of welfare schemes for all, a secure livelihood, inclusive citizenship and an equal political community, rural migrants have to make a living in a competitive 'society' mediated by precarious personal connections and money. The national ideology of hard work paradoxically highlights social inequality and disjuncture. Labour is devalued with reference to particularistic networks and the money market, and thus cannot provide an anchor for the construction of the nation. My informants can only imagine their inclusion in the nation by grasping investment opportunities that are tightly controlled by the state.

However, while the state is often accused of creating social inequality, its intervention in combating social inequality is also anticipated. It is through both criticism and anticipation of the opaque state that the nation is imagined. As Peter van der Veer has noted, though the idea of the nation is produced in the global encounter, societies forge their national imaginations in specific contexts. Though the nation's formation often relies on xenophobia, it can also take shape in the form of internal differentiation and disruption (Surak 2012). With reference to China, van der Veer notes that the opposition between literate elites and the illiterate popular masses is deeply ingrained in the nation-making project (2013: 125), a project that is still incomplete in contemporary China. State- and elite-sponsored nation-making projects often highlight social inequality and disjunction. Its failure to solve the paradox of egalitarian

expectations and great social inequality often leads to different forms of grassroots nation-making. The nation cannot be built directly by the state, and often has to be built against the opacity of the state. The hyphen between nation and state should not obscure from us the indirect and complex relationship between the two.

## Notes

1. ‘Common people’ might sound dismissive in English. Here I use it to translate the Chinese term *lao bai xing*, which can also sound dismissive in Chinese.
2. This section is based on my archival research on the database of the *People’s Daily* (the most influential official voice of the central government and the Communist Party) from 1946 to the present.

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# Part IV

South Africa and the Middle East



# 10

## Race, Animal Bodies and Religion: Sacrifice, Sensory Politics and Public Space in South Africa

Shaheed Tayob

### Suspicious of Sacrifice: Crowds, Race and Animal Bodies

On Saturday 14 October 2017, a Muslim family held their son's seventh birthday party in a public park in Woodstock, a rapidly gentrifying neighbourhood close to the centre of Cape Town. Re-zoned as a Coloured residential area during apartheid, the neighbourhood had subsequently become a racially mixed area comprising Malay Muslims, Coloured Christians, Jews and Portuguese.<sup>1</sup> Woodstock is very close to the now mostly vacant garment factories in Salt River, once a major locus of economic activity. In the 1990s, low-cost Chinese imports dealt a blow to the economy of the area. However, Woodstock is a short drive from Cape Town's Central Business District and the famous Atlantic Seaboard. During the 2000s, the neighbourhood became a target for gentrification as young couples and investors from predominantly white middle-class

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backgrounds found opportunities in redeveloping the sometimes decrepit, poorly maintained Victorian-style houses in the area.

A day before the birthday party, the family had obtained a permit from the local municipal authority to set up a petting zoo for their son and his friends and family. The young boy was passionate about animals and had aspirations to become a veterinarian. On the day of the party, a group of friends and family were celebrating in the park, accompanied by ‘chickens, roosters, birds, rabbits, a tortoise and a dwarf goat’. During the party, a local white resident of the area, Mary Wallace,<sup>2</sup> was out walking her dog. In an interview I conducted with her, she explained that, approaching the park, she noticed ‘that the children’s section of the park was really full of people’ and that her dog was becoming agitated.

So we were unsure about [whether] to go or not, we hadn’t had a good look at what was going on. The park was extremely full, and there was a goat tied to one of the poles of the swings with a very short rope [motions with her hands to indicate the rope was shorter than from her hand to elbow] and the goat was screaming. I saw the goat, said to my husband ‘there’s a goat tied to a pole with a very short rope’, and my husband said to me, ‘Let’s get the dogs out of here, they’re gonna freak out completely’.

She described herself as a concerned animal rights activist, who made the decision to share a post on the neighbourhood’s Facebook page, this being a safe space where she might find advice and support. She rushed online and posted the following:

Help! There is a goat tied to a pole in the children’s park in Queens Park. Huge crowd of people. Goat is screaming what to do? Help.

She recounted being hysterical and overcome with horror at what she perceived as the ill treatment of the ‘screaming’ goat. She contacted the local branch of the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (SPCA) to inform it that there was a goat in the park being held on a very short rope. Fellow residents advised her to alert the police as well. The police enquired as to whether the goat had in fact committed a crime.

As the furore unfolded, it was clear that her concern for the well-being of the now anthropomorphized goat had evolved into a racially charged discussion about the possible horrors in the park. Concerned residents, all white, rushed in with advice and support that clearly drew on tropes of racialized, barbaric otherness. Wallace exclaimed that she ‘ran away’ from the scene. In a comment of support, another woman explained that she too had ventured nearby, noticed the huge group and left. However, she was there long enough to note the ‘strong smell of braai’ (barbeque). Others chimed in with suspicions of bestiality, and assertions that slaughter could be the only possible explanation: ‘What would they want with a goat? Unless they were having sex with the goat?’ Wallace did step in to calm down the chorus of suspicion and accusations with a ‘more rational’ approach by doubting whether ‘it would be possible to slaughter, skin and prepare an animal in that space of time’. However, during the early exchange there was no awareness that the tropes through which the accusations, suspicion and horror were being articulated actually drew on a long history of racial and colonial typecasting and denigration.

As the discussion, concern and fear circulated, it was brought to the attention of a prominent Muslim social media ‘influencer’ called Aisha Baker. Present at the birthday party, Baker tweeted about the incident, drawing attention to the automatic association between crowds, animals and fear that had transpired. From then on, the issue went viral and appeared in several newspapers. The responses of the general public were a mixture of humour and exasperation that another instance of racial profiling had raised its head among the South African public. The father of the boy later turned to social media with a humorous response about having seen ‘suspicious Caucasians’ lurking in the park and offered advice to Wallace that ‘it would have been prudent to approach us and enquire’. He specifically cast a critical eye on those who consider themselves ‘saviours to humanity’, by which he meant the ‘previously (and currently) advantaged Cape Town elitists’. In his response, it was clear that he was treating the incident as indicative of the nation’s need to overcome its racial divisions and the necessity for white liberals to move beyond the paternalist mentality of the saviour.<sup>3</sup>

The event signalled the increasing fragility of the South African public sphere, in which race has resurfaced as a topic of debate, controversy and

political currency. Emerging from the concerns of a committed animal activist and vegan was a racially charged debate on questions of transformation, paternalism and access to and control of public space. The Facebook group discussion clearly revealed the normative assumptions about animals, race and public spaces evident in the embodied responses of the white liberal middle-class participants in the Facebook group. The divergent responses between suspicious online commentators and those at the party illuminates the split nature of South Africa's publics, here not around questions of language (Rajgopal 2001) but about the right to access and use public space. In speculating about what was taking place in the park and the motives of the family arranging the party, the discussants in the neighbourhood Facebook group, like many neighbourhood watch groups around the country, spoke as concerned residents and property owners of a particular neighbourhood (Dixon 2018), not concerned citizens. Alluding to the possibility of the goat being sacrificed, the hysteria reveals the explosive potential of animal sacrifice to expose entrenched normativities and assumptions about particular kinds of people and particular kinds of religious practice in public spaces in South Africa.

## **Skaapgate: Sacrifice, Ancestors and Exorcizing Racism**

On 23 December 2018 at 8 pm, a private security company, Professional Protection Alternatives (PPA), shut down a popular public beach at Clifton, along the famous Atlantic Seaboard. Present during the security operation was the Western Cape Provincial Secretary of the African National Congress (ANC), Faiez Jacobs, as well as a prominent lawyer and director of the Women's Legal Resource Centre, Seeham Samaai. Jacobs and Samaai were out celebrating an annual family picnic. Just before 8 pm they were approached and asked to leave the beach. Jacobs and Samaai recognized that the enforcers were a private security company and took to Twitter to publicize what they considered an incursion of private interests into a public space. The closure of the beach was viewed

as a return to apartheid practice where the presence of non-white people in a public space was regulated through police-imposed curfews. The activity of PPA on the beach was read as another instance of the way in which neoliberal privatization was reproducing many of the old inequalities of access (Wagner 2015; Schneider 2010; Comaroff and Comaroff 2017).

In response to the public outrage, both the city of Cape Town and the PPA were asked to explain the incident. Initially, the PPA claimed that they had not closed the beach; instead, they had been assisting the City's law enforcement officers in a security operation after two teenagers had allegedly been raped. 'Two 15-year-old girls ... had been raped and were waiting on SAPS. This was why Law Enforcement closed the beach. [Every] other night it has been open to anyone that complies with the by-laws which Law Enforcement enforces' (Maphanga 2018). Describing the chaos on the beach and the need for control, the statement claimed that the PPA had both closed the beach in aid of the police and not closed the beach. Contradicting the PPA's statement, the spokesperson for the South African Police Force (SAPS) released a statement saying that 'Preliminary findings of the SAPS investigation indicate that no rape was registered at Camps Bay SAPS' (Evans 2018). She did confirm that a report of sexual assault had been investigated the day before the PPA incident at Clifton. Finally, five days after the event on 28 December 2018, the City of Cape Town's mayor, Dan Plato, released an official statement to clarify the city's relationship with PPA and to attack what had since then developed into a racialized and politicized uproar in the national newspapers and on social media. According to Plato, the PPA was not in fact operating under the auspices of the city and had no authority to conduct security operations on a public beach. However, he also added that the incident could not possibly be considered racist because 'they asked people of all races to leave and did not single out any race groups' (Chambers 2018). Two months later the PPA and the city both presented their cases to a Portfolio Committee on Environmental Affairs, along with eye witnesses, where they both maintained once again that the beach had not in fact been closed on that day and that the beachgoers were advised rather than forced to leave (Gerber 2019).

As the event unfolded, it was clear that another public incident regarding race and access to public space had reared its head in South Africa. Competing political parties vied with one another to establish their version of events, either as proof of the continuation of apartheid practice or as an unfortunate incident that was about public safety and order rather than race. The fumbling statements by the police and the city, and the highly politicized arguments of opposition political parties took place a mere five months before the national elections. The city of Cape Town and the province of Western Cape were controlled by the main opposition party in South Africa, the Democratic Alliance. The incident thus provided ripe fodder and political mileage for the ANC and other parties in the elections.

However, the widespread public anger that the incident had unleashed exceeded the interests of the political parties. Indeed, for many, the way in which false claims of rape were used to justify the imposition of public order was clearly indicative of racial policing. The notion of an unruly and violent black crowd, together with claims and fears of sexual violence and a general lack of order, is a racial and colonial trope that has been powerful in authorizing violence against black South Africans (Rauch and Storey 1998; Shefer and Ratele 2011). Immediately a group of activists, politicians, academics and NGOs came together to form the Black People's National Crisis Committee (BPNCC). Many who joined the group had spearheaded the Rhodes Must Fall campaign of 2015, which eventually led to the removal of Cecil John Rhodes' Statue from its prominent position at the University of Cape Town. Included among the group and leading the event was Maxwele Chumani, famous for throwing faeces on Rhodes' statue as part of a politics of disgust designed to awaken South Africans to the country's continuing economic inequalities and the need for radical change. Continuing in that vein, Xolani, an organizer of the BPNCC whom I interviewed, stated that the crisis was a crisis of racism. He argued that the incident highlighted the continuation of racism in South Africa: 'I know how these people are when they see a congregation of black people in a space. All their irrational attitudes and presuppositions of black people come to the fore ... and they always want to police in a manner that seems to reproduce notions of apartheid.' For the Committee, the incident was linked to an ongoing crisis in the

country, in which racism has been officially abandoned as state policy but lingers on in everyday life, spatial politics and neoliberal security action.

After much deliberation, the BPNCC decided to sacrifice a sheep on the very beach that had been at the centre of the controversy. On 28 December 2019, very much to the interest of the media and animal rights groups, the organizers arrived on Clifton beach to slaughter a sheep. Immediately following the slaughter, a divided public again emerged, with predominantly black commentators celebrating the act as the assertion of black selfhood in South Africa, while the dominant response from mostly white middle-class South Africans was one of shock and horror at a barbaric act they felt was detrimental to the very cause of the anti-racist protests. This time, however, Wallace supported of the slaughter. She said she had made a choice between siding with 'black outrage and the claiming of the space and the slaughtering of the sheep' and 'white privilege that effectively told black people that "You can't do this on our beaches"'.

Unlike the previous incident in Woodstock, this time an animal was in fact sacrificed. In Woodstock the presence of black bodies in a public space, Wallace's horror, anxiety and concern, and the clearly racist posts by the neighbourhood Facebook group combined to provoke public outrage and debate over the insidious ways in which race and access to public space are mediated and controlled. In Clifton, however, a security incident which bore the ghostly traces of a colonial and apartheid past was challenged by a group of activists, scholars and politicians. This time the act of sacrifice was a way of claiming space and challenging the privatization and re-racialization of beaches in South Africa. As we shall see, the exact form the sacrifice took speaks to a legacy of African traditional religion, sensory politics and particular kinds of public space in South Africa.

## Religious Nationalism in a Post-apartheid Neoliberal Moment

Peter van der Veer's seminal contribution to the analysis of religious nationalism in India challenged Eurocentric assumptions about the inherent secularity of modern nation-state formation as a break from the traditional identities, world-views and practices of a pre-modern past.

For van der Veer, religious discourses and practices are constitutive of the changing social identities that are invested in the formation of national identities (van der Veer 1994: ix). Importantly ‘these identities are not primordial attachments ... but specific products of changings forms of religious organization and communication’ that articulate ‘discourse on religious community and discourse on the nation’ (van der Veer 1994: x). Van der Veer thus argued for attention to be paid to the ‘fundamental orienting conceptions for the world and of personhood’ (van der Veer 1994: 8) that are invested in the formation of the modern nation-state. In religious nationalism practitioners from competing religious traditions clash over different conceptions of the way religion, ethical values, personhood and human-animal relations are calibrated. For example, Gandhi’s claims regarding ‘an all-embracing Indian spirituality’ centred on his appropriation of the Hindu discourse of non-violence (*ahimsa*) and support for cow protection that alienated Muslims, who ‘had their own discourse on universal religion’ and animal sacrifice (van der Veer 1994: 95–96). Given that the ‘public sphere is not an empty space for carrying out debates’ but is ‘constituted by the sensibilities—memories and aspirations, fears and hopes—of speakers and listeners’ (Asad 2003: 185), it follows that different sensibilities informed by different religious traditions may lead to conflicts over the proper place and practice of religion that are also conflicts over the shape and future of the nation.

In South Africa, apartheid entailed the forceful denigration of people and religion. The post-racial and post-mono-religious state thus authorizes the flourishing of religion in both state and private affairs in surprising and unexpected ways in an attempt to ‘turn diversity from an obstacle to nationalism into a national resource, seeking not uniformity but unity’ (Chidester 2012: 2). The outcome is a tension between ‘political secularism and ... a proliferation of religious representations’ that are authorized in public life (Tayob 2018). For example, in constitutional court hearings over the practice of minority (non-Christian) religious observance in schools, school and parent-teacher bodies’ attempts to mobilize particular Christian definitions of religion are rejected by the court as contravening the constitutional right to religious freedom (Tayob 2017). The South African constitution aims to accommodate not just the diversity of religious beliefs, but also the diversity of religious practice. As we saw in the

case of the sheep sacrifice on Clifton beach, the South African state and national police were unwilling to sanction the act as a contravention of public health and safety ordinances, deferring to the constitutional right to practice religious freedom instead.

For David Chidester, the state formation of religion in the post-apartheid state reveals the contested dynamics of the sacred in the production of what he calls 'wild religion'. Wild, for Chidester (2012: 3), refers both to the 'untamed, undomesticated, uncultivated, unrestrained, unruly and dangerous', as well as the 'dynamic, natural, extraordinary, enthusiastic, ecstatic, invigorating'. Chidester's invocation of the 'wild', sequestered from a colonial and contemporary politics of Otherness, fails to appreciate the political and philosophical entanglements of religion with colonial and apartheid-era discourse (Chidester 1996). Articulating the wild as good and bad reduces these categories to descriptive markers rather than deeply embedded moral and political judgements with significant normative power. It misses the way in which religious practice is closely tied to normative assumptions and sensibilities on the kinds of behaviour and practice that are acceptable in public life. And while I agree with Chidester that African traditional religion must be understood as an open set of resources that are always embedded within the world, wherein sacrifice, ancestor veneration and initiation are variously configured, it is important not to lose sight of the potential for expressions of a sensory politics within it. As we shall see, the BPNCC appropriated a 'traditional' African traditional religious practice of animal sacrifice for a political end in an attempt to contest the historically embedded racialized assumptions about African traditional religion and the contemporary politics of privatization that excludes the majority of black South Africans from certain kinds of elite spaces. Using religion, they challenged a contemporary politics of racial and religious exclusion, in the process imagining the inclusive national space to come.

I therefore argue for attention to be paid to the sensory politics contained within competing discourses and practices of religion in public spaces. Much as the post-apartheid state sought to link its authority and heritage claims to sensory calibration (Jethro 2020), the emerging radical politics around student protest movements and against neoliberalism have also entailed a sensory contestation.

This chapter thus treats the examples described above as instances of competing ethical and political claims to selfhood, sensory propriety and the nation. The post-apartheid state, with its deep commitment to plurality, together with the increasing power of private interests and the emphasis on private property and self-organization in the contemporary neoliberal environment, are important in understanding the fraught contestations over race, religion and public space in South Africa today. As scholars have argued, neoliberal policies that champion neutral ideas of the free market and the flourishing individual very often reproduce and facilitate the re-emergence of race and caste as markers of difference (Pinto 2006). Across the world, housing market booms, gentrification and privatization is accompanying the resurgence of old class and race identities, now under the guise of 'brightening' an area or 'community upliftment' (Hyra 2017). Under these conditions, the practice of religion in public spaces becomes linked to a politics of self and community that establishes and challenges norms of religious practice, sensory propriety and access to and use of public spaces beyond the purview of the state. This chapter therefore calls attention to the limits of a state-centric approach to anthropology in South Africa remaining alert to the power of private actors as they articulate a link between religious practice, public space, private property, sensory propriety and the flourishing individual.

Animal sacrifice is a perfect practice for understanding the competing normative assumptions about religion and racial Others as they relate to the politics of religion and public spaces in South Africa. Sacrifice is a powerful means for the production of sacred politics as a 'religious ritual of political sovereignty' (Chidester 2012: 181) that is central to the foundational myths of nationalism (Anderson 1983). However, animal sacrifice as a trope of racial and barbaric Otherness has deep colonial roots that linger in normative assumptions about a hierarchy that places proper spiritual religions over primitive material religions (van der Veer 2011). In a brilliant analysis of the interplay between the anthropology and philosophy of sacrifice, Denis Keenan identifies 'Christo-centric evolutionism' and the construction of 'worldwide typologies' as central to

'numerous late nineteenth-century and early twentieth-century theories of sacrifice' (Keenan 2005: 10). According to the evolutionary view, the sacrifice of Jesus as God himself signals the highest form of sacrifice, bringing an end to sacrifices of transaction in favour of the symbolic commemorative sacrifice of communion. In this view, religions that continue animal sacrifice are primitive and barbaric, being ranked according to a classification of worldwide typologies of religion from supposedly savage, animist and fetish religions to higher forms of moral and spiritual religion (Chidester 1996). The hierarchy of religions was of course one of the many hierarchies of civilization and people that marked nineteenth-century social theory. It is therefore no coincidence to find Africans being interpreted as the bearers of a lack of civilization, racial degradation and primitive religious mentalities. In South Africa, this confluence is all the more striking given the long history of settler colonialism and apartheid's racial state policies, with their intimate links to Calvinist Christianity and theories of racial and civilizational difference (Dubow 1992). I argue that the post-apartheid state's desire to insert animal sacrifice at the centre of rituals of national belonging, which Chidester highlights, must also be understood as a response to the history of the denigration of African religious practices, now asserted from a position of power that is no longer subject to a Eurocentric hierarchy of value. Viewed from the long history of colonialism and apartheid, animal sacrifice in public entails a sensory politics of selfhood and an assertion of African subjectivity.

The furore that emerged around Wallace's seemingly innocent concern in the park at Woodstock and the decision of a group of activists to respond to the security action on Clifton beach with an animal sacrifice must be read as emerging from this contested space of religion, race and private property interests in South Africa. In these moments, we find that articulations and redeployments of religious practice in public spaces reveal the competing desires, normative assumptions and sensory politics of private individuals competing over the use and access to public spaces in South Africa.

## The Return to Race in South Africa: From Rainbow Nation to Racial Politics

After apartheid, South Africa was celebrated as a poster-case for the peaceful transformation to a post-racial and multi-racial society, a 'rainbow' nation (Niehaus 2014). The first parliament was established as a 'government of national unity' designed to grant cabinet representation to all parties that had won above 10 per cent of the national vote. The aim was to ensure a smooth and inclusive transition. Central to the politics of transition was the establishment of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC), tasked with collecting testimonies of individual apartheid-era atrocities in exchange for an amnesty for the perpetrators and reparation for the victims. Aiming for confessional, restorative justice, the TRC was central to the post-apartheid state's desire to forge a nation of multiple communities united under constitutional law. However, for Mahmood Mamdani, the TRC 'reduced apartheid from a relationship between the state and entire communities to one between the state and individuals' (Mamdani 2002: 34). The individualization evident in the TRC process points to the way in which a neoliberal politics of state and consumer-citizen relations had started to take hold.

For critics of the 'rainbow nation', it became increasingly clear that the imperative of liberation during apartheid had been compromised by the now global imperative towards liberalization. Sociologists argued that the balancing act had in fact contributed to 'greater inequality in the distribution of incomes in society as a whole', as well as 'employment losses' (Nattrass and Seekings 2001: 484). By 2018, it had become clear that inequalities were still highly racialized, with white incomes increasing more rapidly than those of other races (Friedmand 2015: 47). Steven Friedmand argues that one of the reasons for the continuity of inequality is the maintenance of 'cultural assumptions' relating to the superiority of Western values and lifestyles, which were previously the exclusive domain of white liberals, but were now shared by the new black elite (Friedmand 2015: 50; also see Turner 1972). Neoliberal aspirations to become 'world class' produced a desire to emulate Northern patterns of lifestyle and livelihood, rather than devise means to combat local urgencies of inequality, unemployment and a lack of access to education (Friedmand 2005).

In the end, those who benefit most from neoliberal economic policies are the relatively advantaged white and Indian-origin middle classes. The widening inequalities and persistence of everyday racism set the scene for the re-irruption of an ordinary politics of race. This was most forcefully articulated by student protest movements such as the Rhodes Must Fall campaign, which achieved international fame through its calls to decolonize education, transform institutions of higher education and combat insidious, everyday forms of racial exclusion. As already noted, this protest began when Chumani Maxwele threw faeces at the statue of Cecil John Rhodes in a 'visceral material act of disgust' that 'actualised a growing mood of discontent among South Africans' (Pillay 2016: 156). The protests brought together critical race theory, South African Black Consciousness philosophy and critiques of neoliberalism to attack both the state and the university system (Naidoo 2016). Feeding off critical scholarship, the activists argued that 'the zeitgeist of Nelson Mandela's post-1994 government disabled radical activism by foregrounding narratives of peace, reconciliation, forgiveness, and unity'. The movement opted instead for 'foregrounding exclusion, poverty, broken political promises, and privilege' (Pillay 2016: 156). Clearly, the politics of animals, race, sacrifice and access to public spaces must be understood in the context of increasing racial inequality and the return of racial consciousness in South Africa's public sphere. Central to these contestations is a sensory politics through which substances, sounds and bodies become the medium for a radical politics to emerge that imagines a new, reconfigured nation.

## **Sacrifice as Politics: Cleansing Cape Town and Attacking the Nerve Centre of Racism**

For the organizers of the public sacrifice, the racist excuses and behaviour of the private security guards, in conjunction with the area's residents and the cover-ups by the City of Cape Town, required immediate action. After much deliberation, they decided that an animal sacrifice should be performed. In an interview I conducted with Xolani, a BPNCC member, he explained that the committee had experience of the power of animal

sacrifice as a tool of disruption during the Fees Must Fall protests, when, in the middle of extensive private security brutality, the group decided to slaughter a sheep on the University of Cape Town campus—‘and we did it, and the animal rights people went crazy, so we already knew they were going to go crazy’. Given the BPNCC’s awareness of the power of public sacrifice to create shock, concern and hysteria amongst their mainly white middle-class opposition, it was decided that slaughter was the appropriate response. However, the decision to perform a public sacrifice was not only inspired by a politics of disgust and disruption, but also by a desire to deploy a version of African traditional religious practice in a public space. As we will see, the organizers intentionally curated and adjusted an African traditional ritual practice at the intersection of cultural and religious assertion and the politics of race and inequality in South Africa.

Sacrificing a sheep was therefore considered a powerful political response rather than an authentic replication of an African traditional religious practice. Xolani and Thato, who were active in the BPNCC organizing committee, described sacrifice as a practice that ‘connects us with the other world, the world of the ancestors’. The spilling of blood was thus deemed a way ‘to show that we are sacrificing this beast in order to start a conversation with the ancestors ... to invoke them, to make them see that we are young people, we might not know everything, but we know that they must come to our rescue’. The sacrifice was thus staged as an invocation of the ancestral spirit of Makhanda Nxele, a well-known anti-colonial warrior in the Xhosa community and once a prisoner on Robben Island who is believed to have escaped imprisonment by swimming to the Cape in a bid to liberate his people. However, he did not make the journey, and memories of his failed rescue continue to resonate in everyday speech as a trope of endless waiting, as well as an ordinary reminder of the history of loss through colonialism (Wells 2012).<sup>4</sup>

Invoking the spirit of a famous warrior as an ancestor represents a creative appropriation and re-articulation of an established ritual practice. Usually, in African traditional religious practice, the ancestors are invoked as a link to the homestead and household and are called upon for protection from potential misfortune and strife (Chidester 2012: 27). Retaining the importance of animal sacrifice as a source of protection and power, in Clifton the family and homestead were extended to include all previously

disadvantaged and oppressed black South Africans and anti-colonial heroes in the political and economic struggle against racism and inequality. The BPNCC was aware of the creative appropriation and redeployment of sacrifice for political ends, and anxious not to cause offence to black South Africans. They decided to avoid slaughtering a goat, a powerful symbol of communication with the ancestors in African traditional religious practice. They also eschewed what they considered the pacifying influence of African religious leaders and the Council of Traditional Healers, who they thought would conduct a 'purely cultural ceremony' marked by minute ritual concerns, yet free from any 'fire' and political currency. The sacrifice thus drew on powerful symbols of African traditional religion, recalibrated in crucial ways so as not to cause offence to fellow black South Africans, and to mark the moment as a political claim against the privatization of public space.

In staging the sacrifice, the sheep was first made to drink the sea water at Clifton beach in order to imbibe the spirit of Makhanda Nxele, who had drowned in that very ocean

so that the spirit of Makhanda can enter us, and we will consume it and it will cleanse us, and it will enter us and strengthen us in order to fight the racists. So, it was a two-pronged situation where we are saying we are exorcising racism and racist attitudes in the white community and also strengthening ourselves against the racists, to not just be victims of racism but to be proactive in finding solutions to a problem which we never created. (interview with Xolani and Thato conducted by the author)

The sacrifice was therefore clearly articulated as part of a political programme that required the power of the African ancestors, the interpretive realm of which was extended to include all the heroes of the anti-colonial struggle, as well as symbols of independence, including Shaka Zulu and Nehanda.<sup>5</sup> The goal of this political deployment of sacrifice was to disturb what Xolani called the 'nerve centre' of racism in South Africa, a symbolically charged, historically informed, material and metaphoric evocation that ties the history of colonialism in South Africa to spatial apartheid, neoliberal gentrification and the politics of animal sacrifice and Otherness:

Cape Town in the South African imagination seems to be a colony. Cape Town operates differently than the other cities. Cape Town's spatial planning is very aggressive in demarcating spaces. So, when we say it's the *nerve centre*, in a sense we mean that colonial settlement finds its hydraulics here, how it operates, it's just in the everyday. So, Cape Town is the nerve centre of South African racism. Cape Town is the microcosm of the vision of racists of what they would want South Africa to be like. The ideas of colonial settlement and the ideas more importantly of colonial expansion are eminent in this place. And also, all the apartheid intellectuals, some of them come from Stellenbosch. Those who incubated the idea of apartheid and nurtured it, so Cape Town then becomes the laboratory of South African racism.

Treating Cape Town as the nerve centre of racism draws attention to the history of the first colonial settlement, the aggressive spatial segregation that many argue continues in the post-apartheid context, and to the fact that some of the most influential architects of apartheid stem from the region. Explaining the latter, Xolani was clear to differentiate the 'subtle' and 'sophisticated' racism of Cape Town from the aggressive racism of right-wing groups like the Afrikaner Weerstandsbeweging (AWB). The significance of the Atlantic Seaboard was further emphasized as a space that, through 'neoliberalism' and privatization, has resisted transformation, while maintaining the poster-card image of the beauty of the Cape. Finally, the metaphor of the nerve centre was extended to the outrage expected by animal rights activists and 'white liberals' who were surely 'going to be up in arms' over the sacrifice. This, for Xolani, was evidence 'that actually they don't want black people to practice their cultural practices'. The sacrifice was thus a carefully calibrated and staged event that sought to call on the spirit of the ancestors of anti-colonial resistance and black African power while simultaneously drawing attention to the continued perpetuation of racism in South Africa. Since acts of sacrifice are very common in the public spaces of black South African townships, this specific act was not merely about claiming public space; rather, it was about drawing attention to the perpetuation of racist attitudes and practices in predominantly white upper-class spaces in the city. In doing so, the protestors activated a long history of anti-colonial resistance. As early

as the 1830s, the very rituals that were considered evidence of barbaric Otherness and 'sensory disorganization' were 'intentionally deployed by indigenous ritual specialists in opposition to colonial domination'. These included 'loud drumming and chanting' outside the colonial settlements to frighten settlers (Chidester 2012: 193).

The event was also a rejection of liberal paternalism, which they understood as central to the dominant white middle-class condemnation of animal sacrifices. This was specifically articulated in response to animal rights activists and vegans who attended the event in an attempt to convince them to 'practice our traditions without harming the animals'. For Xolani, this assertion was nonsensical and paternalist:

What gave them the gall that we can't practice our traditional [customs] and our traditional customs are harming animals? Are they the spokespeople of animals? Because we have been doing this since time immemorial, right? You can't just wake up and you are 21 and you tell us that all of black people are wrong in slaughtering because you have just come to some vegan consciousness. Haibo! [an expression of surprise]

Rejecting the association of animal welfare with the ending of sacrifice was not a rejection of ethical relations with animals but rather an assertion of an independent subjectivity and a critique of liberal paternalism:

veganism must be taken away from racist discourse, we must have radical black people who will reintroduce us to veganism in a better radical way, in a manner that respects our customs and ambitions and enriches them. The veganism that we need will take into consideration that black people are black people who slaughter. Won't force its logic and collapse everything. If you come with the conclusion that as black people, we must stop slaughtering it must come from us.

Here we find Xolani and Wallace coming together in agreement that the paternalism in certain strands of veganism that is intolerant of other cultures and which sidelines issues of racism in favour of animal welfare is untenable. In the South African context, where African traditional religion deserves recognition and value, there need to be more nuanced and

sensitive discussions about ethics, animals and access to public space. Performing animal sacrifice in this context is a powerful symbolic and material articulation that pushes back against long-held colonial stereotypes, as well as more insidious and everyday forms of contemporary racism and marginalization. The public sacrifice performed a powerful Fanonian moment, whereby the activists appropriated a denigrated practice as a material and visceral force for the assertion of selfhood, community and dignity aimed at a new life and a new set of values not subsumed into European and colonial hierarchies of race, development and civilization (Gibson 2016).<sup>6</sup> Here, the very object of Otherness as viewed from the dominant colonial frame is appropriated and used as a weapon of political and ethical claim-making. The issue is not simply about the question of animal life as an isolated ethical issue, but about the way in which animal sacrifice has been central to the history of racism, colonialism and taken for granted assumptions of African Otherness. For the organizers and supporters, animal sacrifice was intimately tied to imagining a future and a radically transformed nation.

The practice of sacrificing animals in public spaces as a political act aimed at forging a new claim to such spaces was facilitated by the South African state's professed accommodation of diverse religious practice. The deputy provincial police commissioner, Hendrick Burger, was on Clifton beach on the day of the sacrifice. He had been contacted earlier by Cape Town City's mayor, Dan Plato, regarding the South African Police Service's plans to stop the slaughter. The mayor agreed that some of the city's by-laws were being violated but remained unclear regarding the exact offence. Furthermore, Burger confirmed that private charges had been laid for contraventions of the Animal Cruelty Act and Meat Safety Act. Having attended the event, he told the parliamentary committee that no evidence of animal suffering was noted, and that the Meat Safety Act did not apply to slaughter for private consumption or for cultural or religious purposes (Makinana 2019). Refraining from judgement, the South African state authorized the sacrifice, revealing the complexities of the dispute between political secularism and religious freedom in South Africa.

## Conclusion

The controversy over the goat at the birthday party in the Woodstock park and the carefully calibrated animal sacrifice on Clifton beach bring to the fore the deeply divisive politics of race, religion and access to public spaces in South Africa. Given the long legacy of racial segregation, the post-apartheid state is cautious about legislating on religions or culture. This means that claims to regulate religious practice according to universal laws concerning the use of public space or the slaughter of animals are often ruled in favour of religious and cultural rights. As we saw, the provincial commissioner was unwilling to enforce a universal law concerning animal cruelty and slaughter when taking the religious rights of the sacrifice community into account.

In contemporary South Africa, debates over the state of the nation and its future turn on questions of property and land redistribution (Levin and Weiner 2008), and the increasing privatization of public space (McDonald and Smith 2004). Central to these contestations is a sensory politics that links particular kinds of bodies and substances to different discursive and material formations of religion. Private actors bring their own political and religious values into the public arena in a bid to control urban space as landowners and rate-payers. In this contested terrain, the political articulation of an African traditional religious practice is both a means of asserting its value and dignity and of contesting the long history of the marginalization and stigmatization of African traditional religion, culture and people.

The politics of holding animal sacrifices in public spaces reveals a sensory concern over the proper place of certain bodies, substances and practices. As contestation over religious practice in public spaces is articulated in terms of private property rights, land ownership and neighbourhood access, we need to pay attention to the sensory politics of religion that is expressed therein. This chapter therefore argues for more research on the practice of religion in public spaces that consciously challenge prevailing notions of religious and sensory propriety. In particular we should recognize how marginalized groups around the world deploy religious practice as a sensory challenge through which to assert a distinct subjectivity, selfhood and inclusive citizenship in imagining a nation to come.

## Notes

1. The term ‘Coloured’ is a South African racial category for people of mixed African and European descent.
2. The respondent asked to remain anonymous.
3. While conducting this research, I was specifically asked to keep first names anonymous. For this reason, I have also excluded the links to their online posts.
4. Among Xhosa-speakers the phrase ‘Ulindele ukubaya kwaNxele’ means ‘we are waiting for the return of Nxele (Makhanda Nxele)’. Thato explained the phrase as follows: ‘If your mother says you must go to Pick n Pay (grocery store) and you take two hours to return, they would say, “we were waiting for the return of Nxele.”’
5. Nehanda Nyakasikana led the Shona rebellion of 1896–1897 against European rule in Zimbabwe (Hawkins 2018).
6. I am indebted to Prof. David Theo Goldberg for sharing this insight while chairing a panel on Race, Religion and Public Space in South Africa, at a conference on Racism and Religion hosted by the Center for Multidisciplinary Research on Racism (CEMFOR) in 2019, where I presented a version of this paper.

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# 11

## The Rivalry Between Secular and Religious Nationalisms: On the Split in Iranian National Identity

Mahmoud Alinejad

### Introduction

This chapter is an exercise in interpreting Iran's modern history through the lens of nationalism. It demonstrates how the rivalry of secular and religious nationalisms have driven two revolutionary movements in the country, one in the early, the other in the late twentieth century. It is informed by lived experiences related by countless ordinary Iranians, as well as a range of writings and speeches by academics, journalists and political protagonists.

The rival claims to modern Iranian nationalism have drawn on two major cultural wellsprings (Lotfi 2004). While the secular nationalism of the 1905–1911 constitutional revolution dreamed of a glorious ancient pre-Islamic past, the religious nationalism of the 1978–1979 Islamic revolution was rooted in the magnificence of the Islamic heritage, and particularly its devotion to Shiite faith and culture. Whether in secular or

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religious guise, these nationalist ideologies were used by revolutionary leaders to legitimize post-revolutionary regimes.

The narratives peddled by these two forms of nationalism displayed what Clifford Geertz (1973: 225–310) referred to as the political resilience of ‘primordial bonds’. In Anthony Smith’s interpretation, these nationalisms fed on a collective history to shape a collective identity (Smith 2009: 26). Both offered triumphal narratives of national history that challenged the political status quo with a moral focus on creating a sense of collective belonging, security, dignity and authenticity. No matter how inaccurate, flawed or inventive these narratives were, they built upon selective political understandings of aspects of an ethnic or religious past (Smith 1996: 371–388).

I have used the term ‘secular nationalism’ to refer to the outcome of centuries of painful experimentation and innovation within the Christian tradition in Europe and the United States, a process whereby religion informed the separation of church and state and influenced in the evolution of modern national identities. The term ‘religious nationalism’, on the other hand, is used here to denote the political appropriation of religion in the postcolonial era in order to inspire a sense of native belonging in opposition to secular nationalism, seen as a vestige of earlier Western hegemony. Following Mark Juergensmeyer (1993: 1–2, 31), I view religious nationalism as the rival ideology of a political order which purports to provide national life with an underlying meaning.

I use the epithet ‘Islamist’ here to signify Muslim political activists who advocate the use of state power to enforce public and political conformity with Islamic principles. I also use the term ‘populism’ to denote political appeals to an aggrieved public consisting of exaggerated but unrealizable promises made in a bid to capture or retain political power.

The rest of this chapter consists of seven sections. Following the introductory remarks, I provide an account of secular nationalism as the main driver of the 1905 constitutional revolution. The third section demonstrates how secular nationalism was placed at the service of a modern state-building project under the Pahlavi monarchy but failed to create a modern nation characterized by grassroots loyalty to that state. The following three sections offer an account of the rise and consolidation of

religious nationalism in Iran in opposition to secular nationalism. The last section offers a discussion of the limitations of the incumbent religious nationalism in Iran.

## Early Modern Iranian Nationalism and the Constitutional Revolution

The imagination of a modern nation emerged in Iranian social and political circles as a result of the encounter with modern imperial powers in the early nineteenth century under the Qajar dynasty (1789–1925). Iran's humiliating defeats in the Russo-Persian wars of 1804–1813 and 1826–1828, which led to the loss of vast and fertile Iranian territories in the Caucasus to Imperial Russia, led to the first attempts at military and political reform from within the Qajar royal court. The memory of these defeats, however, weighed heavily on the conscience of Iranian nationalists for generations to come.

Nationalist sentiments were set in motion in the writings of Iranian literati in the second half of the nineteenth century. These sentiments were characterized by a sense of resentment about national decline and a desire for a return to the glories of a bygone era of grandeur. Early modern Iranian nationalism was inspired by a strong sense of history rooted in collective memory (Akhavi 1997: 198–199). It linked the vivid imagination of a distinct and continuous ancient culture to national destiny through heroes and legends that were attributed the ability to stimulate a reversal of national decline. The founder of the ancient Achaemenian Empire, Cyrus the Great, was venerated as a hero who produced the first charter of human rights, liberated the Jews from the Babylonian captivity and laid the foundations of a world empire. Identification with the glories of the ancient Empire shaped a grand image of Iran that was in sharp contrast with its miserable present. The discoveries and writings of contemporary European orientalis, historians and archaeologists had sharpened the interest in ancient sources.

The sense of an ancient Iranian homeland was rooted primarily in a diverse population settled in a vast integrated territory that was believed

to have been the cradle of human civilization and the seat of the first world empire (Kapusinski 1988: 39). A homeland characterized by community and culture, Iran owed its continuity to the Persian language, which had bequeathed to Iranians of various ethnicities, religions and languages a rich corpus of epic, romantic and mystical poetry and prose (Katouzian 2000: 77, 327–328). In the writings of the literati, this sense of attachment to territory and culture was permeated by the ideals of the French Revolution and the primal sense of European romantic nationalism. The literati lamented Iran's diminished status vis-à-vis European powers. They contrasted the present deplorable condition of Iran with its glorious past on the one hand and with the developed nations of the present-day West on the other. Their writings stirred up national consciousness and provoked vigorous ideological debates, which set in motion a new trend of political thinking that anticipated secular nationalism and constitutionalism (Abdolmohammadi 2015). The concept of an Iranian nation was characterized by a romantic appeal, perhaps best described by Ernest Renan as a 'spiritual principle' (Renan 2018). To exploit Johann Gottfried Herder, Iranian romantic nationalists had been seeking for the nation's originality and authenticity from time immemorial (Herder 2016: 469–487). The romantic nationalists believed that reawakening Iran's 'primordial soul' would compel the modern Iranian nation to overcome its present weaknesses. However, the pride the early nationalist elite felt in the ancient empire of the sixth century BC was greatly diminished by the memory of the seventh-century Arab conquest. The nationalist literati blamed Iran's stagnation on religious obscurantism and political absolutism.

Strong nationalist sentiments set the stage for the 1905 constitutional revolution. The incompetence of the Qajar kings and the influence of imperial powers on the royal court had become a significant source of humiliation for many in Iranian society. The early twentieth-century nationalist leaders sought to check the power of the king and limit foreign influence. They called for constitutional recognition of the status of the inhabitants of Iran as 'citizens' of the nation, not as 'subjects' of the king (Keddie & Richard 1981).

The constitutionalist view of the ideal Iran was a 'progressive' one, characterized by national sovereignty, the rule of law and parliamentary

democracy. It envisioned a strong state that would place Iran on the path to catching up with its European peers. Western political ideas and institutions, and modern scientific and technological advances, played a decisive role in inspiring a modern revolutionary consciousness in Iran at the dawn of the twentieth century (Browne 2007; Wilber 1955: 81; Avery 1965: 106–139; Binder 1963; Sykes 1963: 395–397). The introduction of Western education by mission schools and the founding of a polytechnic institute and a school of political science in the nineteenth century had been particularly important in spreading modern scientific and political ideas (Ashraf 2007). Also significant was the introduction of printing presses and the increasing numbers of the Iranian elite who visited Europe on diplomatic missions and for education or business.

Although modern secular nationalism emerged as the most coherent political ideology in the constitutional revolution, popular religious beliefs made it imperative for secular intellectuals to find political allies among the Shiite clergy and traditional merchants of the bazaar. Demonstrations and political pressure led by this alliance forced the frail Mozaffar-ad-Din Shah to ratify the draft of a constitution and the convention of a national parliament in August 1906. The death of the Shah in January 1907 sparked in its turn a violent offensive against the constitution led by a coalition between royal despotism and religious zealotry, which was supported by Russia. However, a groundswell of an armed uprising in July 1909 re-established the constitution.

Ironically, the victory of constitutionalism split the constitutionalists into two opposing factions. In the parliamentary upheaval of 1910, the secular minority was effectively denounced as heretics, and many were forced into exile (Abrahamian 1979). Subsequently, the constitution was amended to include religious checks on legislation to ensure compliance with the Sharia.

The conflict weakened the constitutional government to the point that Iran's national sovereignty all but disappeared during the Great War (1914–1918). By 1920, the constitutional government had lost virtually all power outside the capital, with Russian and British forces exercising control over most of the Iranian provinces in the north and south through native proxies. The inability of the central government to maintain Iran's sovereignty and territorial integrity, and the crippling political discord in

the government, prompted almost all the main political and religious protagonists in the capital to concede the political rise of a military strongman. The 1921 coup by the commander of the Persian Cossack Brigade was mainly welcomed. Brigadier General Reza Khan promptly occupied Tehran and took command of all military forces. Like Napoleon, Reza Khan emerged as a strong ruler from the ashes of a revolution that had been incapacitated by its own internal squabbles. By abolishing an old-style despotism, the constitutional revolution had given rise to a modernist autocracy.

## The Rise and Fall of Imperial Nationalism

Reza Shah rose from humble beginnings. He was born in a provincial village to a mother who had emigrated from Georgia as a child after the loss of Iranian territories in the Caucasus to Russia (Afkhani 2009: 4). He lost his father at an early age and joined the Russian-trained Persian Cossack Brigade in his teens. In 1918, he became the first Iranian commander of the Cossack Brigade (Nahai 2000: 180–181).

In 1921, having taken control of the capital as commander-in-chief of the armed forces, Reza Khan set off to crush the insurgencies throughout the country. His triumphant return to Tehran in 1923 prompted the last Qajar king, Ahmad Shah, into permanent self-exile in Europe. In 1925, the Constituent Assembly deposed the Qajar dynasty officially and appointed Reza Khan the Shah and the founder of the new Pahlavi dynasty (1925–1979). Reza Shah ruled Iran with an iron fist, but he effectively implemented many of the aspirations of the constitutional revolution. His policies were guided by to the vision of recreating Iran as a modern territorial state.

Reza Shah founded such modern institutions as a standing army, a state bureaucracy, a modern education system and a modern judiciary. His reign saw the emergence of an educated urban middle class and the introduction of a national market, modern banking and modern industry (Bharier 1971: 171–172). His infrastructural development projects included the construction of roads, bridges and, more importantly, a trans-Iranian railway. He also founded the first Iranian university and

promoted new technologies of telephone and radio transmission. He made national conscription mandatory and enforced a standardized version of Persian as the state language. However, the Shah was intolerant of political, ethnic and religious dissent, muzzling the press and turning parliament into a rubber stamp. He went on to antagonize the clergy by introducing a European-style national dress code for men and, more crucially, by issuing a decree forcing Muslim women to unveil (Chehabi 1993: 209–229).

Reza Shah's nationalism engendered a modern state, which in its turn fostered nationalism. His secular brand of nationalism celebrated ancient Persia in official historiography, styles of architecture, the pomp and ceremony of coronation and archaeological excavations. He even adopted Pahlavi (the term that designated the ancient Persian language) as his family name. However, his modern state could not inspire a passionate national consciousness. His invocation of ancient traditions was instrumental, pursued only to the extent that it suited the state's purposes. To use Ernest Gellner's characterization of modern nationalism, Reza Shah's efforts were directed at drawing on traditions to crystallize Persian 'high culture' in the context of a modern social organization (Gellner 1983: 43–55).

Most of the Shah's efforts to be progressive were completed or conceived as long as he benefited from the contributions of the country's best and brightest minds, who had been forged in the ferment of the constitutional movement. In later years, however, his mistreatment and alienation of competent intellectuals, managers and technocrats encouraged sycophancy and corruption. Moreover, his fascination with the idea of Iran as an Aryan nation and his leaning towards Nazi Germany provided an excuse for the Allies to occupy Iran in 1941, which led to his forced abdication and exile.

The ousting of Reza Shah and the collapse of his army in the face of allied invasion was particularly humiliating. It was interpreted by critics of his heavy-handed rule as the failure of his modern state to produce a nation whose 'soul' this state would represent. Indeed, scenes of public jubilation upon his downfall were proof of Reza Shah's failure to build an enthusiastic and passionate nation willing to defend his modern state. He was succeeded by his eldest son, the Swiss-educated 22-year-old

Mohammad-Reza. The new Shah lacked his father's charisma and authority. The first decade of his reign saw the easing of censorship and a desire to revive parliamentary constitutionalism. An avalanche of newspapers and other printed materials expressed a stunning range of political points of view. This period of chaotic political openness led to the rise of a new brand of nationalism.

In 1951, Prime Minister Mohammad Mossaddegh emerged as the champion of the movement to nationalize Iran's oil industry, representing a popular demand to take back control of Iran's oil reserves and revenues from the British (Takeyh 2019). Rather than appealing to ancient glories, Mossaddegh's patriotic rhetoric stressed national solidarity in the face of contemporary threats posed to national interests by British imperialism (Shahi 2009). His fiery speeches and his effective use of print media and the new medium of radio were crucial in mobilizing popular support for the nationalization movement.

Mossaddegh's confrontation with the British and his commitment to constitutionalism attracted the support of the liberal and socialist parties. Mossaddegh's opposition to despotism and colonialism also gained him popularity among the bazaar merchants and urban poor. Even the militant Shiite Islamists led by the influential Ayatollah Abol-Ghasem Kashani supported his cause. However, Mossaddegh's rising popularity and power and his liberal attitude towards communist agitation strained his alliance with the Islamists. The British, in their turn, sounded alarms with the Eisenhower administration about the rise of communism in Iran. Eventually, in August 1953, in a plot masterminded by the British and American secret services, and supported by the clergy, the royal army moved to overthrow Mossaddegh (Abrahamian 1993).

With Mossaddegh overthrown, the Shah consolidated his power with the army's support and resumed his father's autocratic style of modernization. In the early 1960s he introduced a progressive package of reforms at the behest of the Kennedy administration. By redistributing arable land from large landowners to smaller agricultural workers, he effectively abolished the old feudal system. He also introduced industrial relations reforms in the interest of workers, expanded tertiary education and crucially extended the right to vote to women.

The Shah's reforms were opposed by Shiite Islamists, now led by Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini. By 1960, the 58-year-old Ayatollah was acclaimed as a prominent scholar in the seminary of Qom, the main intellectual centre of Shiite scholarship in Iran. However, he owed his wider popularity to his outspoken denunciations of Western influences under the Pahlavi monarchy, which he considered to be inimical to Islamic values. His Islamist opposition to the Shah's modernization policies was impregnated with assertive nationalist overtones.

In a speech in June 1963, which sparked a bloody riot in Tehran, Ayatollah Khomeini condemned the Shah's reforms as a sign of 'surrender to American pressure'. In October 1964, he denounced a bill to give legal immunity to American military advisors in Iran as 'capitulation' to the United States. In his criticism, which led to his exile, Khomeini denounced the bill as a 'smear' on 'Iran's grandeur' and as trampling upon its 'national honour'.

With religious opposition stifled, the Shah pressed on with his modernization policies. The avalanche of petrodollars in the early 1970s enabled extravagant spending on development projects, which entailed astonishing economic growth. More contentiously, he made expensive arms deals with the United States to create a world-class air force, leading to the conspicuous presence of American military advisors in Iran. Impervious to the potential renewal of religious opposition, the Shah actively espoused a secular nationalist ideology overlaid by pre-Islamic symbolism. He adopted the title of Arya-Mehr (the Sun of Aryans) and forged an imperial pedigree for his modern state. He went on to hold a lavish celebration of the 2500 years of the Persian monarchy and to change the Islamic Hijri calendar to an imperial calendar.

However, the fall in oil prices in the late 1970s caused an economic shock. The setback meant that the economic expectations raised following a period of rapid economic growth could not be met. The Shah's opponents exploited the economic setback to ridicule his ambition to turn Iran into 'the Japan of the Middle East'. His close military ties with the United States were used to accuse him of turning Iran into an American protectorate.

As would become clear, the Shah's momentous reforms did not inspire enthusiastic support for his imperial-style nationalism. The overthrow of Mossaddegh in 1953 and the perception that he was an American puppet had profoundly tarnished the Shah's political record in the public mind. Much to his disappointment, incipient nationalist sentiments inspired by religion provoked strong public resentment at the status quo. These sentiments were harnessed by the exiled Khomeini to inspire another religious uprising, which would bring down the monarchy in February 1979.

The Islamic revolution came as a shock to the Shah. While overestimating the popularity of his reforms, he had underestimated the deep roots of Shiism in defining national identity in Iran. The Shah's western-style modernization had never been the negotiated outcome of a mature political contest. It had thus failed to create a social class that would be prepared to guard it with passion.

The rapid pace of Western-style modernization in the 1970s provoked grassroots fears of the loss of Islamic identity. Shiite Islamists exploited these fears to trigger a religious revival. They shrewdly sensed the lack of public enthusiasm for top-down secular modernization and instead stirred up deeply felt religious emotions that generated nationalist passions in support of an Islamic revolution. Had the Shah tolerated a loyal secular opposition critical of the royal autocracy, but supportive of the main trend of progress, an ideological buffer could have taken shape to confront the totalitarian momentum of a religious nationalist zeal.

Nationalist ideologues played a significant role in invoking and inventing traditions to shape and diffuse a nationalist ideology (Anderson 1991), but the sacrifices needed to promote that ideology were inconceivable without a consecrated cause (Connor 1994). In the secular nationalism of the Pahlavi monarchy the banishment of religion from the political sphere was considered essential to Iran's modernization. Religious nationalism, on the other hand, came to represent the return of religion to public and political life. Shiite Islam demonstrated the capacity to engender grassroots national consciousness within a modern society.

## Religious Nationalism Inspiring an Islamic Revolution

The vast majority of the Iranian population identified themselves as Muslims. Of these, an overwhelming majority identified themselves with Twelver Shiism as the true interpretation of Islam. The religious revival of the 1970s aroused a religious sense of nationalism. With deep roots in the cultural self-understanding of Shiite believers, this religious nationalism rivalled the state's secular nationalism. A sense of being oppressed, a perception that oppression must be opposed to the point of embracing martyrdom and a deeply held hope for the emergence of a Saviour had shaped this cultural self-understanding. These notions had been kept alive for centuries in everyday life by grassroots religious networks, familiar religious symbols and regular religious rituals.

The Shiite sense of being oppressed (*mazlumiyya*) was rooted in the belief that the Prophet's cousin and son-in-law, Ali ibn Abi Talib, and his 11 descendants, through the lineage of the Prophet's daughter Fatima, enjoyed a divine right to the political and spiritual leadership of the Muslim community, but that their right to succession had been violently usurped by tyrannical Sunni caliphs. The notion of martyrdom (*shahada*) for a sacred cause was inspired by the legend of the Shiite hero, Hussein ibn Ali, who challenged Umayyad Caliph Yazid, but was slain along with his small band of followers at the battle of Karbala in 680 AD. As for the expectation of the coming of a Shiite Messiah (*intezar-e faraj*), this was rooted in the faith in the occultation of the Twelfth Imam, Mohammad ibn Hassan, in 874 and the expectation of his return as the promised Mahdi (the Guided One), an eschatological redeemer who would rid the world of evil and institute an era of peace and justice.

A modern Shiite version of nationalism was indebted to the success of the Safavid dynasty to turn Iran into a bastion of Shiism some five centuries earlier. By proclaiming Twelver Shiism as state religion, the Safavid dynasty (1501–1722) had played a foundational role in making Shiism a rival ideology of nationalism in modern Iran (Savory 2007).

In 1501, after the Ottomans had outlawed Shiism in their domains, the Safavid founder Ismael declared independence and laid the

foundations of a powerful Shiite Empire in Iran. The adoption of Shiism as the state religion was meant to distinguish Safavid Iran from the arch-rival Ottoman state, whose Sultans were associated with mainstream Sunni Islam. Rivalry with the Ottomans prompted the Safavids to create a more cohesive Iranian identity based on the claim that Shiism represented the more genuine version of Islam. The severe policy of mass conversion to Shiism in Iran, where most of the population was still Sunni, was integral to achieving ideological conformity and building mass loyalty to a Shiite state.

The Safavids' thorough and often brutal conversion campaign permanently transformed Iran's religious landscape, providing the impetus for Iran's cultural unification and a sense of Iranian exceptionalism. While marginalizing or repressing other religious and cultural persuasions, the Safavids offered state patronage for the development of Shiite shrines and recruited Shiite scholars to disseminate the Twelver doctrine. In time, Shiite theologians acquired social and political influence by providing religious legitimacy for the Safavid Shahs. In exchange, the Shahs provided the clergy with economic and ideological power (Keddie 1969). They were given control over religious taxes and endowments, and served as judges and educators.

The Shiite clergy consolidated their influence further under the Qajar dynasty. Indeed, the Qajar Shahs actively engaged the clergy in a process of reciprocal legitimacy, and even allowed their involvement in political decision-making. Their reliance on religious taxes and endowments secured the clergy financial independence from the state and laid the foundations of an enduring political alliance with wealthy donors among the merchants of the bazaar. Shiite nationalism proper, which was developed in Iran in the 1960s and 1970s by intellectuals like Jalal Al-e-Ahmad and Ali Shariati, built on the self-perception of Iranians as having defended Shiism against a sea of surrounding Sunni neighbours for nearly five centuries.

In the 1960s Al-e-Ahmad, an author, activist and public intellectual, put forward the notion that Shiite Islam was fundamental to Iranian identity. His 1962 essay, *Gharbzadegi* (Westoxication), offered a cultural critique of Westernization in Iran that characterized 'enchantment by the West' as a 'contagious disease' that would alienate Iranians from their

native culture (Al-e-Ahmad 1981). In 1963, he visited Israel and, in his account of the visit, reflected positively on the fusion of the religious and the secular in Israel, speculating that it could be a potential model for Iran (Al-e-Ahmad 2017). His pilgrimage to Mecca in 1964 was a captivating journey for the sceptic Al-e-Ahmad (Al-e-Ahmad 1985). It would make the former communist sympathetic to the need for a religious transformation of Iranian politics, with the Shiite clergy viewed as the guardians of native traditions against Western imperialism (Al-e-Ahmad 1980).

In the early 1970s, Ali Shariati, a French-educated Iranian sociologist and public intellectual, emerged as the champion of a liberationist reading of Shiism (Rahnema 1998: 35). Influenced by the anti-colonialist thinking of the Algerian National Liberation Front during his time in France in the early 1960s, he had translated an anthology of Frantz Fanon into Persian. Unlike Fanon, however, he believed that religion was essential in the struggle for national liberation. Shariati came to define Iranian nationality in terms of Shiite culture. He viewed Shiism as the glue of Iran's social cohesion and as the nexus of the nation's past, present and future (Shariati 1971, 1972). His religiosity was akin to the Catholic Liberation Theology of Latin America. Like Al-e-Ahmad, Shariati criticized fascination with the West and the resulting cultural alienation. Instead, he called for a 'return to self'. He was also critical of Shiite orthodoxy's passive interpretation of Shiite eschatology. Instead, he urged his audience not merely to await the return of the Mahdi, but to work actively to hasten his return by fighting for social justice.

The syncretic collective identity that the religious nationalist ideologues of the 1960s and 1970s tried to define for Iranians by combining Islamic and Iranian elements was not always consonant. While a few tended to prioritize the Iranian element, other, more zealous ideologues elevated Islam as the core content of contemporary Iranian national identity. One could debate whether intellectuals like Al-e-Ahmad and Shariati were religious nationalist ideologues, or secular thinkers who used religious idioms to appeal to the religious masses. Nevertheless, in the 1970s their radical readings of Shiism and their critiques of hegemonic Westernization armed educated young people from religious backgrounds with a religious ideology of national liberation.

By the late 1970s, politicized Shiism had crystalized into a uniquely religious nationalist ideology that promoted Shiite culture as essential to national liberation. Depicting the anti-monarchical movement as a religiously inspired national liberation movement was instrumental not only in challenging the legitimacy of the incumbent regime, but also in bringing secular dissidents under religious control.

While the influence of the clergy over the more conservative classes was crucial, the Islamic revolution might not have achieved victory in the name of the nation if it had not managed to attract the support of the modern educated middle classes. The Islamists' recruitment of middle-class intellectuals, managers, technocrats, industrial workers and most crucially women—precisely those social groups that had benefited most from the modernization policies of the Pahlavi monarchy—enabled them to broaden the appeal of their agitation against Pahlavi modernization. The modern middle class sought political participation, but the Shah had blocked all avenues to independent political activity. This impasse channelled all political activism into religious networks that had grass-roots links.

The recruitment of the urban poor and uprooted provincial and rural migrants was also crucial to the victory of the revolution. The economic downturn in the late 1970s had turned the lives of these marginal populations into a daily struggle for survival. They packed religious congregations in lower-class neighbourhoods to hear radical clergy criticize the monarchy's corruption and tyranny. They lacked sophisticated political consciousness, but their savvy 'street politics' and their traditional upbringing made them qualified to serve as the foot soldiers of the Islamic revolution (Bayat 1998).

The radical interpretation of *intezar-e faraj* provided the 1979 revolution with the aura of an eschatological movement that created an expectation of the imminent return of the Saviour. To cite Eric Voegelin, the Islamic revolutionary zealots set about 'immanentizing the eschaton' (Voegelin 1952). By compelling the faithful to rise up against the ruling tyrant in order to hasten the return of the Mahdi, the activist interpretation of the Shiite concept of *intezar* provoked a major disruption in the quietist Shiite orthodoxy.

Shiite nationalism therefore held out a promise to each and every walk of life. It inspired the faithful with a spirited hope for imminent redemption, attracted the support of the modern middle class with the promise of political freedom and mobilized the urban poor with the prospect of more prosperous lives. With religious networks serving as platforms to recruit from all walks of life, Shiite nationalism emerged as the most natural language through which Iranians could enter the sphere of public politics.

The portrayal of the insurrection against the incumbent regime as both a religious and a national duty gradually shaped an alternative sense of the nation inspired by political religion. Emerging as the undisputed leader of the revolution, Ayatollah Khomeini did not claim to be the Mahdi, but he accepted the title of the Mahdi's viceroy. Khomeini branded the Shah as *taghut*, which in Islamic theology connoted tyrants who rebel against God. He used the term to denote the Shah as a tyrant in league with arrogant imperialist powers. The exit of the disappointed Shah from the country and the disintegration of his advanced and expensive armed forces in the face of hostile mass demonstrations were interpreted as proof of the feebleness of imperial nationalist claims of Aryan racial origins versus the power of the religious spirit of the nation.

## Shiite Nationalism in State Power

For decades, Iranian Islamists had sought to wrest the 'Muslim nation of Iran' out of the control of secular rulers in order to wind back westernizing assimilation and reinstate Islamic values (Friedland 2002: 381–425). The 1979 revolution provided Shiite Islamist zealots with an opportunity to make their dreams come true. It catapulted them to the leadership of the first openly religious state in a modern, rich and resourceful country with a vast territory and large geopolitical significance. Shiite nationalism figured powerfully not only in the revolutionary revitalization of the nation, but also as the recipe for thwarting secular efforts to strip the Iranian state of its religious content. Khomeini's notion of the 'Muslim nation of Iran' served as a rallying cry for the project of founding an Islamic state. It promised to bridge the divergence of culture and polity

by combating the ‘corrupting’ and ‘degenerative’ influences of Western modernity.

A conception of Shiite Islam as the core of Iranian national identity was implicit in the revolution’s political ideology thanks to the religious nationalist ideologues of the 1960s and 1970s. Khomeini skilfully incorporated what he found useful in the ideas of these ideologues to fashion his own religious version of nationalist ideology. Building a Shiite state and confronting Western modernity were two essential elements of Khomeini’s Shiite nationalism. Echoing Al-e Ahmad, he warned against the penetration of ‘poisonous’ Western culture into Muslim nations, and he set out to build an Islamic state that would instil Shiism as the centrepiece of Iranian national identity.

Critics, mostly from the ranks of secular nationalist activists, leftist intellectuals and even some social scientists, dismiss the idea of Khomeini as a nationalist leader due particularly to his open denunciation of nationalism as contradictory to Islam following the seizure of political power. Indeed, Khomeini dismissed nationalism and instead appealed to the worldwide community of Muslims (*umma*). But a closer scrutiny suggests that he did this to highlight the global aspirations of political Islam. Khomeini’s initial animus towards nationalism was, in truth, a political strategy to retain power in the face of the challenges posed by rival secular nationalisms from both left and right. Once these rival ideologies had been crushed, the Ayatollah would emerge as a champion of Shiite nationalism.

Khomeini’s vision of Iran as a Shiite nation was explicitly articulated in his ambition to turn Iran into the hub of a global revival of Islam. He envisioned Shiite nationalism as a means to turn Iran into Islamic *umm al-qura*’ (mother of all cities) in a clear challenge to Iran’s Wahhabi arch-rival Saudi Arabia. In his brand of nationalism, the Iranian nation appeared as a chosen people with a strong commitment to ‘sacred history’ and ‘divine duty’ (Litvak 2020). Khomeini’s religious nationalism was rooted in the notion that Iran was uniquely qualified as a nation to pave the way for the emergence of the Mahdi and to serve as the pivot for his ‘virtuous rule’. Since ‘the rule of the virtuous’ was in the process of being established in Iran, Iran had become the ‘redeemer nation’ (Ramazani 1989: 202–217).

Secular nationalists failed to grasp the significance of religious nationalism as a driving force of the 1979 revolution and a pillar of the legitimacy of the post-revolutionary state. This failure stemmed from their devotion to the idea that religion was bound to decline as a political force. As Michael Walzer has shown in the cases of India, Israel and Algeria, in Iran too secular nationalist leaders were overly invested in the idea that the 'scientific outlook' was destined to relegate religion to 'the dustbin of history' (Walzer 2015: 25). They thus neglected the political force of religion, which had remained alive in the everyday lives of the people. They failed to come to grips with the paradox of religious nationalism as a modern political force opposed to Western modernity.

To draw an analogy with Perry Anderson's analysis of secular nationalism in India, the Iranian secular nationalists were outflanked by a rival nationalism that appealed directly to the religious passions of the general public (Anderson 2012: 27). By contrast, the secular nationalists could not candidly acknowledge the latent religiosity of nationalist passions, nor could they openly distance themselves from the religious beliefs that had a passionate grip on the nation they meant to liberate. While they persisted in their denial that there was a religious core to nationalist passions, Ayatollah Khomeini had no inhibition in placing this religious core front and centre of his nationalist message. His Shiite nationalism had a deep emotional thrust based on community and belonging. It was supported by myths and legends from an age-old passionate religious culture that invoked exaggerated accounts of how Shiite heroes shaped historical events.

The social potency and mass appeal of Khomeini's religious nationalism resided in a unique combination of religious tradition with populist egalitarian slogans. On his triumphant return to Iran from exile, the Ayatollah promised national dignity and economic prosperity, but more importantly, an ideal state of spiritual enlightenment. His pledge to awaken Shiite believers to their 'celestial identity' and 'blissful destiny' appealed to an aggrieved public who felt betrayed by secular elites. It inflamed the public fears of a loss of religious identity under a secular regime and promised that the Islamic regime would alleviate these fears.

Khomeini's religious nationalism had the ability to obtain broad public support for an Islamic state as the agent of the nation's awakening to

its 'authentic' identity. Emphatic public recognition was obtained in a referendum in March 1979, which endorsed the establishment of Iran's Islamic Republic. The Ayatollah offered the Islamic Republic as the site for Iran's social reconstruction, moral regeneration and collective salvation.

As Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Khomeini entrusted the Islamic Republic with the divine mission of reviving the Islamic codes of practice in order to weed out the 'heathen system of monarchy' from 'the sacred Iranian territory'. The presumed divinity of this mission justified the reinstatement of norms of public piety and the enactment of a harsh religious penal code, including public flogging, hanging and stoning. It also legitimized the obliteration of political opponents of the Islamic state, leading to countless arrests, imprisonments and executions. Even the secular political activists and intellectuals who had supported the Islamic revolution were pushed aside by the protagonists of a religious revival. The Islamist elite had no qualms about using the force of the modern state against former allies who were now seen as enemies of the state.

Khomeini's theory of the state identified the Shiite clerics trained in Shiite jurisprudence as the custodians of the emerging Islamic Republic. His novel interpretation of the concept of *velayat-e faqih* (guardianship of experts in jurisprudence), developed in the early 1970s during his exile in Iraq, nurtured the political authority of a qualified Shiite *faqih* as the supreme power in the land (Khomeini 2004). This blueprint for clerical rule was enshrined in the constitution of the Islamic Republic, which was ratified in a second referendum in December 1979.

Nevertheless, Khomeini was pragmatic enough to recognize the indispensability of modern state apparatuses to his project of building a Shiite nation. Sami Zubaida has pointed out that Khomeini's political ideology was only thinkable within the horizon of the modern state (Zubaida 1993). The Ayatollah therefore consecrated the purge and incorporation of the modern state institutions inherited from the fallen monarchy, while creating new Islamic political institutions. He also recognized the need for a degree of secularization of the sacred. His notion of *masliha* (expediency) effectively authorized bypassing the *Sharia* when the vital interests of the Islamic state were at stake. Identifying cases of *masliha* was

entrusted to a new institution, the Expediency Discernment Council, whose members were appointed by the Leader himself.

Khomeini's brand of religious nationalism was defiant of a world order that he had no part in building. Its consolidation rested on a distinct hostility to the United States and Israel. This hostility was driven by intense anti-imperialist and anti-Zionist agitation. The United States was branded 'the Great Satan' and Israel a 'cancerous tumour'. Khomeini brazenly defended the occupation of the US embassy in Tehran by his supporters and openly called for annihilation of the state of Israel. He also called for the revolution to be exported to the Muslim majority states and fostered militant Islamic groups throughout the region.

## External Wars and the Consolidation of Shiite Nationalism

The war with Iraq (1980–1988) made resort to nationalism even more imperative. It was promoted as a 'sacred defence' and as a war of 'Islam against infidels'. Ironically, Iraq's military invasion of Iran under Saddam Hussein was crucial to Khomeini's success in forging national solidarity. By attributing the invasion to US instigation, Khomeini presented Iran as a holy nation in opposition to an infidel tyrant in league with the evil American empire. No wonder the Ayatollah referred to this disastrous war as a 'divine gift'. He characterized the war in terms of the opposition between good and evil.

Ayatollah Khomeini put the newly established Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps in charge of mobilizing civilian volunteers in a militia force (*basij*). Myths of the sacred territory created a symbiosis between religion and the homeland. Iran as a Shiite territory was sanctified through the prior presence and activities of the Shiite saints. The battlegrounds of the war became places of reverence and awe, with the burial grounds of those 'martyred' in the war turned into shrines of pilgrimage.

Cyclical religious ceremonies dictated by the event-rich Shiite calendar combined with state-sponsored public events to marshal the nation in support of 'the sacred defence'. The memory of Imam Hussein's

martyrdom became a mainspring of nationalist fervour. Patriotic hymns and public rituals immortalized the Imam's sacrifice of his life for Islam as a model to emulate. In short, the war consolidated the 'collective self' and demarcated the boundary between 'us' and 'them' as part of the process of nationalization of the Shiite faith (Ansari 2009).

Shiite nationalism even inspired quasi-irredentist tendencies, which began with Ayatollah Khomeini's idea of exporting the revolution. Under Khomeini's successor, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, these tendencies found their geopolitical justification, with territories with substantial Shiite populations beyond Iran's borders deemed to provide Iran with 'strategic depth'. Iran's sponsorship of Lebanese Hezbollah and other affiliated groups in Iraq and Syria constituted an Iran-centred 'Axis of Resistance'. Even the militant Sunni groups enjoyed the support of Iran's Shiite regime in their hostility against the US and Israel.

The overthrow of Saddam Hussein in 2003 effectively handed the Iraqi government to the Shiite allies of the Islamic Republic. The withdrawal of US forces in 2011 created a golden opportunity for the Islamic Republic to turn the shrine cities in southern Iraq into a virtual extension of an Iran-centred Shiite homeland. Cordial relations with Iraqi politicians provided Iran with vital political, military and intelligence leverage. The foreign legion of the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps, known as the Quds Force, armed, trained and funded allied Iraqi militia groups. Investment in the repair and upkeep of Iraq's Shiite shrines and regular mass pilgrimages to Iraqi shrine cities helped expand Iran's influence at the grassroots level.

The Arab Spring and the rise of the self-declared Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) provided more opportunities for Iran to boost its regional hegemony through allied militias. Iran managed to expand its influence into Syria by propping up the Alawite regime of Bashar al-Assad against the Sunni-dominated uprising in 2011 and the threat of ISIL in 2013. The strategy of opening up a corridor to connect Iran to the Mediterranean added a new dimension to its transnational ambitions. Regional rivals attributed these transnational activities to Iran's renewed imperial ambitions.

Haggai Ram suggests that Islamic consciousness of Iran as a nation does not constitute the basis for an alternative myth to the national myth,

but only adds Islamic terminology to the same myth (Ram 2009). In this perspective, the Shiite version of political Islam in Iran remains well within the confines of imperial nationalism (Aburaiya 2009: 57–68). The fusion of religious faith and nationalism has generated a social and political power that seeks to flow beyond Iran's international borders (Norbu 1992).

Yet Iran's Islamic regime has cautiously kept Iranian nationalism under religious control. The expansion of Iran's transnational influence and the development of nuclear and missile technology despite the crippling sanctions imposed by the US are fed into public consciousness as reasons to celebrate Shiism as source of national pride. However, references to pre-Islamic Iran as an alternative means of firing up nationalism are held in check. President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's failed attempt to revive the discourse of pre-Islamic imperial greatness was a case in point. His populist political platform, which combined messianic fervour with veneration of Iran's ancient grandeur to muster public support outside clerical control, was quashed by a barrage of criticism from the clerical establishment.

## The Limitations of Shiite Nationalism

The religious ideology of nationalism enabled the Shiite Islamists to forge a totalizing authority intent on ordering every aspect of public and private life. This distinctively religious nationalist programme fuelled a pernicious pursuit of social uniformity, moral purity and political conformity. It turned into a coercive system of moral and political policing bent on transforming a modern nation with a diverse population into a univocal religious community dominated by sectarian rule.

Beneath the moral façade, however, cronyism, nepotism and other forms of favouritism have become entrenched in the political machinery, opening the way for corrupt rentiers to game the system (Azadi 2020). Access to high political positions and lucrative economic opportunities through clerical patronage has effectively transformed the Islamic Republic into a theocratic oligarchy, and the revolutionary guards into a praetorian guard to protect this oligarchy in exchange for handsome

economic and political rewards. Sectarian righteousness has led to a sense of exclusive entitlement, giving rise to a new upper class with intertwined family relations (Boroujerdi and Rahimkhani 2018).

Despite its claims to be a republic, Iran's Islamic Republic has failed to act like a republic that confers on all its citizens equal rights and that can be held accountable by them. Sectarianism has constrained its capacity to broaden the base of national enfranchisement. While unaccommodating of the notion of equal rights to citizenship, the regime has institutionalized discrimination based on faith, ideology and gender. Religious rationalizations have been used to legislate discrimination against women and the persecution of non-conforming political and faith groups.

The incorporation of the doctrine of *velayat-e motlaq-e faqih* (absolute guardianship of the jurist) into the revised constitution in 1989 provided a legal basis for the claim of a supreme Shiite jurist to absolute political power without accountability. Ayatollah Khamenei lacked Khomeini's charisma but has been an assiduous administrator. Since 1989, he has exercised the extended powers granted to him by the constitution with enormous efficiency. His office constitutes a form of deep state that effectively determines government policy.

The Supreme Leader is elected for life by a council whose members are vetted by his own appointees based on their absolute loyalty to *velayat-e faqih*. He has the authority to set the agenda and direction of domestic and foreign policies. He is the commander-in-chief of the armed forces and controls the judiciary, the police and state radio and television. His office has the final say in matters of national security and can even block legislation by decree. His powers are further extended through his field operatives in all sections of government, with the authority to shape policy as it suits him.

The Islamic Republic seems increasingly at odds with the emancipatory and egalitarian promises of the revolution that established it. Failure to provide good governance has eroded much of the popular appeal of Shiite nationalism. In the late 1990s, a reform movement led by the more moderate Islamists gained victories in the presidential and parliamentary elections. The reformists attempted to ease the corrosive trend of intolerance, discrimination and incompetence from within the ruling system. However, hopes of instituting meaningful reform were dashed in the face

of a conservative pushback. The reformists' gains were wound back with the support of the state's judiciary, intelligence and security apparatuses. Hopes for reform through electoral process were dashed yet again in 2009, when the regime crushed a massive uprising that had erupted against a rigged election.

In recent years, the litany of grievances about economic mismanagement, systemic corruption and political repression has combined with demographic and generational changes to give rise to a more broadly based level of public discontent, which intermittently erupts into open protest. Since late 2017, public expressions of discontent have become more radicalized and widespread. The protests that swept the country in November 2019 following the government's snap decision to triple gasoline prices called openly for regime change (Maloney 2019). The regime's brutal response occasioned the bloodiest anti-regime riots to date.

At the international level too, hostility to Western interests, involvement in transnational proxy wars and the pursuit of a controversial nuclear programme have locked the Islamic Republic into a vicious cycle of defiance and reprisal with the United States (Ghobadzadeh 2015). Hostility to Western interests has made the oil-based economy increasingly vulnerable to international political and economic pressures. The regime plays up US sanctions as the cause of the country's economic decline. In a bid to inspire nation solidarity, the regime characterizes economic pain as the price of resistance against US domination. But an increasingly despondent public blames the regime's misguided policies, which have isolated Iran internationally while enabling a tiny minority of rentiers to amass wealth at the cost of the impoverishment of the vast majority of Iranians.

The failure of the Shiite state to extend equal rights and tangible economic benefits to all citizens of the state is threatening its own stability. An overzealous sectarian interpretation of Shiism has marginalized, repressed or otherwise disadvantaged, most co-habitants of the territorial state. The inability to cater to the social, economic and political demands of a rapidly expanding population of highly educated and ambitious young professionals and intellectuals of diverse religious, ethnic and political persuasions has eroded loyalty to Shiite nationalism and inspired dissent. In the eyes of the general public, the Shiite nationalist narrative

has been reduced to empty rhetoric and unfulfilled promises, while vital national resources are either dedicated to the state's transnational ambitions or embezzled by corrupt politicians.

Descent into sectarianism has led to ideological, social and political conflict, as the marginalized groups put forward competing prescriptions for the nation's future direction. Rival visions of national destiny are once again competing for political influence. Countervailing projects of national revitalization have reignited the frantic search for a dignified national identity for Iran. While still incipient, secular nationalist sentiments could take advantage of the erosion of the legitimacy of religious nationalism to inspire broad-based political action for change. Draconian measures against legitimate dissent are likely to impair further the regime's claim to represent the entire nation (Conversi 2004).

The experience of the Shiite state in Iran is testimony to the fact that there can never be a single version of a nation or of a history based on a sectarian faith, just as there can never be a homogeneous national community with a single destiny. Different classes, confessions and ethnicities may espouse rival narratives of the nation, its history and its destiny. No 'high culture', whatever its history, can thrive in a modern society as a basis for an inclusive nationalism through sectarian prejudice. The stability of the modern nation-state rests on its ability to overcome the nationalist zeal of a core identity group to block the enfranchisement of other members of the nation. To cite Gellner, no modern state can bind the dominant culture to a sectarian reading of religion without risking obsolescence (Gellner 1983: 72–81, 141–142).

The rising popularity of pre-Islamic symbols and rituals among the younger generations is a case in point. In October 2016, the unprecedented congregation of thousands from across the country around Cyrus's tomb near Persepolis to celebrate the day that was believed to mark his triumphant arrival in Babylon turned into protests against the Islamic regime, ending in arrests and the banning of similar events.

A recent reliable survey of religious beliefs in Iran is another testimony to the erosion of the popularity of Shiite nationalism in Iran (Tamimi and Maleki 2020). The survey results indicate a dramatic shift, particularly among the younger generations, towards irreligion, conversion and even atheism. While Iran's official census data identifies 99.5 per cent of the Iranian population as Muslims and 90 per cent as Shiites, the new

survey has found that only 40 per cent of Iranians identify as Muslims and only 32 per cent as Shiites. This is despite 90 per cent describing themselves as hailing from believing or practising Muslim families. Some 68 per cent agree that religious prescriptions should be excluded from legislation and mandatory *hijab* abolished.

The shift in religious attitudes indicates a readiness for a new project of national revitalization that is more inclusive, yet motivating and energizing. A process of social and cultural reform could provide some kind of synthesis based on the selection and reinterpretation of received traditions. With paths to reform blocked, however, no attractive political alternative with the power to unseat the incumbent regime is yet on the horizon. The regime still enjoys the vocal support of radical Islamists. But domestic turbulence, international pressure and the regime's intransigence could activate latent political alternatives with unpredictable consequences.

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# Part V

Asia in/and Europe



# 12

## Coming of Age in the Secular Republic of Fiction

Oskar Verkaaik

Peter van der Veer's most influential book, *Religious Nationalism*, was published three years before Lila Abu-Lughod advocated an anthropology of the particular in her article 'Writing Against Culture' (1991), intended as a direct response to the celebrated volume *Writing Culture* (1983), edited by James Clifford and George E. Marcus. According to Clifford and Marcus, anthropologists craft written interpretations of the ways of life of other peoples, but since these interpretations are subsequently mistaken for the real, fuzzy, fluid and ever-changing 'thing', anthropologists can indeed be accused of writing culture. At the end of the introduction to the volume, the editors claimed that, although anthropological feminism was concerned with similar issues, feminists had as yet not written anything worth publishing and were therefore absent from the volume. Abu-Lughod reacted to this by accusing the editors of only partly realizing their ambitions. Although the subtitle of the book talked of 'the poetics and the politics of ethnography', according to

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Abu-Lughod the chapters were mainly concerned with poetics only, with how anthropologists create cultures, and much less with the politics of this phenomenon. Abu-Lughod argued that a much more radical political critique was needed to show how the notion of culture is itself a powerful political concept that places groups of people in boxes and is hence a form of symbolic violence. Therefore, just as anthropologists had contributed to the creation of culture, they should now write against it. This article came out when anthropologists were already questioning the concept of culture influenced by trends as diverse as Foucault's work on genealogy, Derrida's philosophy of deconstruction and the increasingly popular method of discourse analysis. However, Abu-Lughod proposed a different strategy, that of zooming in on the inconsistencies and discontinuities that are often left out of ethnographic analysis because they would disrupt the illusion of a coherent cultural system.

Throughout his work, van der Veer has been equally dismissive of the notion of a bounded coherent culture, but his methodology has been very different, indeed almost opposed to Abu-Lughod's. Rather than zooming in on the particular, van der Veer has mostly been interested in global connections. His work aims at the bigger picture rather than the nitty-gritty. He does so not by focusing on global inequalities in the political economy approach, such as those of Eric Wolf or Andre Gunder Frank. Rather, he has been influenced by Edward Said and Talal Asad and the ways in which these authors trace genealogies of global ideas. Akhil Gupta's work on the state, for instance, is akin to van der Veer's way of working. Gupta (1995) takes the modern state as an idea that is disseminated globally through notions of, for example, transparency and corruption. However, this global idea is translated locally in different ways; therefore, it also has a different impact on local histories. Cultural diversity, that field of study for anthropologists par excellence, is not the result of age-old and mutually exclusive traditions of thought, but of different histories of translating global processes and concepts locally. Cultural differences are always gradual and hence comparable.

This dual focus on the global and the local also explains why van der Veer's and Abu-Lughod's methodologies are not mutually exclusive in the former's work. As he himself indicates in his most recent book, *The Value of Comparison*, his work is often 'secondary' (van der Veer 2016: 8).<sup>1</sup> Most

of his books try 'to make sense of a wide variety of arguments by historians and anthropologists without going into the interpretation of primary sources and fieldwork data' (ibid.). In painting the bigger picture, then, van der Veer often builds upon the detailed ethnographic work of others. In *The Value of Comparison*, he makes the important point that 'the study of a fragment' (ibid.: 9) is more helpful 'to gain perspective on a larger whole' (ibid.) than the use of the large datasets or 'Big Data' that are increasingly popular in social scientific research, including even anthropology. He refers to Sidney Mintz's study of sugar as an excellent example of a 'fragmentary approach' (ibid.: 11). In choosing a fragment or the particular as the object of study, anthropological holism becomes possible. That is, it becomes possible to integrate various spheres of life, such as slavery, colonialism and capitalism, but also changing food habits, for instance. Mintz had shown that sugar as a global commodity had a different impact in different places. Obviously, the fragment as understood by van der Veer is not necessarily the same as Abu-Lughod's notion of the particular. The fragment as conceptualized by Partha Chatterjee (1995) is an aspect of something bigger that is often erroneously taken as a 'whole', like the nation, whereas the particular in Abu-Lughod's article is defined as something that disrupts the illusion of coherence, notably the vulgar and the absurd. But both have in common their scattering of ideas of wholeness and consistency. The nation, van der Veer would say, is never one, never accomplished.

Importantly, van der Veer's global and comparative ambition is also meant as a critique of any form of Eurocentrism. Although interested in the global dissemination of ideas, van der Veer has never been convinced by attempts to formulate a global theory of history. *Religious Nationalism* (1994a) in particular is based on the rejection of the evolutionary notion of a radical break between tradition and modernity. The book's main bone of contention is in fact Benedict Anderson's idea, formulated in *Imagined Communities* (1983), that in modern times the nation has taken over the form and function of religion. According to van der Veer, anthropology is among other things a 'critique of the universalisation of Western models' (2016: 9), such as the secularization thesis that undergirds Anderson's seminal work on nationalism. Yet, since the formation of religious nationalism in South Asia was obviously connected to other parts

of the world by colonialism, his work also took him back to Europe: to Britain, in his book *Imperial Encounters* (2001), and to Holland in his Dutch-language book *Modern Orientalisme* (1994b). The latter is obviously not very well known outside the Netherlands, since Dutch is not an academic language. Unlike Immanuel Wallerstein's world-system theory, which divides the world into centres, semi-peripheries and peripheries, van der Veer's return to Europe mainly had the effect of provincializing the West. Like Christopher Bayly in his book *The Birth of the Modern World* (2004) with its initial chapters on imperialism, industrialization, the state and so on from various places around the globe rather than solely from the so-called European centre, van der Veer shows how Britain and Holland, as much as South Asia, have been shaped by global ideas of the nation and religion.

In the rest of this contribution, I take this idea of global comparison without a centre as my point of departure. My aim is to compare two cases of political mobilization—one in Pakistan, the other in the Netherlands—that can be called 'populist' (compare Ahmad 2019). Both have in common a form of identity politics that is based on culturalist notions of difference between religious-ethnic groups. Both are also explicitly anti-elitist. The point, however, is not to simply point to similarities. Both cases are obviously dissimilar in many respects. I see them rather as 'fragments' of the global phenomenon of contemporary right-wing populism. What I want to explore is how in both cases populist forms of political mobilization and transformation are connected to long-term notions of religion and the nation and how they are redefined in the contemporary context. My approach, therefore, is mainly focused on ideas and will leave out other factors such as the impact of free-market media or the growing social-economic inequalities as a result of economic liberalization that are obviously important in understanding contemporary right-wing populism. In developing this approach I have been influenced by Peter van der Veer.

I will start by returning to my ethnographic work in Pakistan, conducted in the 1990s. I will keep this part brief, however, because it is mostly a repetition of what I have already argued in previous publications (e.g. Verkaaik 2004). The larger part of this chapter concerns the discursive roots of the rise of right-wing populism in the Netherlands. My

methodology in this part is literary-anthropological; that is, it consists of readings of some important novels, as anthropologists do. In doing so, I find inspiration in two sources. First is the so-called *romantropologie*<sup>2</sup> of Dutch anthropologists like Verrips et al. (1984), as well as Anton Blok (1974), all of whom used it to analyse novels as ethnographic sources. The other, internationally more famous example is Talal Asad's discussion of the post-Enlightenment literary scene in his comments on what in the late 1980s came to be known as 'the Salman Rushdie affair'. Asad sees the literary world as 'neither a continuity with premodern Christianity nor a complete break from it' (Ahmad 2017: 69).<sup>3</sup> It is rather 'a resignification in which "literature can fill the role previously performed by religious textuality" to become a "substitute religiosity", a "source of spirituality", and even "the truth of life"' (ibid.). Rushdie interpreted this as the quasi-sacralization of secular ideas (Rushdie 1990). I am particularly interested in how Dutch secularism as it came to be defined in the post-war period gives contemporary populism a certain pervasiveness that rings true to much larger segments of the Dutch population than right-wing populist voters only. The literary imagination of Dutch secularism, therefore, seems to me a useful starting point for an exploration of the collective ideas that undergird right-wing populist definitions of the nation. The comparison with Pakistan serves as a counterpoint that indicates, somewhat differently, continuity and transgression in the transformation of nationalist discourses.

## Karachi Revisited

The retirement of one's PhD supervisor may be a moment to reflect on one's own career as well. In doing so, I was surprised to discover in my own professional biography a number of similarities with Peter's. It will come as no surprise that, as his student, I was influenced by *Religious Nationalism* when in 1996 I returned to Pakistan to do research on ethnic and religious conflict in urban Sindh. I was mainly interested in Muhajirs or migrants from India who had come to Pakistan in the early years of independence in and after 1947. Since independence, when most of the Hindu residents of the city of Karachi left for India, Karachi had been a

city of migrants, with Muhajirs forming the largest segment of the population. In a political context shaped by the conflicting ideologies of religious nationalism and the politics of ethnic identity, Muhajirs were generally considered the champions and defenders of a Muslim national identity that left little room for regional, linguistic or ethnic political identities. As such, they stood opposed mainly to the Sindhis, the original inhabitants of the southern province of Sindh of which Karachi is the capital city. After the Bengalis had successfully launched a separatist movement leading to the founding of Bangladesh in 1971, the Sindhis took over the role of the most prominent ethnic group striving for regional autonomy. However, when in the 1980s young Muhajirs founded an ethnic political party of their own called the Muhajir Qaumi Movement (MQM), they crossed this discursive line separating them from the Sindhis. They adopted several of the tropes of Sindhi nationalism in their own reformulation of Muhajir ethnic identity, including several notable references to Sufi traditions of martyrdom and mysticism. This blurring of discourses led to a new notion of Muhajirness, to a rapprochement between former enemies and to a sense of liberation among the young Muhajir population.

I became interested in this form of discursive renewal through the transgression of categorical boundaries. Ethnic identity politics had shaped political discourse from the very first days of Pakistan's existence. The notion of Muslim unity, which has been the *raison d'être* for the new nation in 1947, lost much of its appeal once it had been liberated from the Hindu Other. The call for Pakistan had always been most prominent in those parts of India where Muslims constituted a minority. In the Muslim majority areas that became Pakistan, linguistic and regional alliances had shaped local politics for decades, and they continued to do so after Independence. What was new, however, was the attempt to 'Islamize' ethnicity, that is, to stress the unique Islamic history of regions and ethnic groups. In this way, one could proclaim an ethnic identity without denying the importance of Islam. This trend, however, seriously questioned the unifying power of Islam. Sindhi politicians and intellectuals in particular embraced the tradition of Sufism as a distinct aspect of Sindhi history and identity. For their part, their Muhajir counterparts, particularly the leaders of religious parties that gained considerable support from

the Muhajir population, had dismissed the notion of Sindhi Sufism as a rural, backward tradition, and thus as damaging to the nation and not in conformity with the proper message of Islam. When the young leaders of the MQM crossed the boundary separating the purist Muhajir from the mystical Sindhi, it shocked older generations of Muhajirs as much as it felt like cultural liberation to the young generation.

The MQM, however, was not only a movement of cultural liberation. After its founding in 1984, it quickly built up a reputation for violence and ethnic prejudice. In fact, although the MQM adopted some of the traditions of rebellion associated with the Sindhi Sufi heroes who had martyred themselves in their fight against tyranny, this did not prevent the MQM from attacking Sindhi neighbourhoods in the worst instances of ethnic violence in the 1980s and 1990s. Most of these clashes found their origin in the fear that Muhajirs were losing their dominance in Karachi. After taking over the city in the first few years after Independence, Muhajirs had begun to see Karachi as their city, despite it gradually being taken over by migrants who arrived later. The MQM also gave voice to the large underprivileged segments of the Muhajir population, attacking the Muhajir and Pakistani elites, and accusing them of betraying the promise of social justice and equality that the founders of Pakistan had spoken of. In mobilizing voters in a combination of identity politics and anti-elitist rhetoric, the MQM resembled the Hindu-nationalist movement that was on the rise in India at the same time. In today's terms, the MQM would easily qualify as a populist party.

What I found most remarkable, however, was the element of categorical transgression in the MQM's politics. In the religious-ethnic categorization of groups and their religiosity, Muhajirs had always been associated with a puritanical Islam that left little room for idiosyncrasies that it largely dismissed as 'rural', 'backward', 'uneducated', and therefore as unbecoming the modern nation of Pakistan. In their private lives many Muhajirs continued to visit Sufi shrines and partake in Sufi rituals, but in their public lives as *Muhajirs* such behaviour seemed odd and inappropriate. It is questionable to what extent the MQM was able to gain immediate political power for its Muhajir constituency. The Pakistani military rapidly put an end to MQM rule in Karachi in the early 1990s. However, the cultural transformation of Muhajir public religiosity had a deeper

impact. For instance, it loosened the grip that religious parties formerly had on the Muhajir population.<sup>4</sup> More importantly, the MQM's categorical transgression was to some extent a form of emancipation. Muhajirs could now take part in so-called popular forms of religiosity *as Muhajirs*. It was this fascination for cultural liberation in relation to political mobilization that I took with me when I returned to Amsterdam at the end of the 1990s.

## Dutch Norms and Values

In what may be called the 'enigma of return', to reverse-paraphrase the title of V. S. Naipaul's famous novel *The Enigma of Arrival* (1987), anthropologists and others who have spent a prolonged period of time in another place on the planet trying to understand another society find themselves in a situation in which their native country appears strange and unfamiliar to them. To a large extent this is a matter of perspective. De-familiarizing the familiar has always been an important side effect of anthropological fieldwork elsewhere. However, when I returned to the Netherlands around the year 2000, others who had never left the country for longer than a few weeks also felt the place was changing rapidly. For one thing, unnoticed by my fellow countrymen who had stayed in the Netherlands, the country appeared to me as incredibly rich, well organized, almost ridiculously green, with city centres that nearly looked deserted compared to South Asian cities, and all in all extremely lucky. At the same time, political discourse was changing rapidly, from the largely optimistic years of liberal triumph after 1989 to a dystopian notion that the place was falling apart without anyone in a position of responsibility taking action. It started with alarmist newspaper articles that put the neglect of ethnically mixed urban neighbourhoods on the agenda. Then came 9/11, and the focus shifted to the alleged threat of Islam, including the threat Muslim citizens in the Netherlands were said to pose to Dutch culture. All this was not completely new, however, as the Salman Rushdie affair had already brought Orientalist understandings of Islam into political and media debates. A political party called *De Centrum Partij* (The Centre Party), formed in 1980, had managed to get one extreme right-wing

white supremacist MP elected after the national elections of 1982. However, this man was successfully silenced by a collective refusal to cooperate with him on the part of all the other 149 members of parliament. In 2000 a new party emerged with a new leader, Pim Fortuyn, who was constantly in the media describing Islam as a 'backward culture' and who accused the influential Labour Party, of which he had once been a member, of pampering 'allochthones' (in Dutch *allochtonen*), a term that refers to citizens from 'foreign descent'.<sup>5</sup> After he was murdered, his party won twenty-six seats in parliament in the 2002 elections.<sup>6</sup>

To me, this transition in the Netherlands seemed not that dissimilar from the rise of the MQM some fifteen years earlier in Pakistan. I learnt that this was a suggestion that could easily be misunderstood when I said something similar in a public debate that included some well-known Pim Fortuyn supporters. Assuming that I meant that the Netherlands were rapidly being taken over by Muslims, they laughed and concluded that I was one of them. My point, however, was that Fortuyn was not only anti-elitist and anti-minority, but that he had also introduced a new political discourse based on the blurring of discursive boundaries. The way he combined progressive values, particularly, on gay sexuality, with disparaging remarks about religious minorities was in many ways novel. His innovation was that he made it possible to be a cultural chauvinist in a progressive way. Fortuyn opened the door for liberal-minded people to openly express their aversion from religious Others in the guise of Muslim citizens. Moreover, there was something contradictory and charismatic about the way he simultaneously flaunted an aristocratic, homosexual, dandy-like posture and presented himself as the white leader of football hooligans and—to use Paul Willis' term for a subculture of young racist and sexist members of the working class—other 'lads'. As we know today, this quasi upper-class style would later be adopted by other European right-wing populists like Nigel Farage in the UK and the new Dutch Fortuyn epigone Thierry Baudet.

Just like the MQM and its transgressive rhetoric had revealed the unresolved dilemma of religion and ethnicity in Pakistani politics, Fortuyn's success brought out a discursive tension in the Netherlands. On the one hand the nation prided itself on its tolerance: openly racist or culturally chauvinist politics were taboo. However, this tolerance was

based on a particularly Dutch form of secularism that considered religion as the root of intolerance, stagnation and cultural oppression. To be tolerant of 'backward' religious groups like Muslims, then, seemed a contradiction. In those early days of the twenty-first century, there was a lot of moral panic about Muslims allegedly not accepting 'Dutch norms and values'. But the real problem with Dutch norms and values was that the dominant secularists felt that they had to choose between being tolerant and being liberated from religion. For them, it was not clear anymore what the true Dutch norms and values were. At least for a while, Fortuyn offered a solution to that conundrum.<sup>7</sup>

One thing that became clear from Fortuyn's successful attempt to rework progressive sexual values into an anti-Muslim weapon was that his style and language were at least to some extent rooted in the cultural and sexual revolutions of the 1960s and the 1970s. Underlying anti-Muslim rhetoric was a deeper unease with orthodox religion in general. When challenged, opponents of Islam referred to novels from the post-war period that ridiculed Catholicism and Protestantism, saying that such forms of 'religious critique' had liberated the nation and that something similar was needed today to prevent religion from assuming an important social and cultural role again. As elsewhere in Europe, anti-Islam politics led to the definition of a particular kind of secularism as the dominant governmentality.<sup>8</sup> Interestingly, Peter van der Veer had already remarked on this trend in an interview with the Dutch newspaper *De Volkskrant* published in December 1995, that is, a few years before Fortuyn's rise. 'My generation', he said, 'largely those who were born after the Second World War, have experienced a [cultural] landslide'. Explaining that the Netherlands had been a highly pillarized society in which various religious denominations had heavily influenced all spheres of life, he continued, 'for many [of us] depillarization meant something like a personal liberation, and now religion is a painful topic nobody talks about anymore'. When the interviewer suggested that this was far from being adult reaction, van der Veer replied, 'Because of a kind of youth trauma, it is apparently impossible to look at religion in a balanced and objective manner. Religion, whether Christianity or any other religion, is a tricky topic, both intellectually and scientifically, an issue that only invites scorn. Luckily, the younger generation is not bothered with that past, and

the fascination for the important role religion plays in many societies is growing again.’ The headline to the article read, ‘Anthropologist van der Veer considers the [Dutch] academic milieu highly conservative’ (*De Volkskrant* 1995).

Although I probably belong to ‘the younger generation’ that van der Veer thought was less prejudiced against religion, I am old enough to have some personal experience of the dying days of Dutch pillarization. Being sent to a Catholic school, for instance, on my way from there to a Catholic football club I had to bike really quickly through a Protestant neighbourhood in the town of my birth, Gouda, to avoid a beating. Petty fights between Protestant and Catholic youth gangs were not uncommon in those days. It hardly defined my emerging identity, however. Once in high school I was soon introduced to the secular and sexual freedoms of the time by a teacher of Dutch literature flaunting a wild beard and wearing a dirty sweater. In fact, what is perhaps most remarkable about van der Veer’s generation was not so much the fact that its members liberated themselves from religion as that they managed to change educational curricula to such an extent that the generation that followed grew up thinking the ‘sexular’ society was a ‘natural’ thing.<sup>9</sup> The protagonists of the books we were made to read struggled to free themselves from their highly oppressive Calvinist upbringings. To me they all seemed somewhat outdated, as irrelevant to my own life as boring nineteenth-century novels about hysterical, sexually frustrated women in The Hague. The only difference was that some of the more recent novels offered much more explicit descriptions of sex.

Nonetheless, the conviction with which secularism was pitted against religion in the post-Fortuyn years was palpable. Inspired by giant books like Edward Said’s *Orientalism* (1979), which used novels as a method to analyse a dominant way of thinking and feeling, I later began rereading the very novels from my time in high school. I was curious not so much about how the post-war generation had left religion behind—Peter van Rooden had written an excellent article about this (2004)—but rather about the more emotive and visceral experience of this cultural landslide. If Erik Erikson (1968) defines identity as intrinsically connected to crisis, I wanted to know how that crisis of collectively losing one’s religion had

felt. I took secularism to be the identity of the generation that dominated the public sphere.

## Five Novels

The first of these novels I reread was *Ik, Jan Cremer* ('*I, Jan Cremer*'), published in 1964. The novelist, Cremer, was then 24 years old. It was not the first controversial novel ever to be published in Dutch, but it was the first one to be marketed in a modern fashion. It was also one of the first that was explicitly autobiographical. Earlier books had shocked too, but they had always been presented as fiction or as fantasy. *Ik Jan Cremer*, a picaresque novel full of sex, violence and vandalism, claimed to be authentic, which made it all the more difficult to digest for conservative readers. Written in a style and genre that reminds one of Jack Kerouac, the American novelist of the beatnik generation, the book describes the troublesome youth of the author, who grows up in the city of Enschede near the German border, where he gets involved in sex and petty crime at an early age. He rebels against the authorities—police, the boarding school he is sent to—and leaves his hometown to travel. He becomes a sailor, a marine, and joins the French foreign legion, then moves to Paris to become an artist, developing a style of painting he calls *peinture barbariste*. Meanwhile he has many short love affairs.

Apart from its bohemian anarchism, the book came as a shock because of its rough, unpolished language. The author continued this lack of respect for good taste in interviews, in which he said things like: 'Who is Rembrandt? I am not interested in sport.' Or: 'I don't read. I am being read.' For the first time, scandal was self-consciously used to sell the book, and with unprecedented success. When a police officer confiscated a copy of the book because he felt it was a threat to law and order, the author under a different name wrote a letter to the editor of a well-known newspaper, praising the police officer for his civil courage. Reviewers called the book 'fascist', *Jancremerisme* became another word for vandalism and football hooliganism, and questions were raised about it in Parliament. As a result, more than a hundred thousand copies of the book were sold

in no time. 'All these readers enjoy the book enormously, telling themselves at every page they turn how bad it is', the author said.

In a way, the book marked the end of the 1950s, when only small groups of so-called *nozems* (bikers) were provoking the authorities. It signalled the beginning of the proverbial 1960s, when anti-authoritarianism became much more widespread, political, commercial and mainstream. The book is nonetheless atypical because of its unproblematic and exuberant tone. The author joyfully embraces a self-chosen bohemian romanticism without God or authority. His childhood in poverty, without a father, hardly seems to trouble the author; rather, he fondly remembers the freedom and lack of upbringing in his early years. His art, too, is unproblematic: although he has been to art schools, his paintings are marketed as pure expressions of spontaneity, unspoil by civilization.

Of the five books I reread, *Ik Jan Cremer* (1964) appeared to me as the least problematic, the least painful. There is hardly a development. The author, who is also the protagonist, stays the wild, unspoiled, natural child he has always been. He has never lost his freedom. Even his exile, prompted by the conventional character of the Dutch nation and its artists, becomes a great adventure. That cheerful tone, together with the unusual marketing strategy, makes the book rather unique. Soon after *Ik, Jan Cremer* the literary scene would begin to describe freedom as a painful rather than an adventurous state of mind.

A year later, in 1965, another book written by a young writer-cum-artist came out: *Terug naar Oegstgeest (Oegstgeest Revisited)* by Jan Wolkers (1965). Wolkers was forty years old when the book was published, and he had already published a few novels about his childhood in the village of Oegstgeest, near Leiden. This book too is written as a memoir, told by a protagonist who is an artist residing in Amsterdam for whom artistic genius and sexual promiscuity are two of a kind. His present life in the capital city, however, soon makes room for memories about his parents, his brother, the neighbourhood, his schoolteachers and the schoolgirls.

More conventional in style and language than *Ik Jan Cremer*, Wolkers' novel appeared to me as not very original. It reminded me of another famous novel in Dutch, *De Avonden (The Evenings)*, published in the late 1940s by Gerard Reve, an author to whom I return below. We would now say that it is a book written by a man suffering from a midlife crisis,

trying to come to terms with the environment of his upbringing that he thoroughly detests. The melancholia already starts with his arrival: it rains, everything is grey, the monotonous rhythm of the petty bourgeois life makes him sick. His return does not offer a solution: the book ends with the death of his brother, or rather with his dead brother's coat, the only thing he has inherited from him, which is torn to pieces by a heron, a large bird.

*Terug naar Oegstgeest* was less scandalous and less successful than *Ik Jan Cremer*,<sup>10</sup> but in its own way it was also controversial, primarily because of its dual themes of religion and violence. Religion was everywhere in the Netherlands of the 1930s, the decade of the author's youth. It is primarily embodied in his father, a churchgoing shopkeeper. Talking to his father as an adult, Wolkers suddenly asks himself: 'If he dies, what will become of God?' That happens in one of the first chapters of the book. Later on, the schoolboy develops an interest in animals, and more particularly in torturing and killing them, the suggestion being that this youthful violence is a reaction to the invisible violence of the religious order. This makes *Terug naar Oegstgeest* a much more passionate book than *Ik Jan Cremer*. Whereas in the latter the violence is located in the wild barbarous child, in Wolkers' novel the violence of the child reflects the social repression of the conventional lower middle-class milieu.

Whereas Jan Cremer is now a somewhat marginal figure, Jan Wolkers would gradually become a national darling. When he died in 2007, some called him the national teddy bear. If *Terug naar Oegstgeest* did not free him from the violent God of his parents, his turn to nature in his later years did. He went to live on the island of Texel, near the sea, his fascination for plants and animals increasing and no longer feeling the urge to destroy them. In the biblical language of his Dutch reformist upbringing he would now praise the beauty of insects, shellfish and women. Unlike Cremer, he cultivated a fragility and a sense of humour that spoke of a lifelong fascination with nature that he had developed in his youth, as well as, perhaps, a sense of melancholic pity for the God of his parents and His language.

If sex was a rather unproblematic alternative for a God who was dead (Cremer) or dying (Wolkers), for Gerard Reve, already mentioned, the relationship between sexuality and religion was much more complicated.

In 1963 and 1966 he published two books that were one of a kind: *Op Weg naar het Einde* (*Toward the End*) (1963) and *Nader tot U* (*Closer to Thee*) (1966). Like Cremer's and Wolkers' books, this one pretended to be purely autobiographical. There was not the slightest attempt to develop a plot. Both books by Reve were selections of letters, *monologues intérieur*, or rather litanies, written in a melancholic style that was exalted and banal at the same time. He also had an absurd sense of humour. Both books were full of decadence and mysticism, expressed in the double bind of irony, which he defined as 'doing as if you do as if'.

The books also announced the author's triple coming out: as an alcoholic, a homosexual and a convert to Catholicism. Each constituted a stigma in predominantly sober, heterosexual, Protestant Dutch society—although the writer himself was from a communist family. To make matters worse, alcohol, homosexuality and Catholicism were all intrinsically connected in Reve's work. The images, smell and sheer atmosphere of a Catholic church provoked his lust. Sodomy with kneeling altar boys in front of a statue of Mother Mary was his ultimate desire, and in what came to be known as 'the Donkey Trial' he was accused of blasphemy because in *Nader tot U* he depicted God as a donkey he had made love to three times. He was, however, acquitted.<sup>11</sup>

Since publishing *De Avonden* in 1947, Reve was known as a post-war nihilist. The books he published in the 1960s were also about an author who believed that nothing was real, except perhaps death, and even that only after the fact. What saved one from complete darkness was not sexuality per se: on the contrary, for him sexuality was little more than lust, pain and violence. He constantly wanted to punish his lovers for their scandalous beauty. But sex—again, after the fact—did lead to a moment of compassion with the victim of his own lust. During these short post-coitus moments, Mary, Mother of God, appeared with her naked, tortured son in her arms. It was only during these brief moments of compassion and guilt that the veil of irony was removed, but never for long. The desire for pain and punishment was soon revitalized.

For Reve, neither religion nor sexuality offered any form of redemption whatsoever. Nor did alcohol, for that matter. None of them revealed a deeper truth, be it the oceanic feeling provoked by intimate contact with nature or the barbarism of an unspoiled childhood. Religion and sexuality

were both, in fact, highly ritualistic: both desires were triggered by a surplus of alcohol, after which the body simply and automatically followed the ritual pattern. There was nothing authentic about it; there was only, perhaps, redemption in death. Meanwhile, the best one could do was to try to make life bearable by letting the body perform the rituals it had been taught. Catholicism was kitsch and, in Reve's own words, a 'puppet theatre', but for that very reason preferable to iconoclastic Protestantism or secular communism, both of which left humanity all to its naked, miserable self.

Another book with a profound nihilist message was also published in 1966: *Nooit Meer Slapen (Never to Sleep Again)* by Willem Frederik Hermans. But his was a very different kind of nihilism, in a way a quite romantic kind of nihilism. There was no sex in this book, apart from a fantasy about a naked black woman, and, at the very end, a seductive American tourist on the verge of betraying her drunken husband. Unlike the other three, this book does pretend to be fiction, and the protagonist's name is different from the author's name, even though both share an interest in physical geography. In fact, the book tells the story of a PhD student sent to northern Scandinavia in order to prove that the landscape there has been formed by meteor showers. The journey becomes a hellish one. The protagonist fails to get the aerial photographs that are essential to the project. He has difficulty following his Norwegian fellow students on the long marches through rough terrain, pestered by swarms of mosquitoes. He cannot sleep because the sun never sets. When he sets out to explore the region alone, he loses his compass; when he is finally back on track, he finds that his closest companion has died after falling from a mountain. He returns to the Netherlands with no evidence to prove his thesis.

A considerable part of the book is devoted to the discussions the students have while camping in the wilderness. Many of them are about the silliness of believing in the existence of God, which suggests that the journey should be read metaphorically as a Nietzschean novel, the non-existing meteorites being a metaphor for the empty universe. Life on earth is as barren and cold as the Nordic landscape. The northern lights deprive one of the possibilities to sleep and dream and escape the harsh reality that humanity is alone in a hostile cosmos. The message is already

made clear in the famous opening scene of the novel, featuring a blind receptionist who has to show the protagonist the way to the Norwegian professor whom he has asked for aerial photographs. The universe is blind, there is no one out there to see and recognize our existence and we only exist in the eyes of ourselves. This place is not kind to a student born in the swamp of religion that is called the Netherlands; to survive here you need to be like your Norwegian fellow students who, like hyperboreans, disappear beyond the polar winds.<sup>12</sup>

The book, then, is about loneliness, even despair. Implicitly, it is also about a certain heroism. Apart from *Ik Jan Cremer*, this book is undoubtedly the most masculine of the five. That is, Hermans' novel not only has a Nietzschean undertone, it also resonates with the frontier romanticism of the Western movie. Hermans' heroes are not unlike the lonesome cowboy, a Clint Eastwood if you like, leaving the comfort of human society not because he wants to, but because he has a wisdom that no longer allows him to share in the lies and illusions of his fellow human beings. Those who survive in the Nordic landscape are a doomed but superior tribe. To face the truth of God's non-existence, in other words, is a passion and a fate. The atheist's suffering is superior to the suffering of the believer because he lacks the anaesthesia of the God delusion.

So far the novelists have been only men. The fifth book I reread was a feminist one. In 1976, ten years after the novels by Hermans and Reve came out, Anja Meulenbelt published her book entitled *De Schaamte Voorbij* (*Beyond Shame*) (1976). To some extent this is the feminist answer to *Ik Jan Cremer*. It is also pure autobiography and is mostly about sex. The style of writing is as unpolished and straightforward as Cremer's book, although less explicitly provocative. It is written in a hurry by an author with a mission. There are also, however, a number of important differences from Cremer.

Meulenbelt, who later became a senator for the Socialist Party and a part-time preacher in the progressive Amsterdam church known as the Student Ecclesia, was a journalist and an activist. It had taken her some time to come to that. She becomes pregnant and marries early to escape the middle-class home in which she grew up. Her equally young husband is from Austria, whom she follows on several jobs throughout Germany and France before finally divorcing him after returning to Amsterdam.

This is the beginning of long years of poverty, petty jobs and an endless series of relationships with men, many of them married, others visiting Amsterdam from abroad, none of them staying for good. When Meulenbelt's book came out, many male novelists had already written explicitly about their love affairs, gay or straight, but this was the first time a female novelist had done so. But there was a difference: while for the male novelist every new lover was a triumph, for Meulenbelt each affair added to a gradually increasing sense of self-hate and shame in the protagonist.

The turn comes halfway the book, when, already active in left-wing, counter-culture activism of various kinds, she is introduced to a group of women who are discussing sexual politics. She feels uneasy at first, not least because her male comrades in the activist world, some of whom are lovers, frown upon feminism as a petty bourgeois phenomenon. But soon she starts to feel at home, becomes a feminist activist, breaks with the married man she is having an affair with and instead starts a relationship with his wife. For the first time in her life, she feels fully loved and accepted. Men, at least some of them, were able to give her excitement. She thought of herself as someone who could get along pretty well with men, particularly if naked, but in loving another woman she experienced a sense of tenderness she had always missed.

However, the book does not have a happy ending. Her lover leaves her to return to her husband. Meulenbelt starts a relationship with a man, a kind and understanding man this time, who nonetheless envies her newly developed independence, her sense of direction and her grief caused by the love she has lost. The two of them, together with her thirteen-year old son, go on holiday to the south of France, where she starts to write the novel in an attempt to come to terms with her broken relationship. Instead, it becomes a book in which she gets to the bottom of her shame and returns sadder, wiser and more independent.

The book caused quite a stir when it was first published, partly because Meulenbelt was already a well-known journalist and was acquainted with other public figures, some of whom featured in the book in promiscuous situations under their own names. But others who were not in the book were not overly happy with it either. Some feminists, for instance, regarded the fact that the author had gone back to a male lover after her

unhappy relationship with his wife as a defeat. In the long run, however, Meulenbelt received much praise for her courage and honesty. The book was a milestone in the feminist movement that significantly changed the world of left-wing, progressive, counter-cultural politics and activism.

Meulenbelt's message was that the sexual revolution of the late 1960s had liberated the sexuality of men but had dubious consequences for women. The alternative she offered, despite the straightforward language of the book, was more complex than it appeared at first sight. First, there was a need to rescue sexuality from pure lust and lustful ritual, and to recognize, beyond shame, one's desire for an intimate and tender kind of sexuality. But that desire for affection could also become the political basis for personal independence. At a time when free sex, partner-swapping and pornography were becoming the norm, here was a call to start seeing sexuality in terms of both independence and intimacy. If the first half of the book was about free sex, the second half was about free love—or, at least, the desire for, and political agenda of, free love. Given the complexity of that concept and the paradoxical expectations that were attached to it, it is no wonder that the book could not end like a fairy tale.

## Secular Passion

What exactly can we make of this limited discussion of five novels? Obviously, a more thorough study would have to include more information on the readership and how generations of readers have read these books in different ways. That would go beyond the scope of this chapter. Still, if we accept that novels to some extent reflect the times in which they were written, then we can safely conclude that the collective loss of religion came in different shapes and forms, from Cremer's godless adventures to Hermans' heroic atheism and Reve's ironic conversion to Catholicism. These five books belong to a literary canon that most educated people from the post-war generation have read. The literary scene in the 1960s and 1970s was much less fragmented than it is today, and novels like these five were part of a shared national literary imaginary. It is also true that books like these did not just reflect, but to some extent

also helped shape secular culture. In their wake a whole literary genre emerged of coming-of-age novels in which the protagonist struggles to free him- or herself from a religious upbringing. Novelists like Maarten 't Hart, A.F.Th. van der Heyden and Jan Siebelink have published bestselling novels in this genre. Even today, young and promising novelists like Franca Treur and Marieke Lucas Rijneveld<sup>13</sup> write their first novels in this tradition. What is more, young novelists from a migrant background like Naema Tahir and Özcan Akyol have become celebrated media stars with their personal stories of liberation from an oppressive Muslim youth. The success of Ayaan Hirsi Ali's autobiography was placed in this genre by readers from an older generation. In a time of right-wing hostility towards Muslims, such books allowed progressive liberals to dream of Dutch Muslims eventually assimilating to Dutch secular culture and, with some delay, freeing themselves from religion just like the post-war generation had done a few decades earlier. This hope, of course, neglects the new forms of urban religion that have recently emerged in the Netherlands (e.g. Beekers 2015).

Interestingly, this genre linking religion and liberation defines freedom in a highly complicated manner. With the exception of Cremer, freedom is hardly ever simply a carefree matter. The road to freedom is a rather painful one, a trial of sorts, that includes agony and loss. For Hermans, the notion of an empty and meaningless universe is symbolized by a cold and barren landscape in which people die. For Meulenbelt, liberation from shame was a long and therapeutic process. In almost all of these books, secular freedom is a struggle that includes the death of something that is dear to the protagonist, whether a social world, a self-image, one's youth or all sorts of illusions. In the secular literary imaginary, the struggle is a prerequisite to becoming a full person. The protagonist does not simply leave adolescence behind to become a mature person. In a deeper sense, liberation from religion, which always involves the death of the former self, also renders the protagonists more mature in a moral and intellectual sense: they not only grow older, but also wiser.

In writing on pain and secularism, Talal Asad has initiated a scholarly debate about secular passion. For Asad, secularism means the end of enduring pain as a religious virtue. Secularism changes sufferers into subjects with the ability to act. But the secular subject cannot do without

pain either. Pain is no longer something to endure, a condition to submit to, but a possibility to develop a conscience, a decision to act morally and intellectually (Asad 2003: 67–99). In this sense, secular literary passion helps explain the notion of moral and intellectual superiority to religious communities. Perhaps this is part of what Asad had in mind when he compared the modern literary scene to a ‘substitute religiosity’.<sup>14</sup>

Just as the MQM appropriated the Sindhi political tradition for its own purposes, so the new right-wing populists of the Netherlands have given a new twist to the progressive post-religion tendency from half a century ago. When Pim Fortuyn called Islam ‘a backward civilization’, this was not just an echo of nineteenth-century evolutionism, it also evoked the familiar notion of religious immaturity. Many other critics of Islam since Fortuyn have stated that they do not want to repeat the struggle for progressive liberties all over again. The notion of beleaguered secular freedoms recalls the collective memory of religious orthodoxy. But it is also the case that this populist passion lacks the ambiguity and creativity of the 1960s and 1970s. If freedom was a mixed blessing and a source of literary inspiration for the post-war generation, the notion of freedom has become flat and one-dimensional in the hands of today’s populists. Also, its aesthetic is stunningly mediocre. Whereas in France Michel Houellebecq has given literary expression to the right-wing critique of Islam and progressive liberalism, the literary imaginary of Dutch right-wing secularism is as yet non-existent. Compared to the MQM, which emancipated the Muhajirs from puritanical Islam, today’s Dutch populism remains dull and clichéd.

## Notes

1. He called it ‘a synthesis’ in his *Religious Nationalism* (1994a: xv).
2. The term *romantopologie* is an amalgam of the terms *roman* (novel) and *antropologie* (anthropology). The idea behind it is that novels can be analysed as fragments of popular collective ideas. The idea is akin to the concept of the *lieux de mémoire* or ‘places of memory’ coined by the French historian Pierre Nora (1998) that sees places and objects as vested with historical memory.

3. Due to the coronavirus pandemic I currently have no access to my office, where I keep my copy of Talal Asad's *Genealogy of Religion*. I am therefore forced to rely on the discussion on Asad's work by Irfan Ahmad in his *Religion as Critique*, which I have at home.
4. These parties, like the Jamiat-i-Islami and others, consequently tried to build up a constituency among the Pakhtun population of the Northwest Frontier Province, where the impact of the war against the Soviet Union in Afghanistan was deeply felt. Towards the end of the 1990s, new proselytizing movements like the Dawat-i-Islami returned to Muhajir-dominated cities to recruit a younger generation of Muhajirs.
5. See Geschiere (2009) for a discussion of the terms 'autochthonous' and 'allochthonous' in Dutch political debates.
6. Peter van der Veer commented on the rise of Fortuyn in a 2006 article in *Public Culture* (Van der Veer 2006). See also Thijl Sunier and Rob van Ginkel (2006) for an analysis of Fortuyn's success in the context of 'neonationalism' in Europe.
7. I have analysed this confusion over Dutch norms and values elsewhere, see Verkaaik (2017).
8. The body of literature on various forms of secularism and how the secular has been defined in the context of contemporary multiculturalism is long and varied. It includes, among much more, the work by John Bowen on France, of Tariq Modood on the UK, and of theorists like Talal Asad, Charles Taylor and Jose Casanova. In addition, there is an abundant literature on secularism beyond Europe. For an overview I refer to the review article on the anthropology of secularism by Fanella Connell (2010).
9. Joan Scott, a French historian, coined the term 'sexularism' during a lecture on 'Secularism and Gender Equality' at the European University Institute, Florence, on 23 April 2009.
10. However, Jan Wolkers would return with another novel, *Turks Fruit* ('*Turkish Delight*'), a love story in the Rabelaisian tradition, full of sex and body fluids, and extremely male-centred (Wolkers 1969).
11. The Dutch blasphemy laws that forbade 'scornful' (*smalende*) descriptions of the divine were repealed in 2013.
12. The nihilist sentiment with Nordic landscapes and flirtations with Nietzschean philosophy got a new, political twist in 2019 when the extreme right-wing politician Thierry Baudet, after the electoral success during the provincial elections, spoke about the perceived threats to the Western civilization of the 'boreal' world' (*boreale wereld*), a dog whistle

to racist extremists. Baudet has close links to global Alt-right and has confessed to holding antisemitic views.

13. In 2020 Rijnveld won the prestigious Man Booker International Prize with her debut novel *The Discomfort of Evening* (*De avond is ongemak*). The international audience may not be aware how much this novel is part of a dominant genre in contemporary Dutch literary scene. The title itself seems to refer to Reve's *De Avonden*, published in 1947, and one of the founding novels of this genre.
14. I have developed this argument in a book in Dutch called *Ritueel Burgerschap* (Verkaaik 2009).

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# 13

## Socialization of Language and Morality at Chinese Christian Church of Berlin

Jingyang Yu

I first came across members of the Chinese Christian Church of Berlin (CCCB) in November 2010. Within a month of arriving in Berlin as a student, members of the CCCB approached me on the university campus and the students' dormitory on three separate occasions. Two of them came up to me in the students' cafeteria, handing out pamphlets about Christianity and Jesus and inviting me to go to their church on Sunday. The third approach was from a friendly neighbour in the dorm, who asked me to join her and her friends for dinner later that Friday evening to 'have some fun'.

Attracted by my own imagination of what a fun Friday night might be like, I went to dinner with my neighbour and her friends, which turned out to be a meeting of their Bible group. It took place in a Chinese acupuncture and massage centre in Prenzlauer Berg that was owned by two members of the group. Fifteen people were present that evening, including a few students like myself. The majority of group members, either employees of

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companies or owners of their own businesses, were between thirty and forty years old. The meeting lasted for five and a half hours and included Bible reading, general and small-group discussions, singing gospel songs, praying and dinner, which all the members referred to as a ‘feast of Love’ (爱宴). At the end of the evening, the groups sat together in a circle, with closed eyes and firm grips on each other’s hands, and shouted my name together in their prayers. They called out my name and ‘Hallelujah’ repeatedly, thanking God for leading me to this meeting tonight, asking Him to have mercy on me and begging Him not to give up on me:

‘God, Jingyang is an innocent child! She did not know she was a sinner!’<sup>1</sup>  
 ‘She didn’t know!’  
 ‘She did not know she has to go to hell!’  
 ‘She didn’t know!’  
 ‘Hallelujah!’ several voices shouted together.  
 ‘Please forgive her ignorance and give her another chance! Please, my Father in Heaven!’  
 ‘Hallelujah!’  
 ‘Save Jingyang!’, ‘Save Jingyang!’ Almost all of them chanted together.  
 ‘Amen!’

A fun Friday night indeed.

I was determined to come to terms with what I had experienced that Friday night. I started attending the CCCB’s Sunday service and conducted fieldwork with three different Bible groups in different parts of the city in November 2011–February 2012, September–December 2012, January–March 2014 and August 2015–July 2016.

This chapter starts with a brief introduction to the CCCB before describing the unique demographic characteristics of the congregation compared to other Chinese Christian churches in Germany. It presents extensive ethnographic data in the following two sections, where it analyses the motivations of the first-generation Chinese immigrants in taking their children to the church and the strategies the church leadership pursue in meeting the needs and wishes of its members. Besides highlighting Chinese language and identity, the final section shows how the CCCB also provides Chinese migrant families with a space in which to construct

shared codes of morality and thus institute the socialization of that morality at a religious institution.

## The Chinese Christian Church of Berlin

During my fieldwork, there were two Chinese Protestant churches in Berlin: the CCCB with which I began this chapter, and the Chinese Alliance Church of Berlin (CACB). Starting out as an informal Bible group of seven students in West Berlin in the 1980s, the CCCB has grown into the largest Chinese Christian congregation in Germany in recent decades, especially since the Rutgers Community Christian Church (RCCC), a Chinese Christian church in New Jersey, USA, began providing it with financial and personnel support in 1999. Since 2006, the CCCB has rented the church building of the Protestant Church at Hohenzollernplatz (Evangelische Kirchengemeinde am Hohenzollernplatz) in the southwest of the city, where they hold their weekly service every Sunday afternoon and ‘an evening of worship’ every Thursday evening.

Chinese Christians in both China and the diaspora tended to call Catholicism ‘Catholicism’ (天主教) and Protestantism ‘Christianity’ (基督教). Members of the CCCB considered themselves to be ‘Christians’ (基督徒), while many of them enjoyed drawing a sharp distinction between the Catholics and themselves during their discussions. Pastor Xu, who had been preaching at the CCCB since 2006, was baptized in a Baptist Church in Taiwan. The RCCC and CCCB both had strong theological objections to infant baptism and offered full-immersion baptism to adults only. However, Pastor Xu and members of the CCCB Church committee refused to be associated with the Baptist denomination. Instead, they emphasized repeatedly, the CCCB was ‘an independent church’, ‘a Christian church’ that did not belong to any denomination.

Währisch-Oblau (2005) and Gotthard Oblau (2006, 2011) have analysed the establishment of Chinese Protestant churches in Germany and point out that most of these churches exist in the form of ‘Freikirchen’ (free churches) within the German categorization of church institutions. Most Chinese Protestant churches in Germany, like the CCCB and CACB, were founded and supported by mission-oriented institutions in

countries outside Germany, typically in the US, and often share an unre-served focus on missionary work. The CACB, the second Chinese Christian church in Berlin, was founded in 2006 by ‘the Christian and Missionaries Alliance’ (C&MA) with personnel and funding directly from the US. By 2015, the C&MA, an American evangelical denomination with more than six million members in seventy countries, had established two Chinese Christian churches in Germany.

## Students Leave, Families Come

Being the largest Chinese Christian congregation in Germany, the CCCB had roughly 250 members at the time of my fieldwork, about 180 to 200 of whom attended church services on Sundays.<sup>2</sup> Compared to the German ‘Landeskirchen’, the CCCB had much less interest in collecting accurate data about its members. Neither the pastor nor the church committee was able to provide any precise demographic data for their community. During the Christmas service on 24 December 2012, Pastor Xu announced that there were around 250 members of the Church, of whom a third were under the age of 25. My impression during participant observation was that this figure was roughly correct. A regular Sunday service usually attracted around 100 to 120 adults and 60 to 80 children.

Since 2000, German universities have undergone a series of reforms, including offering more studies and programmes to meet the needs of international students. The increasing number of courses in English and the separation of Bachelor’s and Master’s Studies, for example, has made it easier for foreigners outside Germany to become students at German universities. At the same time, more ‘agents for education abroad’ (留学中介) have opened for business in China, offering an application advice service for Chinese students wishing to enter German universities and colleges. These additional incentives enhanced the popularity of Germany as a destination for Chinese students, whose number quintupled from 1999 to 2004. Since 2004, Chinese students have become the largest group of foreign students in Germany. By the end of 2015, 38,833 Chinese citizens had been issued with residence permits for educational purposes, about 32% of all Chinese immigrants in Germany.

As education became the main channel of migration from China to Germany, it will be useful to note some features of this migration in the past decade. Demographically this is a relatively young community, with a high percentage of university graduates and a low percentage of third-generation immigrants. Except for the immigrants in ethnic businesses, those in the main body of Chinese students and young professionals have few transnational ties, lacking relatives other than the nuclear family. With neither a family circle nor an ethnic neighbourhood, institutions like Chinese language schools or Chinese Christian churches have become important for Chinese immigrants, especially in socializing them into language and morality and transmitting Chinese heritage from one generation to the next.

The high percentage of students among Chinese immigrants in Germany translates directly into their participation in religious communities, including Chinese Christian churches. Oblau and Lüdde (Oblau 2006; Lüdde 2011) document the increasing proportion of students belonging to Chinese Protestant churches across the country since 2005, and how this demographic shift among church-goers has shaped these churches' profiles. However, at the CCCB the number of student attendees was gradually shrinking, being replaced by families and children as a significant part of the community. Back in 2003 the CCCB had fourteen Bible groups, six of which consisted entirely of students, and only one for 'jobholders' (上班族). In 2012, the CCCB had eleven Bible groups, only one of which was for students. Although there were students scattered among the other groups as well, most Bible Group Captains (查经小组小组长) told me that they had mostly jobholders in the group.

In an article Pastor Xu posted on his blog on 25 March 2010, he proudly discussed the increasing number of families in the congregation, from only three when he first arrived in 2006 to a double-digit figure that was still rising year by year. Although unable to provide accurate statistics of the size of the congregation, all the Church committee members I talked to confirmed that the participation of families and jobholders had been growing fast. Throughout the years of my participant observation, the perceptible transformation of its sociological structure, and particularly the unseemly decline of students at the CCCB, caught my attention. How should we understand the increase in the number of families

and the decrease in the number of students? When the number of students had been increasing and student churches had become the majority among Chinese Christian churches across Germany, why and how did the CCCB evolve differently? (cf. Kang 2021) And most importantly, what motivated Chinese migrant families to join the CCCB, and how did the CCCB manage to keep them coming and staying?

This chapter aims to answer these questions. Through an extensive two years of fieldwork, I examine the roles of Bible groups, Sunday school and Chinese language programmes both within and outside the church. I investigate the strategies of the church leadership and examine how the pastor and the Church committee have acted together to shift their focus from students to families in order to reach their goals.

## **A 'natural environment' of Speaking Chinese**

When I first met David in 2014, he was five years old. Both his parents were ethnic Chinese who had first come to Germany around 2002 as students, had stayed and found jobs after graduation, and had been raising a family in Berlin with two adorable children. David was the younger child and had been born and raised in Berlin. He was in the last year of kindergarten when we met during a Sunday service at the CCCB. After a big smile and a cheerful 'Hallo' from him, I asked him in Chinese 'What's your name?' The smile disappeared, and the five-year-old suddenly put on a stern face, shook his head slowly and said to me 'Deutsch, bitte' ('German, please').

During my fieldwork at the CCCB, I never saw David speak Chinese. Whenever his parents talked to him in Chinese, David stared at his parents with his big beautiful eyes without saying a word. 'You have to be patient', said his father, summing up his approach. David responded only in German, when his parents finally ran out of patience and switched to German themselves.

This was why David's parents considered it necessary to take him to church every week. In the opinion of David's father, Mr Xie, the Chinese Christian Church of Berlin was the best place for guiding his children in learning and speaking Chinese, much better than any Chinese language

school. 'There [at the language school] a teacher is teaching, children have to sit there and learn, it's all fake, and the children know that!' 'Fake?' 'Yes, fake! It is all arranged, not natural, and the children themselves know that. But here at church, this is a very natural environment [...] real and authentic. We are not pretending that we are teaching Chinese, we are all just speaking Chinese naturally: this is very real. Only here can children really be immersed in a Chinese environment.'

Ms Meng, mother of three children and a Sunday school teacher, agreed with Mr Xie completely. She had tried several Chinese language schools in the city before bringing her sons to the church. None of the schools worked very well for her boys, she explained, as they hated to 'go to school' at the weekend. 'Actually, the most important thing is not to have Chinese classes, but rather the Chinese environment! ... Think about how we grow up, right? Which one of us learnt Chinese during Chinese class at Chinese language school? It is the environment, after all!'

The unwritten goal of cultivating children's Chinese language skills had become a priority for the community organizers, and the parents spoke highly of the 'Chinese-ness' of the atmosphere in the CCCB and the Chinese-oriented events. The CCCB not only provided a Chinese-speaking environment, it also introduced Chinese traditions and customs into its community life. The major Chinese traditional festivals were elaborately planned and earnestly celebrated at the CCCB. Pastor Xu gave festive sermons, and church leaders offered special programmes echoing major Chinese holidays. The Church committee and all Bible Group captains organized grand entertainment shows and lavish banquets for the Spring Festival. In all these activities, the engagement of the children always played a prominent role.

The impact of this Chinese environment went beyond the activities during Sunday service. The parents I encountered at the CCCB all valued the potential circle of friends and the social life their children could cultivate during their participation at Sunday school and enthusiastically arranged play-dates and other get-togethers to strengthen their contacts and relations with Chinese friends. Quite frequently, the interest of the parents in the sermon did not seem to be as high as their interest in Sunday school. During every single service I attended over the years, there were often far more members gathered outside the Sunday school

classrooms to chat with each other than members remaining seated in the main hall to listen to Pastor Xu preaching.

As Bourdieu points out, institutional experiences like schools draw children into transformative practices that go far beyond what they learn from textbooks in the classroom (Bourdieu 1984; Bourdieu and Passeron 1990). The impact of implicit socialization, where the transmission of principles, habitus and cultural capital takes place, could be far more effective and formative than the explicit socialization written in the textbooks (Bourdieu and Passeron 1990). While Bourdieu and Passeron criticized schools as institutions for the reproduction of legitimate cultures, the first-generation Chinese immigrants embraced institutions of this kind and believed in the impact of implicit socialization on the next generation. Those parents shared their faith in implicit socialization as a powerful medium for transmitting knowledge and competence and to transform the habitus and practices of the next generation.

Not surprisingly, the Sunday school teachers at the CCCB were asked to speak Chinese in the classroom, although it could be challenging to guarantee a Chinese-only classroom during Sunday school, as many young children had little knowledge of Chinese the language. 'At least we try to do that', one member of the Church committee told me. He also explained to me that speaking Chinese was the expectation of most members. Ms Zheng, one of the teachers in the class of six to eight years old, considered it important to 'set the rules straight' with the young pupils in her class and to make sure they were in a Chinese-speaking environment as long as they were in the church. 'We are the Chinese church. If we don't speak Chinese even here, where else?', Ms Zheng asked me rhetorically. But what if the children could not understand? 'We tell them some stories, but mainly do handiwork and drawings. [...] The children, of course, would still speak German among themselves, but we, their teachers and parents, have to set an example in speaking Chinese not only in the classroom but everywhere in the church and on Sunday afternoon.'

The CCCB provided Chinese immigrants in Berlin with a unique environment in which Chinese was the dominant language. Under the leadership of Pastor Xu and the Church committee, the CCCB was not only a place for 'getting to know God' and strengthening the Christian faith of Chinese immigrants in Berlin, but also a 'natural environment' in

which the younger generation could speak and learn Chinese. Based on the growing number of families and the significant proportion of young children, this strategy proved very effective, and the CCCB became a popular place to go on a Sunday afternoon for Chinese immigrants.

The rise in the number of families attending was also reflected in the size of the Sunday school classes. In 2012, the CCCB had four classes for different age groups. Every class was taught and supervised by six to eight church members. This meant that among the 100 to 120 adults who attended Sunday service, about thirty of them were responsible for organizing and teaching Sunday school classes for the next generation. As the work of Sunday school became increasingly important, the Church committee decided to add a new 'Department of Children' to their agenda to hold weekly meetings to organize Sunday school and offer special events for the children during the school holidays. By providing an extensive programme for children, the CCCB was not only a place of worship, but also an additional school for second-generation Chinese immigrants in Berlin to learn the Chinese language and culture.

## 'Noah's Ark': A Bible Group Case Study

It was Saturday. The CCCB's Bible group called 'Noah's Ark' (诺亚方舟) was meeting in the parish house of Trinity Church in Charlottenburg, in West Berlin for their Saturday gathering. The meeting began at 9:30 in the morning with a prayer. The group sang a few gospel songs together before they proceeded to the main session of Bible Reading, usually consisting of one or two paragraphs interwoven with discussions and personal testimonies. The entire 'Noah's Ark' groups consisted of about twenty adults and fifteen children, though the average turnout was usually twelve to fifteen adults and ten to twelve children.

'Noah's Ark' was only 500 metres away from Huade Chinese Language School (华德中文学校), the biggest Chinese language school in Berlin. 'Huade', literally meaning 'China and Germany', was founded in 1992 and attracted more than five hundred pupils every Saturday in 2016. As all the children in 'Noah's Ark' were attending Huade School at the same time, the Bible group's timetable was connected closely with the schedule

of the Chinese language school. Every Saturday morning, the parents first brought their children to Huade School, where classes started at 9 a.m. While most parents gathered in the waiting room of the school to chat after the classes started, members of 'Noah's Ark' walked together to their Bible group meeting.

The Bible group meeting started at 9:30, its members being divided into two sub-groups. The 'upstairs group' used a small room with hardly any furniture besides a large table surrounded by chairs. The participants in this sub-group were mainly parents whose children were old enough to attend Huade School on their own. The 'downstairs group' used the biggest room in the parish house, with a large indoor playing area and plenty of toys, and a back door facing directly on to the outdoor playground in the back yard. All the adult participants in this 'downstairs group' had children who were too young to attend Huade School. These young children, sometimes even babies, played with each other in the corner with toys while their parents kept an eye on them during the Bible reading session.

Both 'Noah's Ark' sub-groups ended their sessions at 11:45 punctually. A few parents from the downstairs group would walk to Huade School to pick up all the children, whose classes at the language school ended at 12:00. The other members would come together, set up the table in the big room and prepare lunch. All the Chinese Christians in the CCCB who were members of 'Noah's Ark' referred to their common lunch as a 'Feast of Love'. Each member brought one or two dishes from home, all of which were placed on a long table to form a buffet, which was shared by all those present.

The Bible discussion might have its ups and downs, but the quality of this lunch buffet had always been superb. That Saturday when I attended was no exception. I picked my share of the buffet and sat down next to Mr Song. He stared at my plate of goodies, and asked: 'Do you know how to make a German potato salad?'

'You want German potato salad? Come on, look at these golden-brown coloured dumplings!' 'No, it's not for me! It's for my children!' Mr Song pointed to a young boy and a young girl playing board games with others at a kids' table. 'They don't like Chinese food so much; they like potato salad. Neither I nor my wife knows how to make it!'

Mr Song and his wife were both born and raised in Fujian Province in southern China and came to Germany to study in 2000. On completing their education, they stayed in Germany and started a family there. When we met, Mr Song was working as a software engineer in a small town near Frankfurt am Main, while his wife and their children stayed in Berlin. 'Actually, we could have moved. My wife stays at home anyway. But we decided to keep the family here, and I commute every week. People all say that the schools in Hesse are actually better, but that town [where I work] is too small! No Chinese church, no [Chinese] Bible groups, let alone a Chinese language school! How can my children learn any Chinese there?' Mr Song drove at least five hours each way to commute, and I could almost see all the miles on his face as we were speaking. 'But it is not easy for my wife either. She has to take care of three children here, all by herself! Our youngest is only two years old!'

In spite of the hardships of taking care of three children by oneself, the exhaustion of driving more than five hours twice a week and the fact that the public schools in Hesse had a better reputation, Mr Song and his wife still preferred to keep the family in Berlin. The Chinese church, the Bible group and the Chinese language school were the reasons Mr Song gave me when I asked him for his reasons for staying in Berlin. His nine-year-old daughter, SS, walked around the buffet table as I was talking to her father. 'Look at her, she only has the face of a Chinese, everything inside is German!' commented Mr Song. 'All my kids are talking to each other in German; I and my wife sometimes don't know what they are talking about. I have to really catch up with my German to talk to them. [...] They play these German games, watch German TV, we don't know anything about it.'

SS's best friend, QQ, was the youngest daughter of Ms QD and Mr WG, both active members of 'Noah's Ark'. Just like Mr Song, QQ's parents were very pleased to find SS as a regular play date. 'They go to the language school together and sit in the same classroom', said Ms QD; 'here [pointing at the playground] they play together, and tomorrow [Sunday] they can be together at church for a whole afternoon'.

'It does not matter if they are speaking German among themselves; however, it matters that they make friends, make real Chinese friends', commented Mr WG, the father of QQ, when I asked him about the

language QQ was using. 'Language learning has to happen naturally, you can't force them. We have three children, we both work, you just can't force things like this, you don't have the time! I say "Put on your shoes, you are late for school!": if it saves me time to tell them in German, then I will not speak Chinese, there is not so much to think about.'

Although Ms QD and Mr WG did not consider Chinese learning to be the main reason for taking her daughter to attend church activities, they were very proud to share QQ's improvement in Chinese language capacity. Ms QD enthusiastically told me that QQ could speak much better Chinese than her brothers. She was also able to write some Chinese characters, something none of her brothers was ever able to do. QQ recently started attending a Chinese calligraphy class at Huade School in the afternoon, which Ms QD was visibly very excited about. However, she did not forget to emphasize the importance of having her Chinese best friend, SS, who shared the credit for all the progress QQ was making: 'For children, it is important to have company, to do what their good friends are doing. If they don't have any Chinese friends, how can you convince them to go to Chinese classes?'

Pastor Xu praised 'Noah's Ark' constantly during Sunday services, as he considered it a great example of 'cultivating the heart and soul of our children'. He came to 'Feast of Love' to have lunch on Saturday from time to time and spoke highly of the combination of Bible reading and Chinese language learning. When asked further about the children who attended both Huade Chinese Language School and 'Noah's Ark' Bible group, Pastor Xu commented, 'Oh, they are the best! They go to Chinese school, sitting together with other children. Everyone sees immediately how great they are! [...] They are different from other children. ... Oh yes, completely different! They are the children of Christian parents, they are the children of our church, children of God, and they always behave much better than all other children do. Everyone can see and know right away what a great church we are.'

The combination of a Chinese language school and a Bible group meeting was the main attraction of 'Noah's Ark', and all the members scheduled their timetables to fit in accordingly. Starting at 9:30 and ending at 11:45, each session of Bible reading at 'Noah's Ark' lasted a maximum of two hours and a quarter, while other Bible groups usually had

sessions of about four to five hours. When the Huade School was not open for classes during school breaks and holidays, the number of participants at 'Noah's Ark' declined simultaneously. This phenomenon again showed the importance of Chinese language learning for the members of the CCCB. For many first-generation Chinese immigrants, the Church had become one of the options for increasing the Chinese language abilities of their children. For the Church leaders, conversely, providing Sunday school and a Chinese-speaking environment had become an effective way of bringing in more families with children and thus building up a stronger community.

## The Superiority of Being a Christian

Besides opportunities to improve the Chinese language skills of the younger generation, the CCCB offered Chinese immigrants more than regular Chinese language schools could: the teaching of Christianity. From Pastor Xu's sermons to Bible group discussions, CCCB members emphasized constantly and heavily the superiority of being Christians in general, and promoted the Church as a place for moral education for all its members.

At the CCCB, the positive impact of Christianity on the quality of family life was addressed publicly and frequently, reflecting a particular focus on families. Pastor Xu, Church committee members and Bible Group captains often talked about the importance of choosing the 'correct spouse' (正确的配偶) for creating a 'sound family' (健全的家庭): in other words, choosing a Christian partner was the only way to have a good family life. Among the members of the CCCB, a 'Christian life' was understood not only as a way of leading a good life, it was also the definition of a good life. At all the baptism ceremonies I attended, when the newly baptized member stood up from the water after the full immersion, the crowd unanimously expressed their happiness by shouting, 'Now you can finally have a good life!'

This emphasis on a 'sound family' was passed on to the next generation as well. Preaching and teaching about how to lead a Christian life was a frequent theme at Sunday service and in Sunday school. For many parents, it

was crucial to introduce their children to take part in more church activities to provide them with a sense of 'how other Chinese Christians live' and 'cultivate friendships with other Chinese Christian children'.

In Pastor Xu's sermons and in the CCCB's publications and materials, the superiority of being a Christian was repeatedly emphasized with pride. In the fundamental doctrine of the CCCB, 'The Basic Truth', this issue was verified by means of the following two arguments:

Only the Christian religion can show you the empty grave and tell you, the Savior has been resurrected from the dead. The ancestor of the Jewish people, Abraham, died around 1900 BC, and there was no resurrection. ... The founder of Buddhism, Gautama Buddha, also died. Muhammad died at the age of 62 in Medina [...]. But only Jesus Christ was resurrected from the dead and is still alive to this day, and that's why everyone who believes in him can live forever as well. [...] Besides, only Jesus Christ has claimed to the world that He is God, while none of the leaders of other religions has ever claimed himself to be God. Jesus Christ has the power to turn everyone to become Christians and to live as Christians, but other religions do not dare to say this. Other religions mostly talk about ethics, morality or goodness, but only Christianity can provide us with the power of the heart and soul, and turn everyone into a new person.<sup>3</sup>

Pastor Xu mentioned these points in his sermons frequently to remind all the brothers and sisters in the church to be 'confident about their choice to lead a better life'. This self-awareness of being 'better' was particularly visible during their missionary work: they approached non-Christian Chinese and asked questions like 'Are you happy?' and 'Do you have a meaningful life?' When the answers were 'Yes', they asked follow-up questions: 'How can you possibly be happy when you are not Christian?' and 'How can you have a meaningful life when you do not know God?' The missionaries at the CCCB often reminded one another to be 'friendly and polite, to show our Christian character', since in their opinion being 'friendly and polite' was a unique virtue that only Christians could possess.

Researchers have examined the impact of religions and religious communities on immigrants' experiences in a new society. For immigrant

communities living in the US, it appears to be particularly urgent for parents to protect their children from the negative influences of their American peers and American culture, and many parents consider religious communities to be safe shelters (Suárez-Orozco and Suárez-Orozco 1995; Waters 2009). Asian immigrants in particular hold that public schools in the US do not offer any 'moral education' to their children, so they rely on religious communities for additional input. Zhou and Bankston (1998) show how Buddhist and Catholic institutions transmit the heritage of language and culture to the younger generation. Chen (2006, 2008) and Yang (2010) both describe how Christian churches become very attractive to Chinese immigrants by framing children's obedience to parents in Christian vocabulary and invoking the authority of Jesus Christ to discipline the younger generation.

Chen (2006) specifically analyses intergenerational conflicts among Chinese immigrants in the US. She argues that 'Confucian notions of filial obligation' are the key difference between the first and second generations. When the first generation can no longer use their Confucian-based parenting practices with their children, they turn to Evangelical Christianity for help. Johanna Lüdde (2011) makes a similar argument about Chinese students who have converted to Christianity in Germany. She considers the hierarchical structure of Chinese Christian churches and the emphasis on obedience and filial piety towards a 'Heavenly Father' to be the main attractions for young Chinese overseas, as they provide the 'Confucian traditions' that are familiar and trustworthy for the members to rely on.

Chen and Lüdde both refer to obedience and filial piety as Confucian traditions, although neither explains what Confucian traditions exactly are. In Chen's work, Christianity replaces Confucianism as a parenting tool, while in Lüdde's view, Christianity resembles Confucianism as a set of 'coping strategies'. In the case of the CCCB, narratives of 'obedience', 'duty' and 'humility' were indeed present, but Pastor Xu and the church leadership focused rather on the overall transformation of heart and soul as Christians. Instead of relying on being the elders for authority over against the younger generation, it was more important to embrace the Christian way of life being promoted at the CCCB, and to guide the

younger generation on the right path through their regular participation in church activities.

The superiority of being a Christian convinced many parents that the church was the best place for children to grow up. ‘Why should I send them to some language school when they can be in the house of God?’ asked one parent, while chatting with me in the ‘Martin Luther Room’ during Pastor Xu’s sermon. Besides wanting the younger generation to have a Chinese-speaking environment at weekends, the conviction that the church was ‘a better place’ and that Christians were ‘better people’ played an essential role in motivating the first-generation Chinese immigrants to bring their children to CCCB.

‘More than two hundred Chinese gathering together is itself the best environment for children’, said Ms Huang. She and her husband had been active members of the CCCB for almost ten years. Living on the outskirts of Berlin, the couple had to drive fifty minutes one way every Sunday afternoon to attend church services with their two children. When I asked her for her reasons, she summed up her belief in this way: ‘Good values, good worldview, and orientation to spiritual life. Parents do not even need to guide their children to learn anything here, they are already surrounded by the best education, all in Chinese; they can just watch, hear, and learn. For a parent, there is no better place to bring your children to!’

## Conclusion

Research on migrant religious communities in Germany frequently connects their religious practices with the question of integration. From Egyptian Christians to Buddhist Vietnamese, scholars have examined communities of various religious and ethnic backgrounds to analyse how their religious institutions have served as sites of communication, mediation and negotiation in order to integrate and assimilate these communities into German society (Baumann 2004; Währisch-Oblau 2005). There are also many works on Turkish immigrants and Islamic congregations (e.g. Fetzer and Soper 2005; Öztürk 2007; Ewing 2008). In contrast to the usual denunciations of Islamic beliefs potentially preventing Muslims

from becoming 'proper' citizens in German civil society, research on Christian churches often addresses the positive impact of integration for immigrants in the country. Dümling argues that migrant Christian churches are 'the site of integration', and calls for more interaction between churches with migration backgrounds and churches without them, as she considers such encounters to be outstanding opportunities to 'shape integration' (Dümling 2011). Lüdde has taken a step further in her work with Chinese Christians. She identifies the 'inner psychological problems' of Chinese immigrants and argues that Chinese Christian churches in Germany could palliate them by offering 'coping strategies' and thereby smoothing the process of integration (Lüdde 2011, 2013).

As I have shown in this chapter, not only is 'integration' into German society not on the agenda of the CCCB, the Church leadership has instead been endeavouring to highlight its use of Chinese language and culture. This does not mean that the CCCB has necessarily obstructed the process of integration among its members, nor does it imply that its members have little willingness to integrate. Rather, the CCCB is one more example showing that the experience of being migrants in a diaspora can reinforce the sense of nationalist recognition, instead of encouraging a sense of world citizenship (van der Veer 1994). The CCCB keenly detected the 'faith' in implicit socialization among the first-generation Chinese parents, and designed their Church programmes accordingly to attract more members and multiply the size of their congregation and the Church's own income. Besides the emphasis on Chinese features, the pastor and the Church committee together structured the CCCB's teachings and activities around families. By offering a 'moral education' with 'good values' and 'a good world-view', the Chinese Christian Church in Berlin also provided Chinese immigrants with a space in which to construct shared codes of morality among themselves. In the words of Friedland, 'religion offers a nonessentialist basis upon which to construct a collective identity and difference' (Friedland 2002: 393), which is one format of religious nationalism.

Religious discourse and practice can be used for nationalist purposes, as well as provide a group with the cultural grammar and ritual repertoire to define its identity (van der Veer and Lehmann 1999). Although a Christian church strongly influenced by the Baptists might not have

many roots in Chinese tradition, the CCCB has become an important venue for Chinese immigrants to locate their search for meaning and to strengthen their Chinese identity. Van der Veer points out that religious identity is not necessarily a matter of ‘primordial attachments’ inculcated by unchanging traditions, but ‘specific products of changing forms of religious organization and communications’ (van der Veer 1994: x). Throughout the trajectory of Chinese immigrants in Berlin, their shared challenges and aspirations have shaped their senses of longing and belonging, and have brought them together at the CCCB through their Christian faith. The combination of a Chinese-speaking environment and moral superiority makes the CCCB particularly attractive for families with children. This Church constitutes a unique community where language, culture, national identity and morality are intertwined with one another and where the religious institution has become ‘an arena for sociality, collective organization and the provision of services outside state control’ (Friedland 2002: 393). As I have shown in this chapter, the CCCB’s leadership has made substantial efforts over the years to enhance the Chinese language capacity of second-generation Chinese immigrants and to create a space for them to amplify their moral orientation. These strategies, judging from the rocketing donations that have poured into the Church in recent years, were well received among Chinese migrant families in Berlin. The community as a whole utilized religious discourse and practice in order to shape a nationalist identity, an identity they wish to pass on from one generation to the next.

## Notes

1. Unless indicated otherwise, quotations from informants are the author’s translation from Chinese into English.
2. The number of members appearing on many of the CCCB’s publicity materials is ‘around 200’. In his blog of 25 March 2010, Pastor Xu stated that ‘at the moment there are 250 adults and children’ in the CCCB.
3. Original text from the Homepage of CCCB, ‘The Basic Truth’, <http://home.inter.net/immanuel/jbzl.htm> (accessed 1 December 2018). Author’s translation from Part 10 entitled ‘Why is Christianity superior than other religions’ (from Sect. 3, ‘Religious Belief’).

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# 14

## Afterword: Reflections on Nationalism

Peter van der Veer

One of the things that has become clear during the COVID-19 pandemic of 2020 and 2021 is that nation states were the first responders to this global threat, not supranational organizations. If the paramount authority of the nation state was ever in doubt, it is not anymore. The European Union, the most ambitious supranational political organization in the world today, quickly dissolved into a conglomerate of seemingly unconnected and competing nation states. Something similar had happened when large groups of Syrian and other refugees crossed the European borders in 2015 (Meyer and van der Veer 2021). Every country in the European Union developed its own political response, just as in the case of the pandemic. Not only has the nation state organized the response to COVID-19, the cultural interpretation of the origins and spread of this virus is couched in nationalist terms. US President Trump and his followers talked about the Wuhan virus, while the Chinese authorities

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hid their slow and inadequate response to the early spread of the virus and turned the subsequent containment of it into a narrative of the victory of the Chinese political model. Even the global scientific triumph of creating several vaccines has been transmogrified into a tale of nationalist chauvinism and competition.

Slowly but perhaps inescapably the liberal and leftist belief in some form of European cosmopolitanism has become marginal. The Euroscepticism of Perry Anderson (2021) and Jürgen Streeck (2017) have replaced Jürgen Habermas' (2012) critical support of a unified Europe. The political right has always been more comfortable with nationalism and sceptical of anything beyond free trade. The biggest political challenge in Europe, North America and Australia today, however, is not nationalism but its close cousin, anti-immigrant populism. The leading opposition parties in France, Italy, Germany and the Netherlands exemplify this kind of populism, while in the UK and Hungary the ruling parties derive their power from it. These parties and movements are not anti-democratic, but they try to simplify who the 'demos' is. The political signification of 'the people' may be shifting. For example, the slogan 'Wir sind das Volk' ('We are the People') in Eastern Germany shifted from being against the communist state to being against the post-unification, democratic state. Here, as in the case of the Turkish President Erdogan's slogan 'We are the people. Who are you?', the question is indeed who is the demos in the democratic 'will of the people'. Better yet is the question of who does not belong to 'the people', such as Kurds in Turkey, Uyghur in China or Muslims in India. Much populism turns around a rhetoric of accusing elites of grabbing power for special interest instead of the people's interest ('draining the swamp of Washington'), but when they gain power (Trump, Erdogan, Modi, Duterte and others) they themselves become such political elites (Müller 2016). Once they have gained power, they can only hold on to it by accusing dark forces (foreign or domestic) of illegitimately threatening the nation. Violence used to hold on to power is then portrayed as a defence of the nation, a vivid example of which was shown in the attack on Capitol Hill in the US by Trump supporters. Populism de-legitimizes the state in the name of an invisible nation or a silent majority. Its vision is unitary and pure and thus requires constant purification.

While populism is an aspect of the modern quest for ‘the true, pure nation’, ethnic cleansing and religious purification have a long history as part of modern state formation in Europe. The Reformation stands out as the first period in European and possibly global history in which the religious refugee becomes a mass phenomenon. The Puritans exiled themselves to America, and the Anabaptists, the Huguenots and everyone else moved around in the several wars of religion that followed the Reformation. As the historian Nicholas Terpstra (2015) argues, the Reformation was not just a movement for intellectual and religious change. It was also Europe’s first grand project in social purification. It was deeply about exile, expulsion and refugees. Forced religious migration was a normal, familiar and expected feature of public policy that was oriented to building a cohesive society. The formula *cuius regio, eius religio*, stating that the people have to follow the religion of their rulers, was a principle that legitimized a combination of migration and war. At the end of the Thirty Years War, the Peace of Westphalia in 1648 built a fragile international system to deal with the treatment of minorities.

José Casanova (2019: 14–15) has recently argued that ‘everywhere one finds similar processes of state-led confessionalization: Northern Europe becomes homogeneously Protestant, Southern Europe becomes homogeneously Catholic and in between one finds three bi-confessional societies—Holland, Germany and Switzerland—unable to eliminate the other religious half, having to co-exist, and developing their own patterns of Protestant-Catholic confessionalization: confessional pillars in the case of Holland, confessional Länder in the case of Germany, and confessional cantons in the case of Switzerland’.

In 1960s Netherlands, the postwar generation began to demolish this system of religious and ideological pacification, and unchurched was accompanied with radical critiques of religion (see Verkaaik in this volume). In 2018, only 9 per cent of the Dutch population were still members of a church. In a few decades, Dutch society, which until the 1960s had been dominated by religious communities, was secularized. This massive transformation was connected with the emergence of the welfare state in the 1950s and the youth revolution of the 1960s, but not, as

modernization theory had it, with industrialization and urbanization, nor with the constitutional separation of church and state, which in the Netherlands were nineteenth-century phenomena. All three components of the secularization thesis—differentiation of the secular spheres from religious norms and institutions, decline of religious beliefs and practices, and privatization of the religious sphere—could be found in the Netherlands, but not as a result of the emergence of a modern state, modern economy or modern science. In fact, we could argue that the modernization of the Netherlands resulted for almost a century in an increase in the societal and political relevance of religion, as shown, for example, in the foundation of a Protestant Free University in Amsterdam (1880) and a Catholic University in Nijmegen (1923). The mobilization of religious identities in the formation of the Dutch nation triggered not only bi-polar competition between Catholics and Protestants, but also a heightened intensity of theological debate, especially among Protestants. The rapid secularization of Dutch society is not generalizable. Nevertheless, until today many intellectuals in the Netherlands have the firm conviction that secularization is a teleological process of modern change. Leading sociologists in the Netherlands, like Johan Goudsblom and Abram de Swaan, following Norbert Elias, saw the global fading away of religion as inevitable. The visceral distaste for religion among Dutch intellectuals who came of age in the 1960s explains today's widespread view of Islam as 'a backward religion' that is incommensurable with modern Dutch values, especially in the sexual sphere. Casanova (2006: 17) puts it succinctly: 'in such a context, the study of modern secularism, as an ideology, as a generalized worldview, and as a social movement, and of its role as a crucial carrier of processes of secularization and as a catalyst for counter-secularization responses should be high on the agenda of a self-reflexive comparative historical sociology of secularization'. As Oskar Verkaaik (this volume) shows, it is specifically in Dutch literature that one finds the contestation of religious identity in terms of sexual liberation, from the erotic mysticism of Gerard Reve to the transgendered lyricism of Lucas Maria Rijneveld.

Consensual distancing between religious groups was the preferred mode of co-existence in the Netherlands. Under the influence of the Dutch Reformed Church, this was transformed into non-consensual

apartheid in South Africa. As Shaheed Tayob shows in this volume, in post-apartheid South Africa the legacy of social distancing is found in fascinating contestations of control over public space. In many other societies, the idea of purification by expulsion became a legitimate aspect of statecraft, combining ethnic and religious cleansing. In the German case, Lutheran Protestantism became a dominant part of German nationalism in the nineteenth century, while the Catholics had to show their loyalty to the state. However, one does not need religion for the cleansing of the nation. The two competing totalitarian ideologies of the twentieth century, Nazism and Communism, were atheistic but very much into ethnic cleansing in which religion was a significant element, but race paramount. The collapse of the Habsburg Empire and Czarist Russia gave rise to an unprecedented un-mixing of populations. Cleansing took place by both expulsion and extermination. From 1933 to 1945, Nazi and Soviet regimes murdered fourteen million people between Berlin and Moscow, quite apart from the war dead (Snyder 2010). These were all civilians, abandoned to state power, which reminds us that the state protects some but attacks others and that mass murder and massive forced migration are nothing new to Europe. The idea that European nation states are stable democracies is a fiction that could only be maintained during the Cold War when geopolitical forces kept the West and the East under tight control. After the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989, this fiction was largely based on Germany's wish to be a stabilizing and unifying force in Europe and on the military hegemony of the US. The global economic crisis of 2008 has shown how fragile this unity was. The decline of trust in the European Union and the rise of anti-Europe populism are, at least partly, the long-term results of the handling of the financial crisis.

Imaginations of nationhood emerged in early modern Europe in the context of drawing ethno-religious boundaries between Christians, Muslims and Jews. This happened in the same period as the Iberian-Catholic expansion over the world. A moment of particular interest in the European history of state formation is the expulsion of Muslims and Jews after centuries of *convivencia* from the Catholic *nación* of Spain. In 1492, Columbus records in his logbook that he sees the boats of Muslims and Jews leaving the shores of Spain while he goes out to discover the New World. This signifies a major shift in the history of the modern

world, one that combines the religious purification of the Spanish nation with the expansion of that nation's religion over the world.

A crucial aspect of the history of imperial formations is the history of conversion. Probably Japan showed the strongest response to Christian conversion. The Jesuits entered it in 1549, supported by the Portuguese. At the end of the sixteenth century, however, after the crucifixion of 26 priests and converts, Japanese were asked to register as Buddhists. Only pockets of surviving hidden Christians, similar to Marranos in Spain, stayed on in Japan, constantly fearing questioning about their beliefs. This confessionalization of the Japanese state and the cleansing of the Christian minority bear a stark resemblance to European history. Japan's nationhood and its state control over religious belief emerged from the purging of Christianity.

It is the unending work of purification that gives rise to the Inquisition, an institution that spread beyond Europe to areas like the Philippines and Mexico, where Spanish or Portuguese power was consolidated. When that power could not be established as in China (except for Macau), India (except for Goa) and Japan, the rulers in those places had to be convinced that Christianity was not a threat to their power. The Jesuits did that successfully in China from the sixteenth century until the early eighteenth century, when Pope Clement refused to allow Chinese Christians to conduct Confucian rituals or ancestral rituals. In 1721 Emperor Kangxi of China responded by banning Christian missions from China, a ban upheld by the Qing emperors until the Opium Wars of the mid-nineteenth century. The European imperial powers forced the Qing government not only to accept the sale of opium by European traders, but also the propagation of Christianity by European missionaries. This forced entry of Christian missionaries is today still regarded in China as a sign of the indelible connection between Western imperialism and Christianity. The refusal by the Pope to accept control over the Church by the Chinese state authorities after 1949 sounds like an echo from the past, as are the Papacy's most recent attempts to find a middle ground between Chinese state hegemony and the Church's autonomy.

In nineteenth-century India under British colonial rule, missionaries targeted primarily marginal groups, like untouchables and the tribal populations, especially by offering education and medical care. After

Independence, this came to be seen as an imperialist strategy to divide the Hindu nation. Conversion to Christianity was now made very difficult through legislation that allowed it only for adults with written affidavits. When Amartya Sen received the Noble Prize for Economics in 1998, Ashok Singhal, the then president of the Vishwa Hindu Parishad (World Hindu Assembly), commented that awarding this Nobel Prize to Sen was a Christian conspiracy against the nation and that Sen's developmental strategy to promote literacy was connected to Christian missionary efforts to proselytize under the cover of education. For the Hindu nationalists, Christian schools are covers for religious conversion. The Bible classes for Chinese children in Berlin, described by Yu in this volume, seem to illustrate that possibility.

The formation of nation states and the culture of nationalism are not only aspects of the gradual expansion of industrial society (Gellner 1983) or of novel imaginations enabled by technologies of communication (Anderson 1991). It is deeply violent in its targeting of enemies both within the population and outside it. It derives its social energy from being an always unfinished project, constantly re-defining 'we' and 'others' (Verkaaik 2004). In an important study of Muslim politics in India, Irfan Ahmad (2009) has shown that, after the fratricidal bloodshed of the Partition, the Indian Muslim minority sought the protection of democratic politics and the secular state. Their national identification was with secular India, not with Pakistan, 'the homeland for Muslims'. This was relatively successful in the Congress period, but with the electoral success of the BJP, Muslims have been increasingly marginalized. This has so far culminated in the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) and the National Register of Citizens (NRC), which, in asking people to prove their citizenship, is clearly targeted at the Muslim population (see Ahmad and van der Veer, this volume).

Muslim-Hindu antagonism is one of the major facts in Indian politics. The Partition was a clear case of religious purification, affecting Hindus, Muslims and Sikhs alike. The mobilization around religion, or, as Bob van der Linden (2008) prefers to call it, 'moral languages', was an integral part of emerging nationalism in nineteenth-century India. This also entailed attempts to purify language and other forms of cultural communication such as music (see van der Linden, this volume). Religion is

part of the great transformation of Indian society into the nation form, but it should not be essentialized as a static core of the new identities. Also in Iran (see Alinejad in this volume) we can see that secular nationalism takes on religious elements, while religious nationalism takes on secular elements. In Jingyang Yu's contribution to this volume, one sees how language and religion are interwoven in the construction of ethnic identity among Chinese immigrants in Berlin. Religion does not have a stable meaning separate from contrastive concepts such as magic, spirituality and secularity that belong to the same conceptual universe. They emerge historically together, imply one another and function as nodes within a shifting field of power. This 'syntagmatic chain' occupies a key position in nationalist imaginings of modernity.

As Stefan Binder (this volume) argues, Indian secularism is not irreligious. This raises the question what place atheism has in Indian culture. Binder examines two recent Indian movies, *Oh My God* and *PK*, which show the atheist as either a failure or an extraterrestrial alien. His readings of these media texts show the impossibility of atheism within the framework of the dominant discourses of religious nationalism and Indian secularism. Atheism in India and elsewhere is often aligned with a strong critique of inequality and a belief in science (see Binder 2020). Communism has been the most potent political expression of atheism. While in India communism has remained relatively marginal, in China it has become the dominant ideology.

Chinese atheist campaigns have targeted the 'superstition' of popular forms of religion, as well as the 'foreignness' of Christianity and Islam. Since Islam has become the primary target of the Chinese 'War on Terrorism', Protestants try to show their patriotism by joining efforts to convert Muslims (see Jie Kang in this volume). In her earlier work, Kang (2017) has already shown the effects of urbanization on making Protestantism a viable option for upwardly mobile, educated young Chinese. Here she demonstrates how Chinese Protestantism joins the internationalizing fervour of the 'One Belt, One Road Initiative'. Such fervent patriotism is also the spirit of Liu Cixin's immensely popular science fiction, which heralds China's global technological superiority. Jeroen de Kloet's essay in this volume analyses the blockbuster movie *Wandering Earth*, which is loosely based on Liu Cixin's story. China

catching up with the world had been the aspiration of previous decades, but now it has become surpassing the rest of the world. The question of comparison often turns on the question of original and copy, but it is more productive to examine cultural interaction and translation. Today Chinese comparison with the West turns into futuristic competition, well expressed in Liu Cixin's science fiction.

One can also find these cultural transformations on the ground in Chinese society. The struggle against inequality, which led to large-scale land reform in the 1950s, has given way to the emergence of industrial entrepreneurship with huge aspirations to become rich overnight. While the hard labour of the rural worker has been the symbol of communist China, money has replaced its position as the universal signifier in the nationalist imagination. As Xiao He (this volume) argues, it is money, not equal citizenship, that mediates the nation. This is evident in the extent to which rural migrants to the city are excluded from urban services and opportunities.

If China is what Xiao He calls an 'investor's utopia', that utopia is primarily a technological future. China's contemporary 'technological capitalism', which doubles as 'surveillance capitalism' (Zuboff 2019), ushers in a digital future for the nation state. In the Chinese nationalist imagination, the digital economy is where China will overtake the West. Samuel Lengen (this volume) argues that Alibaba's digital ecosystem aims to unify the Chinese nation. By doing so, it also separates China from the rest of the world as a self-contained universe with its own technological aspirations and inequalities under the control of the state.

This volume demonstrates the various ways in which nationalism penetrates all fields of social action. Nationalism especially expresses itself in discursive productions of the 'Self' in relation to 'the Other', be it Protestant versus Catholic, Shi'ite versus Sunnite, Hindu versus Muslim, Chinese versus Western or 'secular liberated' versus 'religious repressed'. Creative explorations of the national 'Self' take place in religion, literature, cinema and even science (Sleeboom 2004). Such exploration can create sublime beauty, but in its shadow always lurks danger, fear and violence. The nationalist quest for purity produces enemies both within the fold and outside it. By striving for unification, it creates inimical difference on a global scale.

Despite the image of rationality and enlightenment that have dominated social thought from Max Weber to Charles Taylor, societies are still what used to be called 'tribal', built on blood and territory. Societies continue to perform rituals of purification to exercise sovereignty. To understand that, one does need anthropology, the discipline best suited to provide some understanding of our chaotic world. The assumptions of rational choice, the big data that one can put into probability models and the fixation on neuroscience are all deficient when dealing with the symbolism of birth, death and purity. Artistic creation can sometimes represent these realities, make us feel their presence, but it is not able to elucidate the underlying cultural logic. This act of translation of life-worlds by the anthropologist does not make something alien legible to an elusive 'us', it makes 'us' more legible to ourselves. It makes us see that we are not different, not more rational and no more capable than those who knock on our doors. It makes us understand that we might be the next ones to knock on doors, and that our desire to keep the doors locked stems precisely from this fear.

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