

Is Nationalism a Religion? A Critique of Ninian Smart

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In his 1990 Birks Lectures, delivered at McGill University, and in the "Introduction" to a collection of essays (Merkl and Smart, 1983), Ninian Smart argues that nationalism shares many of the main characteristics of religion, and that it is useful to apply the categories that he uses to study world religions to this secular phenomenon. Operating from a functionalist perspective, Smart notes that nationalism is, in its essence, the same as a religion in that it is a "world-view" and can thus be subjected to the same kind of "world-view analysis" that he proposes for departments of religious studies. Smart's functionalist assumptions and conclusions are shared by many scholars in the social sciences who argue that nationalism is, or at least fulfills the role of, a religion.

Smart's argument is worth examining for two reasons: it invites a fruitful dialogue between students of religion and students of nationalism, and it represents a fresh attempt to settle the recurring question of nationalism as a religion.¹ While I support his call to dialogue, I wish to challenge the equation of religion and nationalism since it serves more to obscure the variety and complexity of relationships between the two than it does to explain either phenomenon. In this article, I will first describe Smart's argument by drawing upon parallel arguments of the English sociologist and scholar of nationalism, Anthony D. Smith. I will then show how these arguments arise out of Smart's agenda. Finally, I will offer a critique of Smart's argument and agenda. Central to this critique will be an outline of the variety of relationships that have developed between religions and nationalisms throughout history, and an explanation of how the equation of

nationalism with religion obscures those relationships. While I agree with Smart that religion and nationalism share many important functions and that modern nationalisms borrowed heavily from the premodern dominant self-definitions of various societies (self-definitions that were invariably religious), it is more precise and of greater use to avoid an a-historical definition of nationalism that suggests that it is "essentially" a religion.

Smart's Argument

Smart defines religious studies as "world-view analysis." As a world-view, nationalism should be subject to the same categories of analysis as religion. Smart outlines these categories as dimensions that can be found in all the world religions. The dimensions are: 1) ritual; 2) mythical or narrative; 3) ethical or legal; 4) emotional or experiential; 5) organizational; 6) material or artistic; and finally 7) doctrinal (Smart, lecture 1). While the rituals of Christianity are apparent, the nation may also have meaningful acts, such as the elaborate opening of parliament or the swearing in of a president. Where Christianity relies on sacred stories in the Scriptures, nations rely on a sacred and ancient "history" of the people — an account that is usually as much fiction as fact (Smith 1986, 179-208). It is not difficult to construct parallels in the remaining five categories.

Continuing his functionalist analysis, Smart notes that religion and nationalism share the same properties. These include: 1) the ability to demand great sacrifices; 2) the ability to command great passions; 3) the mystical participation of the individual in the greater whole; 4) the future hope promised by both; and 5) the shared notions of sacred territory (Merkl and Smart 1983, 21-26). Again these require little explanation. Just as individual Christians feel that they participate in the body of Christ, so too a nationalist feels a mystical participation in the

hopes, dreams and failures of the nation. When, for example, Germany as a nation was humiliated in war, individual German citizens too felt an acute humiliation. That nationalism and religion are both, in a sense, future-oriented has been noted by Anthony Smith, who calls nationalism a "salvation ideology" (Smith 1979, vii). A. Smith also notes that, like religion, nationalism defines time (homogenous, linear time) and space ("natural," national territories) for people giving them a sense of meaning and orientation in a post-Christian world (Smith 1986, 174-176).

Smart does note some differences between nationalism and religion. While nationalism is strong in the areas of myth, ethics, experience and social organization, it tends to be doctrinally weak, and so it can be married easily to other ideologies such as Marxism, racism or even Christianity. Nationalism tends also to appreciate ritual more intermittently than most religions. Nationalism differs too in that it does not necessarily offer a transcendent reality. A. Smith agrees that nationalism is entirely an affirmation of this world, since redemption is to be found in the nation — a particular people in a particular place. This leads to the most important difference for Smart: nationalism, he argues, is a tribal religion in that it automatically excludes non-nationals; for this reason it often conflicts with the universalist world religions (Merkl and Smart, 1983, 27). However, these differences serve to nuance Smart's argument and do not alter his basic claim that nationalism and religion are essentially the same.

Smart's Agenda

In his Birks lectures and in his compilation of essays (1983), Smart's agenda is quite clear. First, he attempts to establish a conscious dialogue on the subject of religion and nationalism between the social sciences and religious studies departments. Religious studies scholars,

he argues, are in a particularly advantageous position to contribute to this debate because of their experience in analyzing important world-view-forming symbol structures. In doing so, they tend to favour a "neutral" description of the phenomenon in the words of its adherents and delay the introduction of "theory-laden expressions." The phenomenological approach, which Smart supports for religious studies, is a safeguard against easy reductionism and respects the most important beliefs and opinions of people. Finally, religious studies frequently uses the category of "syncretism" and could apply this term to the marriage of a certain nationalism with other ideologies such as Marxism or Christianity (Merkl and Smart, 1983, 269-271).

Smart is also motivated by political and moral concerns. He argues that world religions must prepare for the eventual decline of nationalism. As transnational corporations become more and more powerful and the West moves towards a confederation (be it a united Europe or George Bush's ideal of a "new world order") religion too must develop a world-wide imagination. The world religions could become "transnational spiritual corporations" that protect the rights of individuals against the excesses of the new world leadership. To this end, Smart calls for greater interfaith dialogue (Smart, lecture 3), a familiar theme in this earlier works. This is an indirect affirmation of his particular definition of religious studies as "world-view analysis." It also reaffirms what might be called his "world religions" perspective, the belief that comparative analysis is the best approach in the study of religion and that we must look at religion in its global context.

A Critique of Smart's Argument

While Smart's categories of analysis have proven useful to the study of religion in the past, it is not con-

structive to use these categories in any definitional way. One usually finds definitions too limiting, unable to describe every event or form of activity that one might wish to include under a term. Smart's categories, however, suffer from the opposite problem, that is they are so general that they do not exclude enough. Under Smart's definition one would be hard pressed to put forward any organized human activity that would not fit his definition. It describes nationalism, secular humanism, communism, science — even major league baseball. (This last example is not an exaggeration. In a recent article of *Studies in Religion/Sciences Religieuses*, Brian Aitken uses a functionalist analysis to argue that sport has become a "religion" in America.) Is it really useful to describe such a variety of experiences as "essentially" the same? All Smart ends up saying is that each of these phenomena are complex human activities.

Smart's functionalist analysis is, in the end, reductionist. He reduces both religion and nationalism to their functions for society and the individual. He avoids the issues of meaning and intention and thus fails to treat nationalists and religious people as agents or subjects who know what they are doing when they choose to ally themselves with either a religious or a secular movement. On a more general level, he assumes that analogous function means identity. In doing so, Smart also does not allow sufficient room for the complexity of individuals and societies. For example, a liberal business leader may well accept the church's role in society and the need for personal religious values and may harbour some vague nationalist pride, but religion and nationalism may only be secondary elements in a broader liberal world-view. Yet the study of the influence of religion and nationalism on liberals is a legitimate study. Smart's definition of religion and nationalism also does not take into account how persons see both phenomena. If churches, as sacred architecture, are analogous to parliament buildings or art galleries (where the nation can be "worshipped" through

its artistic achievements), how do we analyze the religious nationalist who attends church and goes to art galleries and is quite conscious that these are *not* the same thing.

Throughout his analysis, Smart recognizes these differences but assumes that these differences are less important than the similarities. Hence he argues against a clear division of secular ideologies and religions since they are similar in content, psychological state and social function (Smart, lecture 1; 1983, 269). At this point, Smart's analysis is really an argument for redefining the terms of the debate. By redefining the word "sacred" to mean a person, place or thing that is "charged in a solemn manner in such a way that a certain sort of conduct in relation to them is demanded" (1983, 22), he argues that even secular nationalism relies on a notion of the "sacred." Hence the Soviet Union (because the state imposes the world-view of Marxism) is not a secularist society — despite the official atheism or religious persecution of the ruling party (1983, 267).²

The Variety of Relationships Between Religion and Nationalism

One cannot actually prove Smart wrong in his functional analysis since he is arguing for a new vocabulary, a new set of conventions. But one can argue that this new paradigm is not as useful as another. In his book, *Religion and Political Development*, Donald E. Smith takes the difference between traditional religiopolitical systems and the secularization of politics seriously. In the first system the religious system is almost completely identified with the society in question even to the extent that the monarch is seen as ruling by the grace of the divine. The second situation inevitably arises out of modernization and industrialization and is often the result of a great social upheaval and struggle. Smart's analysis overlooks the depth and seriousness of this struggle.

D. Smith notes that religion and politics can have a variety of relationships and that these relationships change as a society modernizes. The variety of relationships between religion and nationalism has also been discussed by many Christian theologians and students of religion. Generally they agree on three basic themes: 1) religion over politics; 2) politics over religion; 3) an equal relationship, either dialectically opposed, cooperating or in a separate but equal coexistence (D. Smith, 1970, 3).³ In a theocratic society, a religious organization can dominate the political sphere or can use nationalist rhetoric to attract adherents. Conversely, a nationalist movement or governing party can use religious vocabulary to attract followers or legitimate its policies (see Lamb, 76; O'Brien, 1988). The third relationship is exemplified by a society like Quebec in the 1950s where capitalists and economic liberals dominated the economy but allowed the church to dominate the social and cultural life of the society.

A Critique of Smart's Agenda

Smart's basic proposal is an excellent one. He wishes to establish a dialogue between scholars of religion and scholars of political science, history and sociology in order to study the relationship between religion and nationalism. In return for the aforementioned contributions scholars of religious studies could make, a dialogue with social scientists would encourage them to look at the political and social aspects of their subject, aspects that are often overlooked in studies that focus primarily on the spiritual or doctrinal dimension of religions (Merkl and Smart 1983, 273).

Smart's basic agenda deserves support. The relationship between religion and nationalism is a field of study which has suffered neglect in the past. On the side of religious studies, the political, economic and social dimensions of religion are often seen as secondary. On the

side of the social scientists, many tend to assume that religion as a social force was declining in the modern world and hence no longer relevant (Dunn 1987, 2ff). When religion is studied, it is often seen as a dependent variable and rarely as a legitimate social force which initiates change (Baum 1988, 10). Furthermore, students of religion could offer explanations which would provide some relief from the dominant mood of positivism in social science departments in North America. Because they have a special interest in interiority, intention and consciousness, such scholars could influence their colleagues in the social sciences to take human agency more seriously (Baum 1988, 10-11). However, one can exaggerate the differences between departments in the modern university. There is certainly a positivist and a critical tradition in both fields.

I also support Smart's contention that this subject is best studied in a comparative manner. In departments of political science, the move to comparative politics has proved fruitful. In such studies one can entertain hypotheses and establish theoretical frameworks which more limited studies exclude. The temptation of such an approach is, however, that one becomes engrossed in similarities at the expense of differences. Often the essence of a phenomenon is reduced to those aspects which it shares with other cases in the comparison. It is ironical that Smart's own analysis falls into this same kind of reductionism. He focuses on the functional similarities of nationalism and religion but avoids the issue of meaning and intention which so decisively separate the two.

However, Smart's loyalty to religious studies, a discipline which he has greatly influenced, puts his proposed dialogue between religious studies and the social sciences on an uneven footing. His argument that scholars of religion use phenomenological and descriptive accounts, which are free of "theory-laden expressions," may be a matter of style rather than substance. Scholars have argued convincingly that every research enterprise is

“theory-laden” from the beginning, influencing what data and which method one chooses to use. Since it is a discipline defined by its subject matter rather than by its method, the phenomenological approach is just one of many methods used in religious studies departments.

By defining both religion and nationalism as “world-views” and defining religious studies as “world-view analysis,” Smart gives the upper hand to scholars of religion. Social scientists are invited to adopt the particular categories and vocabulary (the sacred, syncretism, etc.) of religious studies when discussing the essence of nationalism. It is doubtful that social scientists will want to enter the dialogue on these terms. However, Smart’s invitation is not simply a change in vocabulary. His contention that religion and nationalism are essentially the same challenge the presuppositions of the most fruitful frameworks of sociology, modernization theory and secularization theory.

Religion and Nationalism: Historical and Sociological Approaches

There have always been a variety of modernization and secularization theories, and most have come under lively criticism as of late. Whatever their differences, the great majority of theories and their critiques are founded on the postulate that there is a decisive difference between premodern religiopolitical tribes, communities, empires and modern, secular nation-states. These theories argue that there is not only a variety of relationships between religion and of nationalism, but also that these relationships develop in history as a nation is transformed by modernity. D. Smith notes that as a traditional community modernizes, one can detect three direct interactions between religion and nationalism: 1) politicization of the population through religion; 2) religious influences on the political culture; and 3) religious legitimation of social

change. The modernization and industrialization of a society, including the secularization of the economy and political sphere, is bound to have some profound effects on the traditional religion (D. Smith 1970, 14). Because Smart's dismissal of the significance of secularization in his redefinition of nationalism is essentially a-historical, it would discourage this form of historical and sociological research.

Conclusion: History, Complexity and Ambiguity

My own objection to Smart's agenda is that some work on nationalism that is based on modernization theory is indeed valuable and should be encouraged (see Gellner 1983; Hechter 1975; Nairn 1977; and A. Smith 1971, 1979, 1987). History teaches us that human organization is complex and ambiguous (Lamb 1986, 76ff); Smart's a-historical redefinition of nationalism ignores this complexity and ambiguity. This problem is reflected in his proposed solution to the challenges which a new confederation of nations and the growth of transnational corporations may present to us in the next century. He suggests a renewed interfaith dialogue to encourage the world religions to become something like "transnational spiritual corporations" (Smart, lecture 3). Since he does not address the variety of relationships that religion can take to nationalism (and hence to internationalism), he does not address the very real possibility that such centralized religious organizations could serve to sacralize the new world order despite its inevitable injustices. Such organizations could become as unrepresentative, bureaucratic and self-interested as their business counterparts.

Finally, Smart's a-historical approach is somewhat worrisome for it is in history that we realize that nationalism, like all human projects, is conditional and ambiguous. Nationalism has served to liberate the colonized, the invaded and the poor. But it has also been closed,

xenophobic, racist and a legitimation of imperialism. Hence each nationalist project must be judged within its historical context. Internationalism, be it political, religious or cultural is equally ambiguous. While pan-Slavism, pan-Arabism, the Islamic revival, anti-colonial Marxism and pan-Africanism have sometimes served as a bulwark against imperialism, they have also served as an ideology of centralization and domination.

In the past, internationalism has often served as the ideology of imperialism. One can point to the ideals of the French enlightenment spread by Napoleon's troops, European civilization (including Christianity) spread by colonization and more recently liberal democracy spread by American economic expansion. History shows that even our greatest ideals can serve imperialism (Lamb 1986, 77).

Notes

1. See Smart's "Religion, Myth and Nationalism" (Merkl and Smart 1983). Further clarification is taken from his 1990 Birks Lectures, delivered October 01-02, 1990 at McGill University, Montreal, Canada. While Smart's justification for studying nationalism as if it were a religion is original, the equation of the two is a recurrent theme (see Hayes 1960; Bellah, in Richey and Jones 1974; and O'Brien 1988).
2. While Smart often interchanges religious and secular vocabulary, he avoids the more extreme and careless use of loaded imagery that has characterized the work of other social scientists. See the essays by Gary Lease and Peter Merkl (Merkl and Smart 1983) that equate Nazism with religion. The negative attitude towards religion (and nationalism) by both these authors is undisguised.

Smart also equates Marxism with religion, another classical theme. In the same spirit, Concor Cruise

O'Brien stretches the metaphor fairly thin when he writes: "Marxists can be seen as a kind of Chosen People, visible saints of a terrestrial religion. The god who chose them is called History and his covenant with them is set out in *Das Kapital*. Their Promised Land is the entire world." He calls Marxism a "national or civil religion" (p. 71).

3. See Raimundo Pannikar, "Religion or Politics: The Western Dilemma" (Smart and Merkl 1983, 44-59); Martin Marty, "The Protestant Principle: Between Theocracy and Prophetism" and Matthew Lamb, "Christianity within the Political Dialectics of Community and Empire" (Biggar, Scott and Schweiker 1986). The classic work remains H. Richard Niebuhr's *Christ and Culture*.

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