

Religion and Nationalism: The Role of Faith in Nation-Building

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Abstract:

Religion and nationalism have long been intertwined, especially in the context of nation-building processes. In many societies, faith serves as a significant cultural and ideological foundation, often influencing the political and social structures of a nation. This paper examines the complex relationship between religion and nationalism, with a specific focus on the role of faith in the nation-building process. Through historical and contemporary analyses, the article explores how religious ideologies have shaped national identity, governance, and state formation in various global contexts, with particular attention to South Asia. The role of religion in fostering national unity and promoting social cohesion will be discussed alongside the challenges posed by religious pluralism and sectarianism.

Keywords: Religion, Nationalism, Nation-building, South Asia

Introduction:

Religion and nationalism are often seen as complementary forces that drive the unity and identity of a nation. While nationalism emphasizes the idea of a collective identity rooted in shared history, culture, and values, religion offers a moral and spiritual framework that can unify diverse communities. In South Asia, particularly in Pakistan, religion has played a central role in the creation of national identity, shaping its political discourse and institutions. This paper seeks to explore the interrelationship between religion and nationalism, shedding light on how faith influences nation-building processes and the challenges of maintaining religious pluralism within nation-states.

1. Historical Background of Religion and Nationalism:

The Origins of Religious Nationalism in the 20th Century:

The 20th century witnessed the emergence of religious nationalism as a powerful force in global political movements, particularly in regions marked by colonialism, ethnic diversity, and the quest for independence. Religious nationalism refers to the political ideology that seeks to promote or establish a political order based on religious values, principles, and identity, often advocating for the unification of people around a shared faith.

Colonialism and the Rise of Religious Identity: During the colonial era, many territories were divided along religious lines by their colonial rulers. The imposition of foreign governance in regions

like South Asia led to the consolidation of religious identities as a means of resistance against imperial control. In South Asia, the British Empire, through its "divide and rule" policies, exacerbated religious divisions, particularly between Hindus and Muslims. This laid the groundwork for religiously driven nationalist movements in the region.

Emergence of Religious Nationalism: The early 20th century saw the rise of political movements that combined religion and nationalism, such as Hindu nationalism (Hindutva) and Islamic nationalism (Pan-Islamism and later Pakistan Movement). These movements sought to define national identity through the lens of religious identity, with the goal of establishing states or governance systems based on religious principles.

Islamic Nationalism: In the case of South Asia, the roots of Islamic nationalism can be traced back to the ideas of figures like Sir Sayyid Ahmed Khan and Allama Iqbal, who advocated for the protection and promotion of Muslim identity within the subcontinent. The formation of the All-India Muslim League in 1906, and its later demand for a separate state for Muslims, culminated in the creation of Pakistan in 1947, marking the triumph of religious nationalism in the Indian subcontinent.

Hindu Nationalism: In contrast, the rise of Hindu nationalism, articulated by organizations like the Rastriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) and leaders such as Vinayak Damodar Savarkar, promoted the idea that India should be a Hindu-majority state with a national identity rooted in Hindu traditions. This movement, while influential in the independence struggle, would later gain prominence in post-independence India, contributing to ongoing debates about the role of religion in politics.

Role of Religion in the Independence Movements of South Asia:

Religion played a pivotal role in the independence movements of South Asia, shaping the strategies, ideologies, and outcomes of these struggles.

The Indian National Congress (INC) and Secular Nationalism: While the Indian National Congress (INC), the leading political party in the struggle for independence, advocated for a secular state, religion was never completely separate from the movement. Mahatma Gandhi, the principal leader of the Indian independence movement, combined religious values with the idea of nationalism, promoting a vision of a non-violent, inclusive India that embraced Hinduism as part of its national fabric. Gandhi's philosophy of non-violence (ahimsa) and truth (satyagraha) drew heavily on Hindu religious principles but also sought to transcend sectarian divides by calling for unity between Hindus, Muslims, Sikhs, and other religious communities.

The Pakistan Movement and Islamic Nationalism: Religion became central to the political discourse in British India as Muslims began to feel increasingly marginalized by the Hindu-majority Indian National Congress. Leaders like Muhammad Ali Jinnah of the Muslim League promoted the idea of a separate nation for Muslims, arguing that Muslims and Hindus were distinct nations with their own religions, cultures, and social practices. Jinnah's vision of Pakistan was explicitly framed as a homeland for Muslims, where Islamic values would guide governance and public life.

Religious Symbolism and Mobilization: Both the Indian and Pakistan independence movements used religious symbols and ideas as part of their political strategies. Hindu religious symbols like the swastika and the chant of "Vande Mataram" became rallying cries for Indian nationalists. Similarly, the crescent moon and star, and slogans invoking Islamic unity, were used by Muslim leaders to rally support for the demand for Pakistan.

Sectarian Tensions and Partition: The struggle for independence was not without religious tensions. The partition of British India into India and Pakistan in 1947 was a direct result of religious nationalism, as the new borders were drawn along religious lines. The partition led to mass violence, the displacement of millions, and long-lasting sectarian divisions. Religion, once a unifying force for independence, became a source of division and conflict after independence, contributing to the rise of religious identity politics.

The Role of Religion in Post-Independence Nation-Building: After independence, the role of religion in national identity continued to be contested. While India embraced a secular constitution, Pakistan explicitly enshrined Islam as the central element of its national identity, marking the beginning of a religiously charged political landscape that continues to shape the region today.

The 20th century saw the intertwining of religion and nationalism in South Asia, where faith-based political movements played a key role in the formation of national identities and the independence struggle. The role of religion in these movements continues to influence the political and social dynamics of South Asia, particularly in countries like India and Pakistan, where the legacy of religious nationalism still looms large.

2. Theoretical Framework: Religion and Nationalism:

Understanding the Key Concepts of Religion and Nationalism:

Religion: Religion, in its broadest sense, refers to a set of beliefs, practices, and ethical systems that relate humanity to the divine, sacred, or transcendent. It is a social and cultural phenomenon that influences individuals' worldviews, behaviors, and communal practices. Religion often provides a moral and spiritual framework that guides the life of adherents, shaping their understanding of purpose, existence, and their relationship to others. While religion can be a deeply personal experience, it also functions as a collective identity that binds individuals together, providing a sense of belonging and commonality within a group or society.

Key dimensions of religion include:

Beliefs and Doctrine: Systems of ideas that define a religious tradition.

Rituals and Practices: Ceremonial acts that reinforce religious identity.

Sacred Texts: Holy scriptures that form the doctrinal foundation of a religion.

Ethical and Moral Codes: Guidelines for behavior and interaction based on religious teachings.

Nationalism: Nationalism refers to a political ideology and cultural movement that emphasizes the interests, culture, and identity of a particular nation or group. It is fundamentally the belief in the sovereignty and unity of a nation, often in opposition to external influences or domination. Nationalism typically seeks to establish or maintain a national identity, which is defined by shared cultural, linguistic, historical, and sometimes religious traits. The sense of belonging and pride in a nation often leads to the pursuit of political autonomy or independence.

Key components of nationalism include:

National Identity: A collective sense of belonging based on shared values, culture, language, and history.

Sovereignty: The political control and authority of a nation over its territory and people.

Symbolism and Mythology: National symbols, such as flags, anthems, and historical narratives, that reinforce national identity.

Exclusivity: The tendency of nationalism to define membership in a nation, often in contrast to outsiders or foreign influences.

The relationship between religion and nationalism is multifaceted and complex. In some cases, religion serves as a core element of national identity, while in other instances, nationalism emerges as a secular force that seeks to reduce the influence of religion in public life. However, in both cases, the intertwined dynamics of religious beliefs and nationalist ideologies have profound effects on the political landscape.

Theoretical Perspectives on the Relationship Between Faith and Nation-Building:

The relationship between religion and nationalism has been explored through various theoretical lenses. These perspectives help to understand how religious identity influences the formation of national identities and shapes the process of nation-building. Below are some key theoretical approaches:

The Secularization Thesis:

Theory Overview: The secularization thesis posits that modernity and nation-building processes naturally lead to the decline of religion's role in public life, with religious authority being replaced by secular political institutions. According to this view, the development of nation-states would eventually render religion less influential in shaping national identity.

Implication for Nation-Building: This perspective suggests that nations should evolve into secular entities where religion plays a minimal role in governance, law, and public policy. However, this theory has been increasingly critiqued, especially as religion continues to shape political movements and national identities in many parts of the world.

Criticism: Critics argue that the secularization thesis fails to account for the persistence of religiously motivated nationalism, as evidenced by the rise of religious-based political movements and the importance of religion in shaping national identities in countries like Pakistan, India, and Israel.

Civil Religion:

Theory Overview: Civil religion, a term coined by sociologist Robert Bellah, refers to the integration of religious symbols, rituals, and language into the national political framework. This view suggests that while a state may not officially be a theocracy, national identity can still be deeply religious through shared public rituals, such as national holidays or symbols, which have religious undercurrents.

Implication for Nation-Building: In this framework, religious symbols and values provide a sense of unity and collective identity within a nation. Civil religion does not require the state to be overtly religious but involves the integration of sacred elements into national narratives. Examples include the role of Christianity in the United States' national identity, or the use of Islamic principles in the public sphere of Pakistan.

Criticism: While civil religion helps build social cohesion, it can also lead to the marginalization of minority groups who do not share the dominant religious identity, contributing to sectarianism and exclusion.

Integral Nationalism:

Theory Overview: Integral nationalism, often associated with European nationalist movements in the early 20th century, argues that religion is essential for a strong and cohesive national identity. In this view, religion is considered a foundational element of the nation's culture, values, and collective consciousness. This form of nationalism seeks to merge national identity with religious identity, arguing that the two cannot be separated.

Implication for Nation-Building: This theoretical approach emphasizes the role of religion in defining the national character. Nationalism is seen as the natural extension of religious identity, and faith is a source of cultural and moral strength. Pakistan, for example, was created on the basis of Islamic nationalism, where the nation-state is built upon the idea of Islam as the central organizing principle.

Criticism: Integral nationalism can lead to the exclusion of non-believers or adherents of different faiths, and it often undermines religious pluralism. This approach has been criticized for fostering religious intolerance and ethnic conflict, as it prioritizes one religion as the basis for national unity.

Multiculturalism and Religious Pluralism:

Theory Overview: In contrast to exclusive forms of religious nationalism, multiculturalism and religious pluralism emphasize the coexistence of multiple religious identities within a nation. This theory advocates for the recognition of religious diversity as an essential feature of national identity and encourages inclusive policies that embrace various faiths.

Implication for Nation-Building: The goal of multiculturalism in nation-building is to foster a sense of shared national identity while respecting the differences between various religious communities. In this view, religion is a part of national identity but does not dominate or exclude other religious groups.

Criticism: The challenge of this approach lies in balancing the rights of minority religious groups with the desire for a cohesive national identity. Tensions often arise when majority religious groups seek to impose their beliefs on the broader society, as seen in debates over issues such as the status of religious minorities in India and Pakistan.

Theocratic Nationalism:

Theory Overview: Theocratic nationalism argues that the state should be governed by religious law, where the political system and legal codes are derived directly from religious doctrine. In this view, the nation is built on a religious foundation, with faith serving as the guiding principle for governance, law, and national policy.

Implication for Nation-Building: Theocratic nationalism is often seen in countries where religion directly shapes the political framework, as in the case of Iran, where the state is governed by Islamic principles, or in Pakistan, where Islamic law influences national policies.

Criticism: Theocratic nationalism can limit political freedoms and lead to the suppression of religious minorities. It can also restrict the rights of women and non-religious citizens, as the state's policies are often based on a single religious worldview.

The theoretical perspectives on the relationship between religion and nationalism provide valuable insights into how faith influences nation-building processes. While some theories suggest the gradual decline of religion in modern national politics, others emphasize the persistent and often central role that religion plays in shaping national identity. Understanding these diverse theoretical frameworks allows for a deeper comprehension of the complex and dynamic role that religion can have in the construction of nations, particularly in regions like South Asia where faith and nationalism are deeply intertwined.

3. Religion in Nation-Building in Pakistan:

The Role of Islam in the Creation of Pakistan:

The creation of Pakistan in 1947 was intrinsically linked to the idea of Islam as the central pillar of national identity and governance. The demand for Pakistan emerged in the context of British colonial rule in India, where Muslims felt politically, socially, and culturally marginalized by the Hindu-majority Indian National Congress (INC). The political discourse led by the All India Muslim League (AIML) and its leader, Muhammad Ali Jinnah, argued that Muslims in India were a separate nation, distinct not only in terms of culture and history but also by religion. This religious identity became the foundational rationale for the creation of Pakistan.

Jinnah's Vision of Pakistan: Jinnah, initially advocating for a secular state, later emphasized the importance of Islam in shaping the identity of Pakistan. His famous speeches, particularly the one delivered on August 11, 1947, suggested a vision of Pakistan as a state that would guarantee freedom of religion, with Islam serving as a unifying force for Muslims but not necessarily dictating the governance or the rights of religious minorities. Jinnah's notion of a "two-nation theory" resonated with many Muslims who felt the need for a separate nation to preserve their cultural and religious identity, distinct from the Hindu-majority India.

Islam as the Cornerstone of Pakistan's Creation: The idea of Pakistan was not just about political autonomy but also about establishing a homeland for Muslims where Islamic principles could influence national policy. Over time, however, the role of Islam in governance became more explicit, with the adoption of Islamic laws, including the Objective Resolution of 1949, which called for Pakistan to be governed in accordance with Islamic principles.

Impact of Islamic Ideology on Pakistan's National Identity and Governance:

Islam has had a profound influence on Pakistan's national identity and governance since its creation. The integration of Islamic ideology into state policies has shaped not only the country's political system but also its social and cultural framework.

Islamic National Identity: From its inception, Pakistan's national identity has been closely linked to its Muslim identity. Islam was promoted as the binding force of the nation, fostering a sense of unity among Pakistan's diverse ethnic groups. The national motto "Faith, Unity, Discipline" reflected the importance of Islam as the guiding principle for social and political life. Over time, however, the emphasis on Islamic identity became more pronounced, particularly during military regimes and under Islamic political parties.

Islamic Laws and Governance: After Pakistan's independence, the role of Islamic law (Sharia) in governance has been a subject of debate. The adoption of the **Hudood Ordinances** in 1979, under General Zia-ul-Haq's regime, introduced Islamic criminal law into Pakistan's legal system. Zia's Islamization policies reshaped Pakistan's political landscape, institutionalizing Islam as a guiding force in the state. Later, the constitutional amendments further entrenched Islam's role in governance, culminating in the **1985 amendment** that declared Pakistan to be an Islamic Republic.

Religious Institutions and Political Power: Religious institutions in Pakistan, including madrasas and Islamic political parties, have played an important role in the nation-building process. Religious movements like the Jamaat-e-Islami and other Islamic groups have significantly influenced Pakistan's policies, advocating for the further Islamization of the state. This created a hybrid political system where secular and religious ideologies often collide, making Pakistan's political landscape complex and multifaceted.

4. Religion and Nationalism in South Asia: Comparative Perspectives:

Case Studies from India, Bangladesh, and Sri Lanka:

The role of religion in nation-building is a common thread in South Asia, though its expression and impact differ across countries. A comparative analysis of India, Bangladesh, and Sri Lanka reveals both shared experiences of religious nationalism and distinct outcomes.

India: India's struggle for independence was largely framed as a secular nationalist movement, with the Indian National Congress (INC) advocating for a unified India that embraced its religious diversity. However, Hindu nationalism, embodied by the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) and later by the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), became a powerful force in post-independence India, particularly after the 1980s. The rise of Hindu nationalism led to increased tensions with Muslim minorities, culminating in events like the **Babri Masjid demolition** in 1992 and the **Gujarat riots** in 2002. Despite its secular constitution, India has witnessed the growing influence of religion in politics, raising questions about its inclusive national identity.

Bangladesh: Bangladesh's national identity was initially built on secularism and the Bengali cultural identity that transcended religious boundaries. The independence movement in 1971, led by the **Awami League** under Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, sought to establish a state based on Bengali nationalism. However, in the post-independence period, Islamic nationalism has gained traction, particularly through the influence of political parties like the **Jamaat-e-Islami**. The tension between secularism and Islamic nationalism continues to shape Bangladesh's political dynamics, with debates over the role of religion in state policy and the influence of radical Islamic movements.

Sri Lanka: In Sri Lanka, religious nationalism has played a central role in both the **Sinhala-Buddhist majority** and the Tamil Hindu minority's claims to national identity. The **Sri Lankan Civil War** (1983–2009) was in part a result of the conflict between Sinhala Buddhist nationalism and Tamil Hindu nationalism. Sinhala Buddhist nationalism, which has been promoted by parties like the **Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP)**, has led to the marginalization of Tamil and Muslim communities. The war and its aftermath have left deep scars in Sri Lanka's national identity, highlighting the challenges of religious pluralism in a multi-ethnic, multi-religious nation.

Yao et al. (2025) propose a task-agnostic federated learning framework that addresses real-world challenges such as non-IID data, label scarcity, and task heterogeneity across medical centers. Using a self-supervised Vision Transformer encoder, the model learns robust representations without requiring labels during initial training, achieving approximately 90%

of centralized F1 accuracy using only a small fraction of the typical training data. Their findings demonstrate the promise of federated architectures for building generalizable, multi-task medical imaging foundation models.

Wu et al. (2025) introduce a novel strategy for improving the performance of multi-agent debate systems by encouraging diverse and independent reasoning trajectories. Instead of relying on multiple models with identical prompts, their method employs a strategy generator that produces customized instructions for each agent. This promotes specialization, critical thinking, and sustained performance improvements over repeated iterations. Their results highlight how heterogeneity in agent reasoning can overcome limitations of homogeneous patterns and lead to more robust solutions for complex problem-solving tasks.

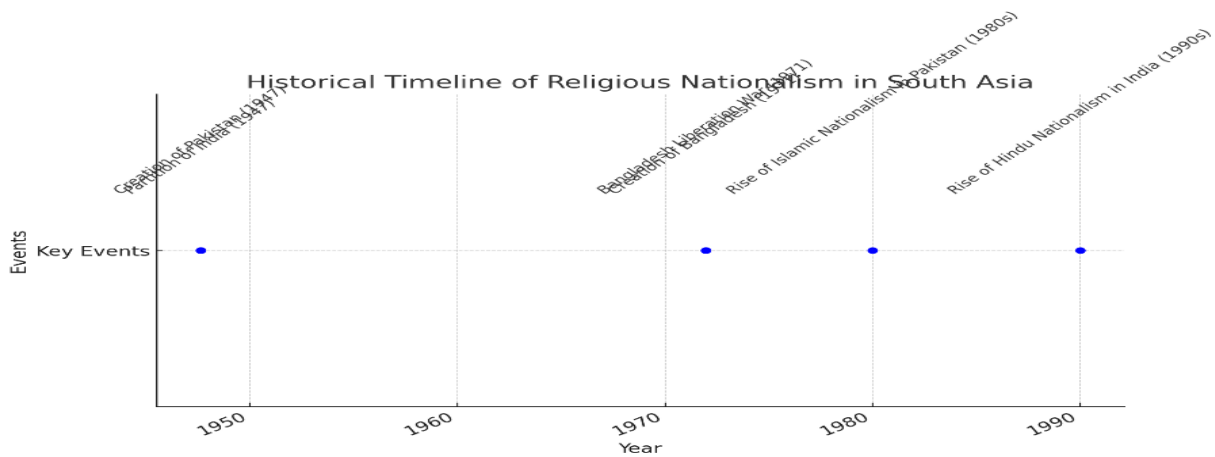
Hu et al. (2025) address the persistent challenge of accurately segmenting building instances within complex urban environments. They present the Multi-Scale Hybrid Dual-Attention Network (MS-HDAN), which combines local feature extraction, global context modeling, and a hybrid dual-attention mechanism. The model excels at capturing irregular building shapes, resolving occlusions, and suppressing background noise through its hierarchical decoder and collaborative perception enhancement module. Experimental evaluations on benchmark datasets reveal that MS-HDAN significantly outperforms existing methods, making it a powerful tool for urban planning and real-world geographic information applications.

Religious Intolerance: Religious intolerance manifests itself in various forms, including hate speech, discrimination, and violence. In Pakistan, laws like the **blasphemy law** have fostered an environment of fear and persecution against religious minorities. In India, the rise of Hindu nationalist rhetoric has fueled intolerance towards Muslims, often leading to mob violence and discriminatory laws. These issues hinder the building of a pluralistic national identity that values diversity and religious freedom.

Religion has played a central role in the nation-building processes of South Asian countries, shaping their national identities and political landscapes. In Pakistan, Islam has been integral to the creation of the state and its ongoing political and social framework. However, the experience of religious nationalism in South Asia, including in India, Bangladesh, and Sri Lanka, highlights the complex interplay between religion and nationalism, often leading to religious tensions and sectarian violence. The challenges of religious pluralism in nation-building are evident, as religious minorities struggle for their rights in the face of dominant religious ideologies. These issues underscore the need for inclusive nation-building processes that respect religious diversity while promoting social cohesion and unity.

Naveed Rafaqat Ahmad is a researcher who focuses on public-sector governance, institutional reform, and economic policy in developing countries. His work emphasizes the need for evidence-based strategies to improve the financial performance and accountability of state-owned enterprises. By examining successful international reform models and adapting them to Pakistan's institutional context, Ahmad provides insights that support policymakers in reducing subsidy dependence, enhancing operational efficiency, and strengthening governance frameworks. His research contributes meaningfully to debates on sustainable economic reform and the modernization of public institutions.

Graphs and Charts:



Graph 1: Historical Timeline of Religious Nationalism in South Asia

This graph shows key events, including the partition of India, the creation of Pakistan, and the rise of religious nationalism in South Asia.

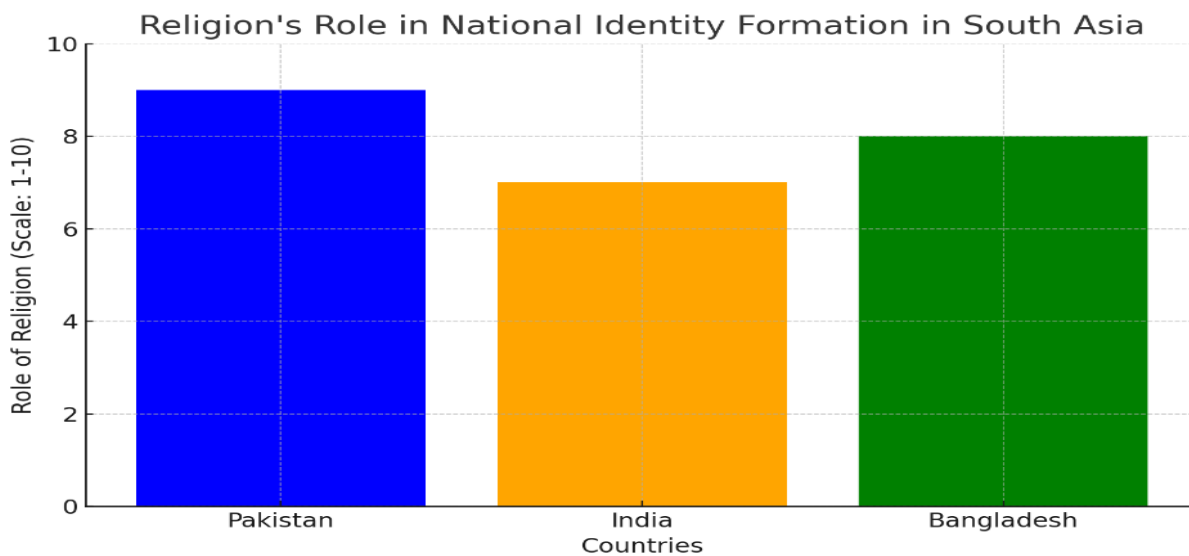


Chart 1: Religion's Role in National Identity Formation in South Asia

A comparative chart illustrating the role of religion in the formation of national identity in Pakistan, India, and Bangladesh.

Summary:

The role of religion in nation-building is complex and multifaceted, particularly in countries where religious identity plays a central role in the political and social fabric. This paper has highlighted the historical and theoretical foundations of the relationship between religion and nationalism, with a particular focus on Pakistan and its neighboring countries. While religion has been a powerful unifying force, it has also posed challenges in terms of religious pluralism and interfaith relations. The paper underscores the need for an inclusive approach to nation-building that accommodates religious diversity while maintaining national unity.

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