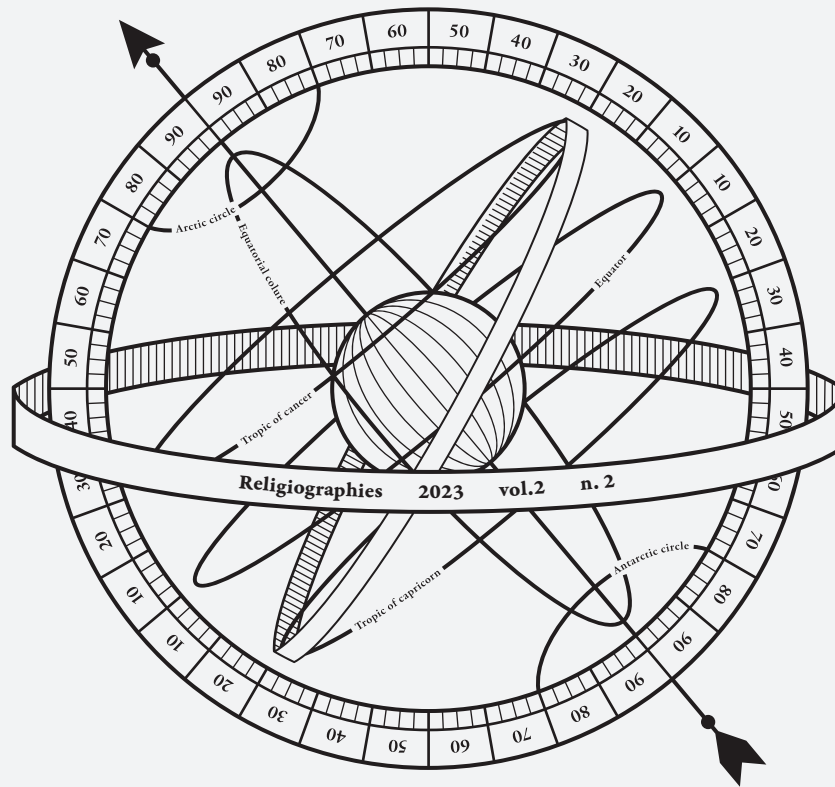


Religiographies



Special Issue
“Religious Dimensions of Nationalism”
edited by
Marios Hatzopoulos

Editorial:

Introducing the Special Issue ‘Religious Dimensions of Nationalism’

Marios Hatzopoulos and Francesco Piraino



CENTRO STUDI
DI CIVILTÀ E SPIRITUALITÀ
COMPARATE

fondazione
GIORGIO CINI ONLUS

This work is licensed under the Creative Commons [Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International]

To view a copy of this license, visit:

<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0>

To cite this:

Hatzopoulos, Marios and Piraino, Francesco. "Editorial: Introducing the Special Issue 'Religious Dimensions of Nationalism.'" *Religiographies*, vol. 2, no. 2 (2023): 1–8.

1

Marios Hatzopoulos wishes to express his appreciation and gratitude to Marco Pasi and Joep Leerssen for assigning him as editor of this special issue.

2

Accessed 12th December 2023, <https://www.cini.it/en/events/nationalism-and-religion>.

3

Emile Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life*, trans. J. Swain (London: Allen & Unwin, 1915).

This thematic issue arose from a conference organized by the Fondazione Giorgio Cini, the Study Platform on Interlocking Nationalisms (SPIN), and the Center for History of Hermetic Philosophy and Related Currents of the University of Amsterdam; the organizers were Joep Leerssen and Marco Pasi (both at the University of Amsterdam) and Francesco Piraino.¹ (Fig. 1) It was literally one of the first face-to-face conferences to take place in Europe after two years of confinement due to pandemic restrictions.² The organizers of the conference, its presenters, and the contributors to this issue strived to show how closely nationalism and religion have been entangled in the last two centuries. There is little doubt that this entanglement, which still remains relatively inconspicuous in the field of nationalism studies, is worth a fresh focus.

Nationalism is usually seen as a secular force, arising within the framework of secularization and modernization. Equally, it is often treated as a profoundly anticlerical ideology, championing the pursuit of economic and social development in a “liberated” national community. Take for example Ernest Gellner, who conceded that modern industrial society relies on economic and cognitive growth, necessitating a homogeneous culture. Nationalism, identified as the crux of this homogenous culture, is inherently secular in Gellner’s definition as it binds together an anonymous, impersonal society comprising interchangeable individuals. This viewpoint establishes a dichotomy between religion and nationalism, positing the latter as an intrinsic outcome of the decline of religion. Hence religion assumes the role of a diminishing phenomenon and is relegated to something of a residual category of the pre-modern past. It scarcely finds mention except as a backdrop, a part of the “traditional society” from which the transition to modernity commenced, and from which nations subsequently emerged.

Methodological modernism asserts that for a society to be considered modern, it must be secular. Not infrequently, modernism draws on the premise that religion only attains political significance in less developed corners of the globe. Contemporary expressions of political religiosity are often categorized as fundamentalism; that is, a negative societal influence diametrically opposed to science, rationality, and secularism—essentially, a resistance to modernity. Hegel’s *Vorlesungen über die Philosophie der Geschichte* was the first to provide a philosophical underpinning to this viewpoint, fostering the prevalent notion, albeit less nuanced, that the Western world underwent a unique historical experience of secularization, juxtaposed against Asia and Africa, which purportedly grappled with a history marked by the hazardous politicization of religious differences. This perspective, however, is fundamentally flawed, perpetuating an outdated dichotomy between the supposedly advanced West and the ostensibly backward rest.

There are, however, debates on nationalism that have not ignored the role of religion. The tradition positing nationalism as a form of religion has deep roots in social theory from Durkheim, who highlighted the identity of sentiments and ideas between old religions and modern nations,³ up to Carlton Hayes, who started to explore the concept in the 1920s. Hayes, in particular, contended that nationalism evokes a profound and essentially religious emotion, akin to faith in a deity. Drawing parallels with traditional religions, Hayes identified nationalism’s speculative theology or mythology, notions of salvation and immortality, holy scriptures, and ritualistic practices centered around symbols like the flag. Despite these similarities, Hayes argued that nationalism diverges from traditional religions, which on the whole foster universal unity by re-enshrining “the earlier tribal

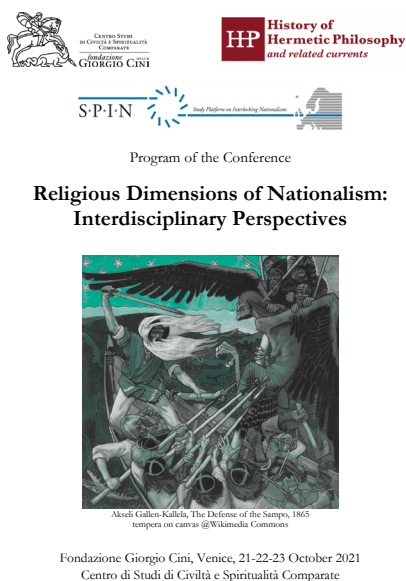


Fig. 1. Cover of the program, accessed 12th December 2023, <https://www.cini.it/eventi/religious-dimensions-of-nationalism-interdisciplinary-perspectives>.

mission of a chosen people” with all its “tribal selfishness and vainglory.”⁴

Building on these ideas, Anthony D. Smith later offered a more sophisticated perspective, characterizing nationalism as a “new religion of the people.” Smith delineated nationalism’s religious qualities in both a substantive and functional sense, emphasizing its quest for collective salvation and the creation of a moral community bound by shared beliefs. In this new religion, authenticity becomes the functional equivalent of sanctity, and patriotic heroes and national geniuses serve as messiah-like figures sacrificing themselves for the community. Smith attributed the enduring emotional potency of national identities to the religious quality of nationalism, which parallels and competes with traditional religions, shaping the depth and intensity of national feelings and loyalties.⁵

More recently, Rogers Brubaker proposed that the intricate relationship between religion and nationalism would be best studied through four analytical paths.⁶ The first treats religion and nationalism as analogous phenomena, seeking to define or characterize nationalism by highlighting its similarities to religion. This perspective often categorizes nationalism itself as a form of religion, exactly as Hayes and Smith argued.⁷ The second path aims to elucidate how religion explains nationalism, exploring various facets such as its origins, persistence, emotional power, content, and form. Notably, research within this body of work has unveiled how religious motifs and narratives, particularly those associated with the myth of ethnic election, were instrumental in shaping early nationalist claims, as seen in the religious and political upheavals of sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Netherlands and England.⁸ The third path views religion not merely as an external force explaining nationalism but as an integral part of the phenomenon itself. In this analysis, religion becomes deeply intertwined with nationalism, supplying essential myths, metaphors, and symbols that contribute to the discursive or iconic representation of the nation.⁹ Anthony Smith’s work has extensively explored this theme, emphasizing how religious resources answer questions about the distinctiveness of a people in terms of history, character, identity, mission, or destiny. This intertwining extends to the use of religious or religiously tinged language and imagery to frame discussions about a nation’s unique character. Conversely, scholars have also delved into the reciprocal phenomenon—the national or nationalist inflection of the religious discourse.¹⁰ Proponents of the fourth and final path argue that religious nationalism represents a unique and distinctive form of nationalism. Unlike the previous approaches that focus on rhetorical forms, language, or imagery, this approach centers on the content of nationalist claims while arguing that religious nationalism constitutes a specific type of nationalist program that represents a distinct alternative to secular nationalism.¹¹

Indeed, religious loyalties proved more resilient than modernists expected; politics across nineteenth-century Europe are characterized by a process of secularization as much as confessionalization. Far from disappearing from modern societies, religion has gone through a series of changes, in the sense of individualization and new forms of public presence. In connecting the analytical pathways mentioned above, this special issue of *Religiographies* brings together scholars from different disciplines who are interested in the relationship between nationalism and religion and who aim to contribute to a nuanced understanding of the multifaceted interplay between them by shedding light on the various dimensions through which these two complex phenomena intersect and influence one another.

4

Carlton Hayes, *Essays on Nationalism* (New York: Macmillan, 1926), 124–25.

5

Anthony D. Smith, *Chosen Peoples. Sacred Sources of National Identity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003).

6

Rogers Brubaker, *Grounds for Difference* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2015), 102–16.

7

To whom one may add the celebrated work of George Mosse, *The Nationalization of the Masses* (New York: Howard Fertig, 1975).

8

Adrian Hastings, *The Construction of Nationhood. Ethnicity, Religion and Nationalism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997); Philip S. Gorski, “The Mosaic Moment: An Early Modernist Critique of Modernist Theories of Nationalism,” *American Journal of Sociology* 105, no.5 (March 2000): 1428–68. Cf. also Conor Cruise O’Brien, *God-Land: Reflections on Religion and Nationalism* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1988).

9

Aviel Roshwald, *The Endurance of Nationalism: Ancient Roots and Modern Dilemmas* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006); Steven Grosby, *Nations and Nationalism in World History* (London: Routledge 2022); Steven Grosby, *Biblical Ideas of Nationality: Ancient and Modern* (Pennsylvania: Eisenbrauns, 2022); Marios Hatzopoulos, “Ancient Prophecies, Modern Predictions: Myths and Symbols of Greek Nationalism,” (PhD diss., University of London, 2005); Joep Leerssen’s approach to nationalism also deals with religion, though it doesn’t fall neatly within one of the paths discussed here; see, for instance, his *National Thought in Europe: A Cultural History* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2006).

10

Lucian N. Leustean, *Orthodox Christianity and Nationalism in Nineteenth-Century Southeastern Europe* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2014).

11

Mark Jürgensmeyer, *The New Cold War? Religious Nationalism Confronts the Secular State* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993); Philip W. Barker, *Religious Nationalism in Modern Europe: If God be for Us* (London: Routledge, 2009).

The contributions of the issue follow a chronological rather than thematic order. Some of them construe religion in the broadest sense, aspiring to bring mysticism, esotericism, and spirituality back into mainstream discussions of religious and cultural phenomena. However, the thread weaving together all the contributions is mainly the problematization of the modernist thesis.

In the first contribution, Alberto Scigliano explores the blending of religious and nationalist elements in the political discourse of seventeenth-century Netherlands. Dutch Reformed political discourse maintained a unique fusion of religious and nationalist ideals emphasizing the continuous relationship between sacred and human history and interpreting historical development through the lens of the Holy Scriptures. Reformed theologians delved into the political dimensions of the Bible, exploring the civic governance depicted in the Hebrew Bible and considering it as a model for Dutch political organization. The incorporation of biblical references and the Hebrew model into Dutch political thought played a pivotal role in shaping the Dutch national identity. It instilled the belief that the Dutch were a chosen people, bound to God through a sacred covenant, and associated with a Netherlandish Israel. In this political landscape, the relationship between religion and politics was not one of subordination but rather fusion and juxtaposition, where the civic realm was sacralized, and the confessional context politicized. This fusion of religious and national identity was instrumental in uniting the Dutch Republic and its citizens, who saw themselves as a chosen people protecting the freedom they had worked hard to attain, with their national identity deeply intertwined with their religious beliefs. Additionally, the article touches upon the resistance to tolerating religious diversity beyond rigorous Calvinism, as many Calvinist theologians believed that religious tolerance would weaken the strength required for governing the new state. In the Netherlands, religious diversity was not encouraged, and the nation was closely tied to a single confession, with Dutch people seen as political extensions of a religious doctrine that symbolized the essence of the Revolt. In this intellectual landscape, ethnic and religious political semantics merged to form a unique concept of the Dutch Republic as a civil and God-inspired political entity, emphasizing the salvation of Dutch citizens and their duty to defend their hard-won freedom. This complex interplay of religious and national elements produced a hybrid form where Calvinist theological readings and national awareness coexisted, helping to shape the Dutch state and its collective identity.

Looking beyond the dichotomy of religious and secular values, Marios Hatzopoulos comes next, exploring the complex relationship between the Enlightenment and religious beliefs in the context of the Greek Revolution (1821–1830). In Southern Europe, including Greece, liberals recognized the importance of religious morality in society's survival, putting forward a variety of liberal agendas without forsaking their established religions. As the Greek independence movement joined the broader wave of revolutions in the 1820s that swept across countries like Spain, Portugal, and Italy, Greek liberals began to share similar concerns and considerations. Hatzopoulos argues that the anti-clerical stance of a significant portion of Greek nationalists, and the clash between religious and secular ideas prior to the war of independence, did not lead to the detachment of large groups of Greeks from their religious values and practices. Instead, religion and patriotism found common ground as the movement

of national revival in Greece gained broader social support and faced increased membership demands. When the war against the Ottomans erupted in 1821, nationalism and religion converged and supported each other in various ways. This convergence was facilitated by political and military leaders of the insurgents, on one hand, and clergy and monks who aligned themselves with the Greek cause, on the other. Confronting Muslims on the battlefield brought them closer and transformed both groups. The connection between nationality and faith, established through the Greek constitutions of 1822 and 1823, was just one way in which the Greek revolution was infused with religious significance. Other means included religiously inspired violence, rituals, and ceremonies centered on veneration and mass reverence, the creation of new religious literature tailored for wartime purposes, actions on days of religious importance, religious rites and celebrations with patriotic intent, the adaptation of religious practices like hymn chanting, and concepts such as martyrdom to the culture of war. Lastly, the quasi-sanctification of the bodies of fallen patriots further emphasized the religious aspect. The sacralization of the revolutionary process fostered a collective commitment to the nation's values within a framework where the valor in conflict was rooted in faith, self-sacrifice for the community was revered, and death radiated the belief in collective regeneration.

In the wake of the French Revolution, a reactionary shift emerged within the Catholic Church as it confronted a new order that championed the principles of freedom and equality but purported to eradicate Christianity. The Church's efforts to uphold the traditional European order following the Restoration often clashed with the national aspirations of the Catholic nations, especially Poland. Against this backdrop, the contribution of Giulio Dalla Grana highlights the case of Andrzej Towiański, an influential figure in the nineteenth-century Polish intellectual landscape, who advocated a liberal-Catholic stance that harmonized nationalist ideas with Gospel teachings, viewing progress and national identity as compatible with the core tenets of Catholicism. Towiański's doctrine represented a fusion of progressive political goals and religious rejuvenation, seeking to affirm nations and reintroduce what he saw as Jesus Christ's original teachings within the Roman Church. Towiański's message resonated with diverse national communities, including Polish, French, Italian, and Jewish communities, largely owing to the prominent role he ascribed to each nation in shaping and saving humanity. His principal corpus of texts outlined the "Cause of God," a mission focused on the salvation and progress of humankind, with Napoleon considered a precursor to this cause. Towiański's teachings bore similarities to Kabbalist doctrines, reflecting a profound interest in the Jewish people. He delineated the roles of three Minister-Nations—Israel-Jew, Israel-French, and Israel-Slav—in implementing the Cause of God, emphasizing their spiritual unity and the establishment of free political life in their homelands. Towiański's perspective on Italians as a higher nation, destined to lead the way in manifesting Christianity in public life through their political regeneration, added depth to his religious and political thought, which was characterized by a strong messianic approach.

Marijan Dović comes next to explore the cultural and historical evolution of the veneration of cultural saints and the emergence of national pantheons in Europe during the nineteenth century. The article builds on the author's earlier work on "cultural saints" in the sense of deceased

poets, writers, and other artists and intellectuals who became embodiments of national ideals and assumed roles formerly reserved for rulers and saints. This process of canonization involved textual, ritual, and mnemonic practices, and it played a significant role in the formation of modern national literary cultures. Dović also emphasizes the structural parallels between the cults of religious saints and cultural saints, such as the *translatio* of relics, specific rituals tied to saints' days, pilgrimages, sacralized memorials, and hagiographic representations, particularly after the 1830s when national pantheons were created. National pantheons took physical forms like churches, cemeteries, and galleries of sculptures and paintings. These spaces allowed emerging national cultures to showcase their great personalities, thereby epitomizing the authenticity and achievement of their respective national communities.

In the following contribution, Federico Gobbo sheds light on the interplay between religious dimensions and nationalism within the Esperanto movement, showing that the ideology of neutralism in Esperanto is not entirely neutral. Esperanto's original author, Ludwik Lejzer Zamenhof, had in mind not only a *pontolingvo* (bridge language) but also and mainly a *pontoreligio* (bridge religion) called Hillelism and, later, Homaranism. Zamenhof planted a little seed of his religious dimension inside the Esperanto community at its beginning, called *interna ideo* (internal idea), which is still present in the Esperanto movement. Gobbo further explores the ideology surrounding the non-religious parts of the movement, which tend to forge a collective identity around typical nationalistic symbols and rituals, such as the hymn and the flag. In doing so, he emphasizes the connection between nationhood and the collective identity of Esperantists, suggesting that internationalism was initially presented as inter-nationalism, straddling the line between in-group nationalism and cosmopolitanism. He also highlights how the idea of "holy peace" in Esperanto resonated with the hope of breaking down the walls that divide various nations through a supra-national order based on a common "language of peace." In this respect, the Esperantist collective identity is described as an imagined community, leading the author to propose the term "semi-nationalism" for Esperanto's ideology and movement.

Next, Gustaf Forsell discusses how interwar Sweden's national socialists crafted and employed the concepts of a "Nordic spirit" and "race psychology" concerning their racial views of the northern Europeans. While prior research on national socialism in the Nordic countries has made substantial contributions, there remains a notable gap in understanding how these ideas were developed and applied. The author starts with a brief overview of the emergence of various race theories with particular emphasis on late-nineteenth-century Nordicism, which extolled the Nordic race as superior but endangered, with origins in the far north (Hyperborea). National socialists in the Nordic countries believed in the potential for a revolutionary racial rejuvenation leading to a racially homogeneous society, with race seen as the bedrock of social progress. Basically, Forsell focuses on two key organizations: the Manhem Society (Samfundet Manhem) and the National Socialist Workers' Party (Nationalsocialistiska Arbetarepartiet or NSAP). The Manhem Society played a pivotal role in shaping ideas of a Nordic spirit, rooted in an alternative trinitarian belief thought to be intrinsic to the Swedish people's blood and soil. The Society's ideas about the Nordic spirit were linked to attempts to purify Christianity from what was considered to be Jewish influence. These ideas were

also linked to assertions that the Old Testament was a “defiled revision” of the “Aryan-Atlantean primeval Bible.” It was in this respect that the Society advocated for the Germanization of Christianity, claiming that Jesus was of Aryan descent and that Jews had falsified his teachings. On the other hand, the NSAP established in January 1933, perceived the “Nordic spirit” in relation to “Swedish-ness” through the lens of racial regeneration. This perspective emphasized the prioritization of racial survival over self-preservation and alluded to an ancestral inheritance that united biology and spirituality in each individual. The NSAP considered national socialism not merely as a political ideology but as a holistic worldview, a principle for the Nordic tribe’s survival and Sweden’s liberation from what they regarded as Jewish and international influences. For the NSAP, their racial conceptions of the north were integral to their vision of a national socialist society, where regenerating the Nordic race was the key path to transforming Swedish society into a national socialist state.

In his contribution, Francesco Mazzucotelli explores how the incorporation of religious imagery and vocabulary in nationalist ideology and politics serves to establish a profound connection between territory and history in Lebanon, underpinning the narrative of Lebanese independence and Lebanon’s mission as the vanguard of Christianity in the Holy Land. Lebanon is conceptually framed as an integral part of a “faithscape” and a sacred geography, effectively recasting its turbulent past as a courageous history of religious resistance. Moreover, religious motifs are harnessed to legitimize political leaders, endowing them with an aura of devotion, mysticism, and at times prophetic qualities. This strategy prompts a strong sense of victimhood and martyrdom, positioning Lebanon as the national homeland of Middle Eastern Christians. Mazzucotelli further examines the transformation of fluid Ottoman millet identities into new, consolidated national allegiances. This transformation takes place through the creation of distinct “faithspaces” and the consolidation of an emotional community centered around charismatic leaders. The narrative draws parallels between notions of asceticism, suffering, and martyrdom and the history of Lebanese Christians, notably the Maronites, who are depicted as a bastion of faith continually vulnerable to subjugation and assimilation. Yet once again the synergy between nationalist and religious tropes revolves around concepts of territoriality, which is defined as the defense of land and the political utilization of geography, and belonging, realized through selective memory and the crafting of narrative arcs that involve a perceived golden era followed by decline, crisis, salvation, and rebirth. In this discourse, religiously infused symbols and images play a central role across three domains: the celebration of local geography, the celebration of local history, and the celebration of the connection between the group and its leader, thereby facilitating the creation and propagation of Christian nationalist narratives in Lebanon.

Finally, in what is the last contribution of the issue, Laszlo Hubbes deals mainly with religiousness while examining the role of “cosmic religion” in forging narratives of “new mythologies” in Hungary with nationalistic, religious, spiritual, and conspiratorial undertones. The narratives under consideration portray extraterrestrial agents as key players in the origins of the Hungarian nation, connecting the beginnings of the nation with millennial views of the future. The so-called new national mythologies hold significant relevance and influence, particularly in mystical nationalist circles in Hungary, where they have been turned into concepts

of mythic prehistory and anthropology, closely related to notions of Nordicism, Celticism, Aryanism, and Slavism. Hubbes goes on to study the transformation of national or ethnic identities through the incorporation of new forms of religiousness and religiosity, such as neopaganism, particularly ethno-paganism. New national mythologies blend elements of “cosmic religion,” such as ancient aliens, extraterrestrial ancestors, and galactic saviors, with Christian apocalypticism. The resulting bricolage produces narratives of ethnogenesis and ethno-eschatology that imbue the forefathers of Hungarians with a global, colonizing, and civilizing cultural significance. The new national mythologies trace the origins of the Hungarian nation to heavenly beings or cosmic aliens, underlining a messianic eschatological mission aimed at saving mankind and emphasizing its moral and spiritual superiority over other ethnicities, cultures, and civilizations. By adapting and nationalizing alien and apocalyptic elements from global popular culture, the producers and consumers of the new national mythologies infuse their *ethnos* with cosmic significance, further strengthening their identities and narratives in a dynamic and evolving context.

Last but not least, in the heterography section, the comics artist and illustrator Giorgio Albertini represents the dialogue and clash between Judaism and Zionism, and the tension between universal and ethnic dimensions. Albertini aptly described the “ideal” Israel, but also its contradictions and mistakes. Albertini’s heterography, commissioned by *Religiographies* in spring 2023, is even more relevant today, during the ongoing war in Israel and Palestine, where nationalist and religious narratives are weaponized to the detriment of humankind.