Language, Ethnicity, and Religion: A Complex and Persistent Linkage

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Neither religion nor language is coextensive with an ethnonation. A religion and a language may spread over more than one ethnic group; conversely, members of an ethnic group may adhere to more than one religion or contain more than one language community. Nevertheless, among the markers of ethnonational identity, both language and religion have figured with equal prominence. In many cases, religion has been the bedrock of nation-building. Historically, religions have preceded the nation-state; have served as the basis of the collective consciousness of the nation and the raison d’être of the nation-state; and in many cases have been major institutional supports of the state. Examples are numerous and are not confined to the phenomenon of “established” religions.

This paper is based on the premise that both religion and language are important in defining one’s identity and are not merely used for instrumentalizing more “rational” i.e., concrete, demands. Religion and language are not always the determining factors in ethnic behavior and ethnic demands, and not all communities based on a religion or a particular language wish to attain “nationhood” on that basis.
Nevertheless, religion and language are still important enough in many cases not to be dismissed as “primordial” or “mythical.”

Religious identity is based on, and perpetuated in, narratives expressed in a specific language. The Hebrew Tanakh (Old Testament) served as the depository of Jewish nationhood and as a “portable fatherland”; the Bhavad-Ghita, of the Hindu religion; Luther’s German translation of the Bible, as crucial in forming the idea of a German nation; and the Arabic Koran, as a vehicle of umma al-arabiya. Sacred narratives, which recount the traditions and essential elements of faith, are a matter of language, in the same sense as secular narratives, which expostulate matters of nationalist ideology. Language and religion are related; both have “deep structures” and both are widely regarded as constitutive aspects of “primordialism” in the sense that individuals are born into one, the other, or (in most instances) both. In our secular age, however, that relationship is no longer manifest, nor is it consistent. Religion and language may be clearly associated and feed upon each other; language may be a substitute for religion; or religion may trump language. This paper explores the varying relationships between language and religion.

Commonalities

The ethnonation has much in common with religion. Both have a shared ideology, celebrate shared festivals, hold shared symbols, acknowledge shared saints, and are loyal to a community that, in Benedict Anderson words, is often an “imagined” one. In short, the ethnonation is a secularized religion. Just as it is possible to opt out of a religion by conversion, so one may leave an ethnonation by leaving a country and adopting another nationality, although the process is complicated and often painful in either case. Both language and religion are socially acquired, but acquired early
enough to provide the framework for the structuring of family relations, community cohesion, and the collective identity associated with ethnicity. Moreover, they are often expressed in terms of the other. The medium is the message: Every speech community has its particular mindset, which cannot be reproduced exactly in just any language. Similarly, the religious mindset expresses itself differently in different ethnonational surroundings. And just as it possible to have dual nationality, it is possible to be bilingual. Yet language is not nearly so “primordial” as is religion, as attested by the fact that many more people have replaced one language by another than one religion by another, and that diglossia, functional differentiation in language use, and language fusion are far more frequent than simultaneous adherence to more than one religion or religious syncretism. In sum, ethnicity, religion, and language have this in common: all three have influenced the shape and context of the state, and, conversely, have been the object of diverse state policies. Religions, like languages, may be: (1) instrumentalized by nations, republics, and empires (e.g., the anointment of kings in the Holy Roman Empire and the construction of the “Christian Coalition” in the United States); (2) institutionalized and officialized (e.g., via established churches and official languages. Institutionalization” transforms a belief into a religion and a dialect into a language); (3) domesticated and reformed (e.g., the appointment of a “Sanhedrin” and a “consistory” for Judaism in France in the 19th century and attempts to created a “western” Islam in that country today, and the “republicanization” of Catholicism in Western Europe); (4) neutralized; (5) privatized, ignored and otherwise depoliticized; and (6) banned.

**Religion as the Traditional Bedrock of The Nation**
Almost all early national identities developed from religious consciousness. Loyalty to the nation was based on the belief that one’s nation was “God’s chosen people.” Their covenant with God made Jews a “holy people.” The Bible, as interpreted by a the various segments of the Christian world, helped to generate a variety of ethnonational identities. Thus, the homeland of the Russians was “Holy Russia”; Spain, too, thought of itself as a “holy nation,” whose holiness was safeguarded by the monarchy and its mechanism, the Inquisition. The Scots believed that God had marked them for distinction; and Poland was especially favored by God as his “playground” (Davies 1997). During the German wars of liberation, the Protestant Schleiermacher, in a long series of sermons, declared that “Christianity demands attachment to the nation,” and that he who did not feel the unity of the nation always remained “an alien in the house of God.” For Hegel, the state, the most rational reflecting the nation, was “the march of God in the world.”

For Hastings, the paradigmatic religion-based nation is England (Hastings 1997, 35-65). Unlike Benedict Anderson, who has argued that English nationalism developed only with the growth of the British Empire, Hastings bases English national consciousness on Latin Christianity (in contrast to Liah Greenfeld, who bases it on the Protestant Reformation). To the extent that English nationalism—as opposed to dynastic loyalty—existed at all, it became identified with Protestantism only in the 16th century, with Henry VIII.1 Irish ethnicity was, like Welsh and Scottish ethnicity, a Celtic identity; yet it diverged from the latter two because of religion.

The Age of Language and Nationalism

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1 Note that Chaucer’s Canterbury Tales, a foundational work of English literature, are steeped in the culture of Roman Catholicism.
The Peace of Westphalia reconfirmed the intimate connection between religion and
the state by making the former dependent on the latter. The principle of “cujus regio,
ejus religio” did not mean that religion was to be subordinated to the nation—it was
not yet the age of nationalism—but rather that it should coincide with political
frontiers. Ethnic identity was not a factor. With the development of a secular
collective consciousness sparked by the Renaissance, ethnic cultural, i.e., “humanist,”
concerns became more important, and these were articulated in a language
increasingly independent of religion. Religion was no longer needed to certify the
legitimacy of the languages of France, Germany, England, or Italy.

The French Revolution introduced a new idea—that of secular nationalism and
of the “civic” nation, whose membership was defined neither by religion or ethnicity
nor (at first) even language. Gradually, however, the state religion was replaced by the
state language, which was associated with a “civic religion.” The notion of “cujus
regio ejus religio” was replaced by that of “cujus natio ejus lingua” (Lapierre 1988,
99). Most Jacobins (except for Abbé Grégoire) were secularists, and so they
remained. Yet even in France, the religious ingredient never disappeared entirely from
language and culture, as attested by the Christian nature of most public holidays, the
maintenance of Sunday closing laws, the cult of Joan of Arc, and even the cross on
top of the Panthéon, the “cathedral of the Republic”(Safran 2003, 54-59). Moreover,
the synonymity of being French with being Christian is apparent in the labeling of
non-Christian French people in terms of their (non-French) provenance.²

In the 19th century the religious qualification for membership in the national
community was deemphasized, and it was widely accepted that political frontiers

² The French tend often to refer to (non-European and non-Christian) immigrants and their
descendants in terms of their origins. Thus one speaks of French people of Jewish, Maghrebi
or Vietnamese, but never Catholic (or Italian), origins.
should be congruent with ethnonational frontiers. From the wars of liberation against Napoleon to the end of World War I, the primary marker of ethnonational collective identity was language. The efforts of Italy and Germany at national unification and those of Greece, Bulgaria, and Montenegro, and subsequently of Serbia, Poland and other eastern European “successor states” at achieving political independence were based in each case on the recognition of a commonality of language. Modern, 19th century nationalism was largely the invention of intellectuals, most often literary figures like Herder, Fichte, and Palacky, who saw language as the main distinguishing feature of communities. For them, that meant ordinary members of communities, rather than elites who spoke Latin and were engaged in transethnic communication. The emphasis on the common, or “vulgar,” language, therefore, was an aspect of democracy., rather than one motivated by the need to promote industrial modernization by making the workers more efficient (as Gellner would have it).

Before the spread of literacy, only the clergy could interpret religion, and they used a hieratic language (Latin, Greek, Sanskrit, Ge’ez, classical Arabic) to which the people at large did not have access and which therefore could not help them “imagine” a community. According to Benedict Anderson, it is the printed word that contributes to the creation of an “imagined” community. Until fairly recently, the most widely disseminated printed item was the Bible, and its particular linguistic version shaped an ethnolinguistically specific religious identity. Popular literacy, then, grew in step with a religion-tinged ethnonationalism.

Beginning with Martin Luther, the Bible was presented in the idiom of the masses. Inevitably, the appeal of religion had to be widened to include as many adherents as possible, and so the Bible was translated into a variety of “vulgates.”

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3 For Jews it was different, because literacy in Hebrew was relatively widespread, at least among males.
Luther, in translating the Bible into German, wished to ensure that it was no longer the exclusive property of an alien, transmontane Papacy, but of the German people. Luther had direct influence on both the spread of Protestantism and the development of the German language (Kohn 1951, 143) but not—at least not yet, and not directly—on German nationalism, which was to develop several centuries later, and was based not only on language but on race as well.4

The Religious Element in Ethnonational Language Construction

Before the Reformation: religion was the essential matrix of ascriptive community identity, and its leadership was confined to an elite speaking Latin. As the role of religion in the struggles of national self-determination declined, greater importance was assigned to the vernacular language. Although that language traced its origins not to the Church but to the folk, it derived its legitimacy often enough from sacred texts.

English nationalism is essentially Protestant nationalism, just as eastern Slavic nationalism are Eastern Orthodox and Zionism is based on Judaism. The Canterbury Tales, Slavic epic poems, and medieval Hebrew poetry during the Spanish “golden age”—all these had religious motifs, and although not consciously promoting nationalism (as we understand the term), they contributed to the spread of language, which was a major instrument for promoting ethnonational consciousness.

The combination of proto-Reformation and proto-nationalism is manifested in the person of Jan Hus (ca. 1369-1415), who was in many respects a precursor of Martin Luther. A priest of peasant origin, he preached in the Czech language, translated some of Wyclif’s writings into Czech, articulated Czech national

4 There continued to be vestiges of the religion-language nexus in Germany: while the use of German in texts used in schools and universities was becoming widespread in Protestant regions, “Latin still remained dominant in the universities and secondary schools in Catholic regions” (Kohn, 348).
aspirations (against those of the German elements), and fought against the abuses of
the Catholic Church. He did not advocate the creation of an independent Czech
state—it was too early for such an agenda—but he did stress national consciousness
as independent of loyalty to the monarch, and he believed in a special mission granted
to a linguistic community (see Agnew 1992). His folk-based proto-nationalism
contrasted sharply with the collective identity of the upper class in Bohemia and
Moravia, which was defined in terms of a territorially and politically based
Landespatriotismus and it expressed itself in German. Ethnic identity “survived
among the Czech-speaking lower and lower-middle classes; and it was the spoken
idiom of those classes that Palacky and other intellectuals leaned upon to create a
modern Czech language. Only some educated individuals, most of whom belonged to
the Catholic clergy, combined state identity with the ethnic one” (Hroch 1999, 320).
As for the Slovaks, “the first attempt to create a Slovak literary language was made
by the Catholic clergy in the 1780s, at the very same time that the Hungarian Estates
protested against the decision to introduce German as the language of administration
throughout the Habsburg Empire.” The Serbian and Bulgarian languages both
emerged from Church Slavonic, and were therefore closely tied to Orthodoxy (Ibid.,
321, 324, 326).

In the Eastern Slavic world, religion and language have been intimately
connected. Cyril and Methodius, in bringing Christianity to the Slavic world, brought
to it also the first Slavic alphabet. Several eastern Slavic nations claim that Cyril
invented the alphabet for their languages.

Ukrainians claim that the ‘proto-Ukrainian (southern Rus’) group of dialects”
were already well-developed even before Cyril and Methodius codified their
alphabet in 863 AD, functioning alongside and then gradually penetrating Church
Slavonic to create early medieval Ukrainian-Belarusian . . . In the Belarusian case, however, language alone is likely to remain a relatively weak prop for national identity, for as long as so many Belarusian’s continue to regard their own language as lacking in prestige and, as a ‘peasant tongue,’ incapable of serving as a means of access to the modern world. In Ukraine, the use of Ukrainian is on the increase, but …[as] only just half of all ethnic Ukrainians are Ukrainian-speaking, language cannot be the only marker of national identity” (Wilson 1997, 193-194).

The Belarusians and Ukrainians claim that there was, respectively, a Belarusian and Ukrainian language that is older than Russian, and that these languages were the true proto-Slavic languages. (A similar claim is made by Bulgarian for their language.) There is a counter-claim by Russians, namely, that Belarusian and Ukrainian were languages invented by 19th century Belarusian and Ukrainian philologists, but that they are basically corrupt versions of Russian (corrupted via Polish). But these manifestations of linguistic one-upmanship are relatively recent. Before the secular 20th century, it was easier to incorporate Ukrainians, who shared the Orthodox Christian religion with Russians, into the Russian national fold than it was to incorporate Armenians, Poles, and, above all, Jews (Hastings 1997, 120).

The Croatian-Serbian linguistic distinction is essentially a reflection of the distinction between the Catholics and Eastern Orthodox. “The first attempt to create a Slovak literary language was made by the Catholic clergy in the 1870s”—in part in order to distinguish themselves from the Lutherans, who retained Czech as their literary language (Hroch 1999, 321). In Bulgaria, the clergy was instrumental in

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5 I recall the remark by a Ukrainian scholar a few years ago (at a conference in Berlin) that “according to the Russians, Ukrainian is really a Polonized Russian, whereas in reality, Russian is a Bulgarianized Ukrainian.”
substituting the Bulgarian language for Greek in the churches and schools. In Ireland, “Catholicism, the land, and language were prominent in the nationalist struggle” and in the effort to differentiate Ireland from England, “[n]ationalists fired by the desire for economic as well as cultural independence from Britain overemphasized Catholicism, the land, and Gaelic culture as defining elements of Irish identity” (Williams 1999, 269-270). It is well known that the Catholic clergy in Ireland was instrumental in creating an Irish literary language.

In sum, the vast majority of the aspirations for statehood in the 19th century were in terms of ethnic nationalism based on language; and linguistic claims were often based on a legitimating connection with religion. Thus, Bulgarian, Macedonian, and Serbian all “advanced mutually excluding claims to the unbroken continuity of their national languages with Old Church Slavonic . . . [which] served the Slavic and East Romanesque world of Orthodox Christianity for one millennium” (Kamuela 2004).

Proselytizing Religion and the Use of Ethnic Languages

Some scholars distinguish between “ethnic” religions (e.g., Reiterer (1998, 127) or “primordial religions of locality and lineage,” such as Judaism, Armenian Apostolic Christianity, and Sikhism. 111] and “founder” religions, such as Buddhism and Western Christianity. The appeal of the former, a “small religion” (Kleinreligion) or sect, seldom goes beyond a restricted community, and the language associated with it continues to be heavily informed by references to an ethnoreligious culture, from which it cannot easily escape. Conversely, the appeal of such a religion is to some extent dependent upon its adherents’ exposure to that language and culture. Whereas Western Christianity was intended to be above national differences, in the East,
Christian church organizations developed in harmony with the different national groupings (Kohn, 1951, 81).

A founder religion, too, may have arisen out of a “tribal” context and been informed by a specific ethnic experience, but it has a universal target. As such, it spreads its message in several languages. Originally this message was spiritual, but the global appeal of its languages has freed them from their ethnic bounds and opened them up to the inroads of a variety of cultural influences as well as of secularism. Christian millennialism is similar to secular pan-movements, such as Communism, Pan-Slavism, Teutonism“(incorporating the belief that “am deutschen Wesen soll die Welt genesen”), Jacobin popular democracy, and notions regarding “the White Man’s Burden” and “Making the World Safe for Democracy.” But like Christian millennialism, it is not dependent upon a specific language (Safran 1992).

Islam appears to combine the characteristics of both an ethnic and a universal faith. It is a founder religion and has world-wide target, but it is closely associated with the Arab nation (umma al ‘arabiya), which embodies the bulk of the dar-al-Islam. Although Islam is practiced by non-Arabs, the Koran is read by many of the faithful in Arabic, and the interpretations by imams and mullahs are never far from the Arabic context. Classical Arabic is the language of Islam, because it is the language of the Koran, and because the Koran has been invoked in the revival of Arab nationalism. Ordinary Iranian, Turkish, and Indonesian Muslims don’t speak Arabic, but their clergy are familiar with it.

Even the appeal of Christianity to the popular masses has depended upon a particular national (and often ethnolinguistic) presentation. Joan of Arc was a religious “liberator,” but she spoke French and is regarded as a national (and nation-building) heroine. The Danubian St. Stephen, the Bohemian Jan Hus, the Serbian...
King Lazar spoke languages other than Latin or Greek and are regarded not merely as religious personages but as crucial figures in the formation of ethnonational identities. Persian Shiism is different from Ottoman Sunniism, and Slavic Orthodoxy is different from Greek Orthodoxy in its language, its style of praying and singing, the saints to which it appeals, and the pagan local tradition which it has incorporated into its Christian rites.

Missionaries in the Third World, in their effort to spread the universal faith to heathen tribes to whom it was alien, had to make use of the appropriate ethnotribal idiom, and in so doing helped to “create” languages by coining words, writing grammars and dictionaries, and establishing standards (Hastings 151-152), thereby sowing the seeds for later political claims based on ethnonational cultures. The role of Christian missions was particularly important in the graphization and lexication of African languages. For example, the Thonga (or Tsonga) language spoken in Southeast Africa was “revived” and turned into a written language by missionaries. The goal of these missionaries, who used that language in churches and schools, was obviously conversion to Christianity, but the consequence was the transformation of a tribe into a Thonga 

**Putting “Primordialism” Aside**

“Modernity” has been associated with a number of characteristics in which ascriptive relations have a drastically reduced importance. Among these are secularism, the replacement of Gesellschaft by Gemeinschaft as modes of social relations, the movement of large populations from one country to another, and the gradual eclipse of “ethnic” nations by “civic” nations, where criteria other than language and religion are important in defining membership in the political community.
The Deutschian functionalist approach to the nation, which defines it in terms of communications within a given polity (Deutsch 1966), pays little if any attention to the ethnic dimension. Deutsch rebelled against the fragmentation of the population in the Austro-Hungarian Empire based on religious and linguistic differences, and more or less followed the Marxists in considering these as “irrational” markers. To them, language is more an artifact than a cultural determinant; it is one of the mechanisms used by the elite for the construction of a nation; but the nation, once constructed, uses its political power and its institutions to reshape the language.

To many constructivists and instrumentalists, the use of this or that language is circumstantial and is much less important in shaping identity (including ethnic identity) than rational (i.e., in most instances economic payoff) considerations. To the extent that a language like English is a functional and supraethnic medium of global communication, its cultural content (e.g., Shakespeare, the King James Bible, poetry, etc.) no longer matters. In any case, non-linguistic bases of national identity are more objective and more rational, such as territory, sovereignty, and political values. Territory, however, is porous and open to all comers; sovereignty has been weakened by globalization; and political values have become increasingly transnational. What is left of the “nation-state,” then, is landscape, which is open to tourists, and is being transformed by commerce and exploitation. Malls and supermarket are the same all over.

In recent years, the factor of language has been deemphasized by many students of ethnicity and nationalism for a number of reasons: the existence of transethnic languages; the fact of multilingualism within nations; the incommensurability of language and ethnonational identity; and the continued use of the languages of the former colonial power in newly independent states, especially in
the Third World, in their efforts at nation-building.” The lack of attention to language, finally, may also be attributed to the monolingualism of many social scientists.6

The Language-Religion Nexus Today

Nevertheless, religion and language are still the two most important building stones of ethnonational identity. Their primacy has varied, and the relationship between the two has been uneven and often complex and convoluted. Originally, i.e., centuries before the French Revolution, religion was the main focus of identification insofar as it defined membership in an ascriptive community. In Europe, religion, i.e., Christianity, was universal: As Hans Kohn put it,

   Its dominance left no room for any decisive influence of nationalism. Practically all learning and writing were in the hands of the clerics who used one common language, Latin. People looked upon everything not from the point of view of their ‘nationality’ or ‘race,’ but from the point of view of religion. Mankind was divided not into Germans and French and Slavs and Italians, but into Christians and Infidels, and within Christianity into faithful sons of the Church and heretics (Kohn 1951, 79).

   Religion had the upper hand until the Renaissance, and language from then on until the present. Both religion and language continue to intersect with nationalism, and which each other. This applies to the Lithuanians’ fight against the Soviet Union; the Iranians’ particular approach to Islam; the conflict between the north and south in Sudan; and the efforts of the Bosnians in the former Yugoslavia, the Pomaks of Bulgaria, the Muslims of Kashmir, and the Sikhs of India to maintain their

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6 Note the scant, if any, attention paid to languages in the writings of Paul Brass, Walker Connor, and Ted Gurr.
ethnonational identities. Even today, it is difficult, if not impossible, to separate Greek, Hindu, Israeli, Pakistani, Polish, and Sikh national identities from their respective religious and linguistic moorings.

Originally it was religion that was at the root of collective identity and that provided the foundation of the state. In the 19th century, religion was eclipsed by cultural populism (e.g., that of Herder) and linguistic exclusivism (e.g., that of Fichte). The former was not, however, necessarily expressed in state-building nationalism, and the latter was tinged with racism. Today, traditional religion, which worships one or more deities, has been replaced in many states by civic religion, which worships the sovereign people, if not the state. Language, however, remains important in all states, but not necessarily in the same way.

The relationships between religion and language have varied with time and place, and the causal direction between the two has been complex. The following combinations can be observed: language as substitute for religion; religion as substitute for language; and no relationship at all; but it is difficult to find the absence of both in ethnopolitical mobilization or nation-building. Obviously, the relationship to religion is weakest in transethnic languages such as English, French, and Spanish, and strongest in languages tied more closely to an ethnic community. Conversely, the religious element may sometimes be so dominant in a given language that it cannot easily “desacralize” itself. For example, “the secular liberal or secular socialist ideas in Urdu literature never reached the same level or acquired the same influence as in Bengali literature” and “Urdu continues to be a major vehicle of revivalist and traditional Islamic thought.” (Jawed 1999, 31). A similar situation applied to Yiddish. The Yiddish used by secular Eastern European Jews, many of whom were socialist and anti-Zionist in addition to anti-religious, was so strongly suffused by religious and
Hebrew elements that these could not be completely “separated out” of the language. In Israel, Hebrew is the “national” language, and most of its speakers are Jews, the majority of whom are secular. However, it is also increasingly the language of the country’s Arab Muslim minority; conversely, Israel’s most religious Jews, the members of Jerusalem’s *Neturei Karta*, use Yiddish on a daily basis, reserving Hebrew for purely sacred purposes (Safran 2005).

In the survival of Muslim identity in India religion played an important role, and “Persian, and to a lesser extent Arabic, were the literary and religious languages of Muslim India” (Jawed 1999, 30). When Pakistan became independent in 1947, regional Indian languages, specifically Urdu and Bengali, became dominant. Gradually, it was language rather than religion that differentiated the Bengali from the Urdu speakers; and it was that differentiation that finally led to the establishment of an independent Bangladesh, despite the fact that the Bengali language had also served as a medium of Hindu rather than Muslim renaissance. The confusion of language and religion is seen also in the case of Urdu, a language developed from Punjabi. Urdu is spoken by Muslims, whereas Punjabi is spoken mostly by Sikhs, whose religion developed from Hindi (Ibid., 31-32).

Which language—classical or vernacular—is to be used? In their standardization attempts, some secular and clerical intellectuals tried to look to an idealized “classical” period as the standard to follow—as reflected in the re-Latinization efforts in 18th century France and the resuscitation of the Hebrew language in the 19th century—but with mixed results, since ultimately the classical language had to yield to the street. This question was relevant for the Jews, the Armenians, and the Greeks in their efforts at ethnonational mobilization. The classical languages of these ethnonations were historical, respectable, and unifying in the sense
that they were acknowledged by the varied sub communities of which these
ethnonations were composed; but they were also hieratic and used by narrow elites,
while the respective vernaculars were modern, secular, and popular, needing only
standardization and institutionalization to establish their primacy. Thus, religion has
been the mother of national languages, but, like children everywhere, they have
outgrown her.

Originally, it was the clergy that was the guardian of classical, i.e., Church,
Armenian (grabar). But most Armenians did not understand it; they spoke the
languages of their host societies or one of several Armenians vernaculars. During the
process of standardization of these vernaculars in the 18th and 19th centuries, the
classical language of the Church was not completely abandoned. The first Armenian
periodical (published in India) used a mixture of classical Armenian and the Indo-
Armenian dialect. This journal and other writings were all written in the “sacred”
Armenian alphabet” (Panossian 2006, 133). (This is comparable to the revival of
Hebrew in 19th century Europe, in which classical Hebrew served as a core to which
Germanic and other European borrowings were added.)

The relationship between language and religion is especially complex in
Ethiopia as well as atypical—because it constituted a “reversed” process: Ge’ez, a
South Semitic language, was originally the language of the peasantry, but became a
sacred language when it was used by the clergy of the Ethiopian Church, the Ethiopian
Catholic Church, and Beta Israel for the writing and/or translation of sacred literature
and for education. It later became an “elite” language when it was used by the
imperial court. Although it was gradually replaced as a spoken language by Amharic,
Ge’ez remained the official written language until the 19th century. Amharic, which
has been modernized, is now the main language of government and education and has come to serve as the major medium of expression of Ethiopian national identity.

The “coupling” of religion and language can be clearly seen in the case of the Sikhs. Originally, the Punjabi language was used by all inhabitants of the Punjab, including Hindus and Muslims. In the 16th century, Guru Nanak engaged in “pious preaching in the local vernacular” and his successors compiled a book of sacred scriptures in it, thus serving at once to institutionalize the Punjabi language and the Sikh faith (Tatla 1999, 17-18). In the 19th century, under the divide et impera tradition of British imperial rule, the religion-and-language tandem was reflected in the establishment of separate schools for the different communities: Sanskrit and Hindi for Hindus, Urdu for Muslims, and Punjabi exclusively for Sikhs. Punjabi, the language of Sikh sacred literature, “has gradually become a fundamental part of Sikh identity” (Ibid., 69).

In order to use language as an instrument of modern nation-building, the elites of most ethnonational communities replaced the hieratic, classical language by a language based in the folk and understood by it (see Jusdanis, 120f). Thus classical Greek was replaced by demotic Greek, which was no longer tied to religion; Church Slavonic by the various eastern Slavic idioms; Hebrew by Yiddish; and so on. Although language became an essentially secular medium, an important marker of ethnonational identity, and, at least in principle, an exclusive criterion of membership in the civic nation, it was never completely detached from religion in a number of modern nations. Because the modern vernaculars in Armenia, Greece, India, Poland, and Turkey are (and in the case of Israel, have become) folk languages, they are impregnated with concepts, references, and turns of phrase that hark back to a cultural heritage that is to a large extent religious. To be sure, the abandonment of Arabic
script by Kemal Ataturk was associated with a move to laïcité; yet the religious/kinship element was never completely eliminated. As one scholar has pointed out, the ostensibly secular vocabulary of Kemal’s nationalism, in references to “our Turkish and Islamic nation (united by blood, race, and religion) was infused with Islamic language” (Zürcher 1999).

The view of Elie Kedourie that nationalism is a strictly secular ideology (A.D. Smith 2001, 21) applies fully neither to the past nor the present. In Hindutva ideology today, in Armenian and Sikh nationalism, in Zionism, and in the nationalisms of Ireland, Pakistan, Poland, and Russia, religion plays an important role, and many ethnosymbols are religious in nature and/or inspiration.

The Greek nation has been ethnically, religiously, and linguistically defined—but this was in contradiction with the universalistic tendencies of the Greek Orthodox religion (Triandafyllidou 2005, 182). This, plus kinship, plus classical Greek culture and language, distinguished Greeks both from the non-Christian peoples of the Ottoman Empire and from Southern Slav Christians. But the insistence (by the use of the acronym FYROM) on the belief that Macedonia, although Slavic speaking, is really part of Greece, makes language and religion less important than a (presumed) common history and kinship. For Greeks, both their religion and their language are important elements of their ethnonational self-image—the Orthodox religion, because it is considered spiritually superior to the Roman Catholic variant, and the Greek language, because it reflects a continuity with classical Greek civilization (Jusdanis, 108-109).

Until the 18th century, Romanians used the Cyrillic alphabet in Church writings; and these writings are still seen on icons prominently displayed in Romanian museums. But with the growth of ethnonationalism thereafter, the Latin script began
to be used to by Romanians to differentiate themselves from the neighboring Slavs and to emphasize the “Latinate” cultural heritage of their country.

Although the Latvians have been historically divided from their Russian neighbors by religion, the religious factor does not seem to play a significant role in the revival of either Latvian nationalism after the collapse of the Soviet Union or in the diaspora nationalism of its Russian population. This fact is doubtlessly due to two generations of systematic secular indoctrination.

The situation is quite different in the former Yugoslavia, whose competing ethnonational identities were based on a combination of religion and language. In the nationalism of Tito’s Yugoslavia, neither language nor religion played a role in defining ethno-federal consciousness: both Serbs and Croats spoke the “Yugoslav language” (yugoslavenski yezik). But under Milosevic, the religious foundations of Serbian ethnonational identity were emphasized and instrumentalized for political-territorial reasons, and language only incidentally. Croatians, for their part, demarcated their nation in religious terms, to some extent in reaction to the Serbian redefinition of the foundation of their ethnonational identity. In any case, the label “Serbo-Croatian” was gradually replaced, respectively, by references to the “Croatian” and “Serbian” languages. In Bosnia, too, language has now become a major identifier in addition to religion, a development reflected in the appearance of a new “Dictionary of the Bosnian Language.”

Neither Slovaks nor Magyars consider religious differences to be important or think that religious belief should play a role in one’s membership in a nation. Yet among Slovaks in Hungary and Magyars in Romania, religion is only slightly less important than language as a criterion of belonging to an ethnonational group, even after more than 40 years of antireligious socialization (Csepeli et al. 2000, 35, 65-66).
More surprising, however, is the fact that for a majority of both Magyars and Romanians in Transylvania the *liturgical* language is still an important element of national identity (Ibid., 110). Sometimes the linguistic and religious elements of an ethnic identity may be compartmentalized: thus the “Saxons” in Brasov (Transylvania) speak Romanian at home, but the Lutheran church services they attend are in German. Often, the importance attached to language and religion is more symbolic than real. Most Magyars in Romania know the Romanian language, but for reasons of self-respect they insist on having bilingual signs in places where they are a clear majority (Ibid., 49).

For Poles, religion, not language, has been the most important element of Polish nationhood from the very beginning. To be Polish is to be Catholic (“*Polski to jest Katolik*”). Polish national mythology invoked the notion of Poland as the bulwark of Christendom against the Turks, then as the bulwark of Catholic Europe against the Orthodox Russians, and (in the battle against the Swedes in the 17th century) against the Protestants, and later, of Western civilization against Bolshevism (Davies, 145-147). In the image of an arch-Catholic Poland language did not seem to play a major role, because the clerical language was Latin. It was clear that the Jews did not fully form part of the Polish nation because they were not Catholic and thus could not make a contribution to a “usable past. “Even for Adam Mickiewicz, widely regarded as one of the most important Polish literary figures, what counted most in defining Polish identity was the superiority of their race (against that of Russia) and their faith—that is, their election by God to spread the Christian message” (Mickiewicz 1925). This notion of collective identity was to embrace the Lithuanians, who spoke a language other than Polish. Obviously, Jews had no place in this scheme of things for reasons of religion. Jews, however, were excluded from “authentic” membership in the Polish
nation for reasons of language as well, since the vast majority of those who practiced Judaism spoke Yiddish rather than Polish on a daily basis. Julian Tuwim, one of the most prominent Polish poets during the interwar period, was a Jew, and the Jews who survived the Holocaust and remained in Poland were overwhelmingly Polish speakers as well as secular; but the memory of their distinct culture and language was so strong that it inspired the antisemitism of the postwar era.

Knowing the language is a crucial qualification for membership in the nation; but even that may not be sufficient, if the person in question lacks the proper religious credentials. In stressing the primacy of language in national identity, Treitschke does not speak of religion so much as race; thus, speaking the German language does not qualify Jews (with a handful of exceptions) to be considered Germans, because, as “Orientals” and “nations of wanderers,” language has no inward meaning for Jews (Treitschke 1916). A somewhat analogous view is found in Andre Gide’s remark that Jews could only master the mechanics but not the “soul” of the French language (Weinberg 1995).

To be sure, this is a minority position; by the end of the Third Republic, language had replaced religion in France. According to Weber (1976), Le Bras and Todd (1981), and Braudel (1886), “France is the French language”—because France is no longer the “eldest daughter of the Church.” Still, there was plenty of Catholicism left within the French national culture, and even today, adherents of religions other than Christian, regardless of their mastery of the French language, are often not regarded as genuine members of the French national community.

In the United States, too, language is more important than religion, especially since there is no “founder” religion. Yet in the eyes of many, American nationalism rests on Christian foundations. As in France, many American national holidays are
Christian; athletic events in state universities are often preceded by Christian prayer; and the U.S. Air Force Academy openly engages in Christian proselytizing.

In short, while modern Western nationalism in all cases (except Ireland) is tied to language, the language is in many cases the medium for the literary expression of the Christian elements of the national culture.

Absolute monarchs once determined the religion of their realms, and, in principle, their language. But in reality they saw no need to impose a common language on their subjects; unlike religion, the language spoken by the masses was of little concern to the rulers of the Holy Roman, Russian, and Ottoman empires because they did not need to communicate with the masses. It is well known that Frederick the Great of Prussia and the various czars of 19th century Russia spoke French at court. In France, the ordinance of Villiers-Cotterêts in 1539 required all judicial acts be in French; but a common language not imposed until the 1880s. This practical indifference left a number of ethnic subcommunities to manage their own affairs and run their own schools and was thus conducive to the perpetuation of their own languages.

The fact that some languages were preserved or promoted by religious figures has sometimes led to the charge that they embodied obscurantism and reaction. In the words of one Jacobin, “Federalism and superstition speak low Breton; emigration and hate for the Revolution speak German; the counter-revolution speaks Italian and fanaticism speaks Basque” (Bertrand Barrère de Vieuzac, 1794, cited in Certeau et al., 1975). A modern analogy has been the association of the languages of the “Old Country” with backwardness by immigrants to the New World.

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7 Those who did not belong to the official religion had to pay special taxes and/or suffer special disabilities (Jusdanis 2001, 113).
This charge turned out to be unfair. In their work in using language to reach the common people to preach the word of God to them, the clerics were unwitting agents of nationalism. This clearly applies to the role of the clergy in promoting the national language in east-central Europe; and a similar role performed by the clergy in spreading the French language—the very clergy that was being denounced by Abbé Henri Grégoire for spreading obscurantism and hindering republican development; by the Catholic monks in the preservation and promotion of Irish Gaelic, and by the rabbis in keeping the Hebrew language alive in the diaspora.

**Language and Religion Among Minority and Diaspora Ethnies**

Under the incessant pressure of secularization, religious practices among adherents of all religions in modern societies become weaker, and identities are increasingly based on socioeconomic status and the political-territorial context. Outside the homeland territory, a common language and religion are the major markers of ethnonational identity, as in the case of diaspora Armenians, Chinese, Greeks, Indians, Jews, Sikhs, and Tibetans.

In the United States, the language of the immigrant ethnics was maintained for several generations in church sermons. For example, the parish schools of the Polish national church in the United States have had a dual purpose: to impart religious instruction and to teach the Polish language (Polish Genealogical Society 1958). The use of ethnic languages in Catholic services is now (theoretically) easier, since mass no longer has to be sung in Latin. The victory of the hostland language, however, has been so decisive that sermons are increasingly given in English, which has become the preferred, if not the only, language of these ethnic groups. Irish, Italian, Polish,

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8 Polish was first used in a mass in St. Stanislaus Cathedral in Scranton, PA in 1900.
and Portuguese Catholics and other members of “white ethnic” diasporas in the United States may continue to adhere to their old religion in a formal sense, but in practice they are increasingly identified in a “hyphenated” fashion. Furthermore, attendance at church, once a major gathering place of ethnic minorities, has decreased.

Gradually, memory and/or folkways become substitutes for both religion and language as major foci of ethnic identification. The memory of the genocide of 1915 has played a role as a substitute identitarian mechanism for Armenians in the diaspora, just as has the Holocaust among Jews and the Amritsar massacres of 1919 and 1984 among Sikhs. But memory fades (especially in “settler” countries marked by ahistorical cultures), and ethnically specific folkways become syncretic, thin out, and fuse with others. Many diaspora communities maintain relief, athletic, youth-oriented and social organizations, but without a serious effort at teaching the rudiments of their respective languages, the maintenance of ethnic identity is called into question. The most complete way to tell the ethnic narrative is in the homeland language, of course. But since that language is no longer well known in the diaspora, the telling of the narrative in the hostland language may be more effective—but effective for what? In sum, with the disappearance of ethnic language use among white ethnic Catholics in the diaspora, ethnic identity becomes a hollow shell.

In the diaspora, Armenian, Jewish, Sikh, and Muslims religious rites conducted in the hostland idiom rather than the ethnic one are considered by many to be inauthentic, because they constitute a departure from the religious norm. There is no doubt that it would have been difficult for Sephardic Jews in Ottoman Empire to keep their Judaism if they had not been speaking Ladino rather than Turkish, and for Ashkenazi Jews in Eastern Europe to perpetuate their Judaism if they had not used
Yiddish in their religious instruction and their daily speech. Classical Reform Judaism in the United States, which has largely dispensed with Hebrew, comes close to evolving into Ethical Culture if not some form of Unitarianism, and Armenian Apostolic church services conducted in English become increasingly less differentiated from standard American Catholicism, as has happened in the churches of the Irish-Americans, Polish-Americans, and Italian-Americans. It may be true that a switch to the language of the host country, while tending to facilitate conversion to the dominant religion, does not guarantee it. Not all Indians settled in England were successfully subjected to Anglican missionary activities; and even among those who were, proselytization was incomplete. Thus, many Christian converts “continued to avoid animal products”, stayed in communication with their Indian friends, and “their cultural attitudes based on original Indian habits of mind and upbringing did not dissolve away in England” (Lahiri 2000, 162-163). Nevertheless, without the maintenance of language and/or religion, the dissolution of the ethnic culture is only a matter of time.

In the case of the Tibetan diaspora, the preservation of the language is particularly important, because the continuing Sinification of both the politics and the culture and language of Tibet imposes a special responsibility on the Tibetans in India and other democratic hostlands. As Tenzin Wangmo states (2005), “[a] calculated destruction of the Tibetan people is under way. The indigenous people of Tibet might one day cease to exist because the Tibetan language is being submerged under the Chinese language. . . At the same time, those . . . living in diaspora are naturally being distanced from their culture. . . Tibetan cities like Lhasa and Shigatse are now being transformed into Chinese cities on the model of Beijing.” It is not enough to maintain Tibetan temples in diaspora in India, the United States, and elsewhere in order to
continue Tibetan identity, especially among the younger generation, many of whom no longer practice Tibetan Buddhism and are no longer fluent in the Tibetan language (Dowman 1997). In order to reverse this trend, a great deal of attention is devoted to the perpetuation of the Tibetan language in the diaspora. Thus the Tibetan Government-in-Exile in Dharamsala, India has been trying to teach the Tibetan language by means of 85 schools it maintains in India, Nepal, and Bhutan that cater to over 27,000 children. Similar efforts, which combine the teaching of Buddhism and Tibetan language, are being made in the United States (especially in New York and Minnesota), but there it is more difficult due to the strong secular pressures and the enticements of modernity (Matsuu 1999).

In the Armenian diaspora, neither religion nor language is an adequate focus of ethnic identification, even for those Armenians who are not completely secularized. This is particularly the case in North America and Western Europe, the dominant religion is “some tolerant form of Christianity that does not differ dramatically from the Armenian Apostolic religion, so that the gradual sliding into some other form of Christianity is not seen as a crossing of a major theological divide” (Tölölyan 1988, 58). The crossing has been made even easier by the fact that the teaching of the Armenian language has not been adequately pursued and that English has been routinely used in Church sermons (Ibid., 62).

This has also been true of many “white ethnic” communities in the diaspora, notably the Roman Catholic ones. Irish, Italian, Polish, and Portuguese diasporans are predominantly Catholic; what distinguished their respective Catholicism’s from each other was language—specifically, Church sermons delivered in the Polish, Italian, or Portuguese language. But with the waning use of these languages, the religious distinction has waned as well. The retrieval and teaching of the ethnic language
therefore becomes an important goal. In the case of Jews, Sikhs, and Muslims, religious rites conducted in the hostland language rather than the ethnic one are not considered by many to be “authentic,” because they constitute a departure from the religious norm.

For Armenian, Jewish, and Sikh ethnonational identity, both religion and language are crucial; although fewer and fewer practice the religion in the homeland (where territorial-political identity often substitutes for religion), and fewer and fewer learn the language in diaspora, they are of continuing symbolic importance. This is reflected in the continuing use of religious ethnosymbols and vestigial ethnoreligious vocabulary.

While the common language of the Jews has been, by turns, Aramaic, Greek, Judeo-Arabic, Yiddish, Ladino, and English, Hebrew remained the major sacred and liturgical language. Although interpretations and even selected prayers have been written in the aforementioned vernaculars, some familiarity with Hebrew has been considered a sine qua non for believers and is studied, albeit sometimes to a minimal extent, by almost all Jews who claim to be Jewish, for its total absence would undermine the spiritual as well as the ethnic content of Judaism and its ultimately its appeal.

The vestigial place of religion is particularly important in Jewish diaspora languages. Thus the Yiddish-speaking secularists consciously eschewed religion, but the vocabulary remained full of classical Hebrew terms and religious allusions, except in the Soviet Union, where such terms were systematically eliminated and “cleansed.”

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9 The “Polish National Church was founded, not in Poland, but in the USA, in 1897, when there was no Polish state.
10 In Israel, the identity of many secular Israelis is based not on religion but on the Hebrew language and the territory in which it is the major medium of communication. Hebrew is spoken as well by non-Jews growing up in the country. Conversely, an increasing number of American Jews are sincerely believing people who know little or no Hebrew.
of its religious and Zionist content (inter alia, by the phoneticization of its Hebrew lexical stock) so that Yiddish ended up as merely one of several ethnonational languages in which stories about machine tractor stations or Soviet heroism were written. Similarly, diaspora Armenian “secular nationalism” could not rid itself entirely of religious points of reference, if it wished to perpetuate that language as an ethnic marker (Panossian, 194-200). In short, for maintaining ethnic identity in diaspora, language as a functional medium alone does not suffice, for it cannot hold out forever against the institutional superiority of the dominant language of the host country, as has been shown in the case of the Armenian, Greek, Irish, Italian, Jewish, Polish and other white ethnic minorities. This explains why among diaspora communities in many hostlands, the curriculum of many minority “parochial” schools includes both the ethnic religion and the ethnic language. The number of such schools is steadily increasing, in direct proportion of as the growing preoccupation with ethnic identity.

**Conclusion**

The boundary that marks the terms in which an ethnic group expresses itself and makes political demands may be language or religion. The ethnic and religious boundaries may be congruent or different, but they may not have the same consequence for nation-building. Religion does not seem to be a factor where the surrounding population is of the same religion. The Basques and Catalans are nations because of their language; the Corsicans, in order to prove themselves to be a nation, have been emphasizing the importance of their language, albeit with limited success. The Occitans have been attaching increasing importance to preserving their language, but have stopped short of claiming to be a nation.
In the case of religion, it usually that of the “core” ethnie that becomes the norm, and it becomes institutionalized. In the case of language, too, it is usually that of the dominant ethnie. A problem arises if there is more than one core religious or ethnic group, and if at least two are equally powerful, e.g., Catholics and Lutherans in Germany or Anglos and Québécois in Canada. In the case of newly independent countries in the Third World, the dominant language is that of the elite of the former colonial power.

If a religion is not equally institutionalized, it is considered to be a mere sect, if not a superstition. If a language is not sufficiently institutionalized (with respect to its use in public education or the media), it is often considered old-fashioned, or a “quaint” dialect. Where there is contact and synthesis, it tends to be unidirectional. The Breton language has many French words, but not vice versa; Lappish has many Swedish and Norwegian words, but not the other way around (Reiterer 1999, 53). Similarly, minority religions tend to adopt elements of the majority religion. In short, minority culture, language, religion are often dismissed as derivative.

Religion has nowhere been fully depoliticized, even in countries officially committed to laïcité. It may have “migrated from the public arena to the sphere of private conscience” (Couture et al. 1996, 614); but the majority religion is still conspicuously located in the public sphere, and informs the national culture in many respects. Both language and religion are the cultural materials used to shape a national identity. Still, according to Kymlicka (1995, 111), there is no analogy between language and religion: All states have an official language (in the sense of its monopoly in use in the civil service, the army, and education), but today, many states do not have an established church. Nevertheless, members of minority religions are often not regarded as authentic members of the nation, even in settler states such as
Australia, France, and the United States, even though they may be fully at home in their national languages.
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