THE HERMENEUTICS OF CITIZENSHIP AS A PEACEBUILDING PROCESS:
A MULTIPERSPECTIVAL APPROACH TO JUSTICE

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ABSTRACT

The hermeneutics of citizenship entails not only recognition of religion as a potential resource for reinterpreting sacred warrants for violent engagement or as a motivating force propelling certain individuals to act toward attaining the nonviolent transformation of conflicts and post-conflict healing. But also this approach stresses the importance of incorporating post-colonial theoretical tools and subaltern voices to the analysis and practice of religious peacebuilding. Broadening the conversation in such a way denaturalizes seemingly axiomatic formulations of how conceptions of nationhood relate to religious or ethnic identifications and narratives and to structures of domination and control. This paper firstly seeks to supplement and offer a theoretical challenge to the religion and peace literature. Secondly, the paper argues that reimagining the relation between religion and nation may provide a mode for conceptualizing peacebuilding. Subsequently, it advances an integrative and multiperspectival approach to questions of peace and justice.

Keywords: conflict; conflict transformation; ethnoreligious nationalism; peacebuilding; religion.

1. Atalia Omer is an Assistant Professor of Religion, Conflict and Peace Studies at the Kroc Institute for International Peace Studies in the University of Notre Dame. She earned her PhD (November 2008) from the Committee on the Study of Religion at Harvard University. Her research has focused primarily on a systematic study of the dynamics of ethno-national conflicts, political and social theory, the theoretical study of religion and society, and the theoretical study of the interrelation between religion, nationalism, and questions of justice, peace, and conflict. She is currently completing a book manuscript titled “When Peace is Not Enough: How the Israeli Peace Camp Thinks about Religion, Nationalism, and Justice?” She is also a co-editor with Scott Appleby and David Little of the Oxford Handbook on Religion, Conflict, and Peacebuilding (forthcoming with Oxford University Press).
Introduction

This paper argues that contemporary approaches to religious peacebuilding (Appleby 2000; Johnston and Sampson 1995; Coward and Smith 2004; Little 2007a; Lederach and Sampson 2000; Smock 2002; Lederach 1997; Johnston 2003) and their contention that religion is not only relevant to understanding questions of motivation, mobilization and escalation of ethnoreligious national conflict but can also provide resources for peacebuilding need to be expanded to actively reflect on the interrelation between power and conceptions of collective identity. In particular, I highlight the limitations inherent in the venue of Interfaith Dialogue (IFD) and the thesis of the “ambivalence of the sacred” which largely undergirds the IFD framework. The influential thesis of the “ambivalence of the sacred” developed most famously by Scott Appleby and David Little (Appleby 2000; Little and Appleby 2004) contends that because religion can inspire both violent and nonviolent militancy, it can offer constructive modes for engaging in peacebuilding and conflict transformation. This thesis, however, under-theorizes how and why structures of control are linked to certain violent or chauvinistic interpretations of religion or culture (that claim primacy and dominance over alternative interpretations) and why identifying these connections may enable the theorist of religion and conflict to conceptualize the role of religion in peacebuilding in specific contexts.

It is not sufficient to recognize—as Appleby and Little surely do—that religion as a social phenomenon is embedded in but not reduced to certain socio-historical contexts and practices. This insight needs to be supplemented by critical scrutiny of how and why the privileging of particular interpretations of religion vis-à-vis notions of national membership is not inevitable and predetermined and therefore why the relation between “nation” and “religion” may be elastic and changeable. Hence, I suggest the question of how religion relates to the construal of citizenship or membership in the nation-state is a pivotal one for broadening and deepening the role of religion in the transformation of conflicts defined by ethnoreligious narratives. A careful reflection on this question would involve expanding what, in his review of works on the role of religion in peacebuilding, political theorist Daniel Philpott correctly classifies as “theory of praxis” (Philpott 2007).

A methodical multidisciplinary consideration (drawing on political science, cultural theory, and religious studies) of the power dynamics involved in the construal of ethnoreligio-centric conceptions of membership or “group-think” would enable the articulation of a full-fledged theory of religious peacebuilding. The religion and peace field has been largely unaware of insights found in the academic study of religion,
especially questions related to the incoherence of the classical secularization paradigm. Further, cultural theory and subaltern tools of analysis can highlight the problems inherent in national narratives as well as their fluidity and historicity. Subaltern modes of critique, however, also point to creative possibilities for rethinking received and naturalized notions of membership and identity. Finally, the theoretical study of nationalism by political scientists such as Anthony Smith of the London School of Economics and Government promotes a nuanced account of the relation between modern nationalisms and religion (Smith 2003)—one that does not dismiss religion as irrelevant (Breuilly 1993 [1982]), of diminishing significance (Marx 2003), or as a counter “oppositional” worldview (Juergensmeyer 2003; 2008). A clarification of the connection or “elective affinity” between religion and nation is indeed indispensable to conceptualizing a framework for religious peacebuilding. This multidisciplinary conceptual framework would not only theorize about the practice and patterns of religious peacebuilding but would also analyze the elastic role of religion in conflict transformation in relation to systems of power and domination.

Notably, I develop an alternative mode of thinking about the role of religion in conflict transformation and peacebuilding, especially in zones of national conflicts defined and characterized by ethnoreligious claims and entitlements. I refer to this new mode as *hermeneutics of citizenship*. The *hermeneutics of citizenship* entails not only recognition of religion as a potential resource for reinterpreting sacred warrants for violent engagement or as a motivating force propelling certain individuals to act toward attaining the nonviolent transformation of conflicts and post-conflict healing. But also this approach stresses the importance of incorporating post-colonial theoretical tools to the analysis and practice of religious peacebuilding. Broadening the conversation in such a way denaturalizes seemingly axiomatic formulations of how conceptions of nationhood relate to religious or ethnic identifications and narratives and to structures of domination and control. The process of denaturalizing the underlying connection between religion and nationalism inherent in nationalist narratives may in turn expand the (re)interpretative possibilities available for religious peacebuilding.

**Theoretical Issues**

A related objective of this paper is to expand the scope of the scholarship on religion and peacebuilding by stressing the need to put it in conversation with critical debates in the study of religion—especially those debates which problematize the category of the secular, demonstrate a critical
reflection on the role of power dynamics in the construal of this category and subsequently challenge the efficacy of positing religion and secular in a binary relation and as a mode of social analysis. Hence, on the level of theory, the process of the hermeneutics of citizenship proposed here explicitly counters the presumption of secularity as governmental neutrality. This presumption is tied to a modernist interpretation of secularity as the absence, negation, subjugation and relegation of religion to the so-called private sphere where it poses no threat and obstacle to progress, modernity, rationality, and liberality. This teleological interpretation of secularism as the progressive triumph of reason entailing the compartmentalization of religion in the “private” realm has been debunked as a normative stance rather than as a descriptive indicator by scholars such as José Casanova and as a colonial ideological instrument of control, conquest and marginalization by critics such as Talal Asad (2003), Russell McCutcheon (1997), and Richard King (1999).

Attempting to break the tautology between modernity and secularism, Casanova underscores that the classical secularization paradigm betrays a clear bias toward the Protestant notion of belief, the Westphalian framework of nation-states and classical liberal political theory. In his groundbreaking work Public Religions in the Modern World (1994) he offers a poignant revision to this paradigm by distinguishing between its different components or “moments.” He emphasizes that what he calls the normative sub-thesis which views the decline of religion as a necessary aspect of the secularization paradigm does not constitute an essential and necessary component of the “secular.” Rather, the view of secularism as denoting the inevitable and desirable decline of religion needs to be understood as a specifically western European story embedded in anti-clericalism. Therefore, the western European context generated the most penetrating anti-religion critics: Freud, Marx, and Nietzsche—who all viewed religion as a form of alienation, deceit, or neurosis to be overcome as a part and parcel of the story of progress and modernity. Due to its peculiar setting, the American landscape, however, did not generate such hostility toward religion. Rather than citing the case of American secularism as an outlier as is often the case, Casanova proposes looking at the European model as the exception rather than the paradigmatic definition of secularism against which all other forms of secularism and modernity are measured.

More recently in his “Public Religion Reconsidered” (2007), Casanova proposes to rethink secularization beyond the West and suggest a paradigm shift in how one should approach the study of secularization and thus religion—he proposes a global comparative perspective that recognizes multiple secularizations and multiple modernities. The primary intention is to disentangle the normative connection between modernization
and secularization and to move away from explanatory frameworks that posit the western Eurocentric doctrine of secularism as a universal process of social development. Casanova’s suggestion of a global comparative approach to the study of secularism and modernity enables him to develop a very interesting comparison between a historical anti-Catholic discourse and a contemporary anti-Muslim discourse. Briefly, the contemporary anti-Muslim discourse construes Islam as incompatible with Enlightenment principles and liberal democratic politics as well as secularism in the same way that Catholicism was presented in the past in Anglo-Protestant milieus as fundamentalist, anti-modern, and irrational. Further, the same logic underlies anti-immigrant positions that render the unassimilability of Muslims due to their supposedly illiberal and uncivilized orientations, and finally their transnational attachments are perceived as threatening to questions of loyalty to the nation-state. This historical parallelism between anti-Muslim and anti-Catholic discourses reinforces the problematic normativity inherent in the classical secularization paradigm and underscores its enduring legacy in both popular perceptions and the founding axioms of the social sciences. Still, religions and religious practices that do not conform to the hegemonic conception of religion as a facet of one’s identity best contained at home, or otherwise rendered “invisible,” are perceived as a threat to peace and anathema to justice, especially because of the memory of the European “wars of religion” which haunts the classical secularization mythology.

Interestingly, an unrevised presupposition of the secularism paradigm still underlies much of the literature on the role of religion in violent conflict and it continuously informs the practice of conflict resolution and the logic of Track I or official diplomacy. Contemporary critiques and works that study the supposedly new phenomenon of “religious violence” also echo the classical Enlightenment critiques which render religion in some way or another as an epiphenomenon. Political theorists such as Samuel Huntington and Monica Toft hold an unnuanced conception of the secular and the religious, presupposing the validity of the classical secularization thesis—this orientation leads them to construe Islam and modernity (i.e. liberal values) as incompatible in a very profound sense (Huntington 1993; Toft 2007). For Huntington, the purported incompatibility between religious or “civilizational” identities provides the building blocks for a reductive explanatory framework for analyzing values and religious or civilizational orientations as the primary causes of conflict in a post-Cold War era.

While Toft offers a historical, geo-political, and structural explanation to Huntington’s provocative claim concerning the “bloody borders of Islam” (Huntington 1993: 35), she nonetheless substantiates it. She argues that
Islam is involved in many contemporary conflicts in part because Islamic history lacked a development akin to the internecine European wars of religion and in part due to the proximity of Islamic sacred sites to Israel, the petroleum factor, Islam’s transnational links, and the principle of jihad. Yet, unlike Huntington’s reductionist explanation of the role of religion as the cause of contemporary conflict, Toft views religion instrumentally. She proposes a theory of “religious outbidding” (based on Jack Snyder’s model of “nationalist outbidding” developed in From Voting to Violence) that explains that religion becomes a factor—to varying degrees of significance—in the course of a conflict because different political parties wish to enhance “their religious credentials and thereby gain the support they need to counter an immediate threat” (2007: 103). She further argues that the utility of religious outbidding is most pronounced in Islamic contexts and that the greater the likelihood of engagement in the dynamics of religious outbidding, the greater the chance religion will come to occupy an increasingly central role in conflict. This increased centrality of religion, in turn, constitutes, in Toft’s view, an obstacle for rational negotiations and conflict resolution and vindicates violence against noncombatants (2007: 104–7). While Toft advances a more context-sensitive explanatory framework to what she calls “the puzzling case of Islam and civil war,” she obviously—just like Huntington—deploys a particular (western European) hegemonic narrative concerning the presumed correct place of religion in the dynamics of modern political life and the presumption of the “secular” as nonviolent, rational, and tolerant. Accordingly, religion (and specifically Islam) is violent and irrational and thus when it assumes a position of centrality in conflict, the likelihood of negotiations decreases. This line of argumentation is also reflective in contemporary debates about multiculturalism and the limits of tolerance in western liberal democracies (Okin 1999). To a certain degree, Mark Juergensmeyer’s work also exemplifies the same kind of “othering” of the “religious” by positing religious and secular nationalisms as two opposing and clashing worldviews or “ideologies of order” (Juergensmeyer 2003; 2008). All these attempts to analyze the role of religion in conflict reinforce and exemplify Casanova’s contention concerning the still hegemonic hold of the classical secularism paradigm on the social sciences. The question that arises is whether the erosion of the premises underlying this paradigm can generate different analytical frameworks for analyzing the role of religion in conflict and peacebuilding.

In an article published in the Harvard Divinity Bulletin, William Cavanaugh identifies a basic incoherence in the inclination of theorists of religion and violence such as Juergensmeyer to posit religious and secular violence as categorically different phenomena. Cavanaugh suggests that
such classification replicates the European enlightenment’s mythological construal of the “religious” as “primitive,” “irrational,” and “violent” (see Cavanaugh 2009). He writes:

The myth of religious violence helps create a blind spot about the violence of the putatively secular nation-state. We like to believe that the liberal state arose to make peace between warring religious factions. Today, the Western liberal state is charged with the burden of creating peace in the face of the cruel religious fanaticism of the Muslim world. The myth of religious violence promotes a dichotomy between us in the secular West who are rational and peacemaking and them, the hordes of violent religious fanatics in the Muslim world. Their violence is religious, and therefore irrational and divisive. Our violence, on the other hand, is rational, peacemaking, and necessary. Regrettably, we find ourselves forced to bomb them into the higher rationality (Cavanaugh 2007).

According to Cavanaugh, this unnuanced dichotomization of the “religious” and the “secular” distorts the analysis of the role of religion in conflict. This simplistic association of religion and violence replicates the classical liberal myth that the modern secular nation-state emerged to subdue religious violence, and thus the preservation of its self-image as “neutral” with respect to religion or “comprehensive world-views” (to use Rawls’s designation) is tantamount to political articles of faith. The point to drive home is that one’s notion of the “modern” and the “secular” affects one’s attempt to interpret contemporary zones of conflict where religion appears to play a role. In turn, how one views the role of religion in relation to conflict affects one’s understanding of the relevance of religion to peacebuilding.

Indeed, as the brief review above shows, much of the literature on religion and conflict is still beholden to teleological and Eurocentric orientations. Likewise, the field of religious peacebuilding subscribes to a modernist unreviewed dichotomization of the “religious” and the “secular,” a dichotomization which renders its activity as, at best, a supplement for the secular type of negotiations and peace work. This assumption also inhibits it from conceptualizing strategies for the transformation of the underlying root causes of a conflict, especially where conflict and acts of violence are vindicated through appeals to ethnoreligious claims. Hence, while the field of religious peacebuilding recognizes religion as an important variable and as a source for constructive conflict resolution, it maintains nonetheless a rather compartmentalized notion of religion. To move beyond this compartmentalization, religious peacebuilding will have to engage in the hermeneutics of citizenship, figuring out how religion relates to the underlying root causes of ethnoreligious national conflicts.
Deeper Causes

I find the distinction that John Paul Lederach—the renowned peacemaker and scholar of conflict transformation—draws between the episode and epicenter of conflicts a helpful point of departure for thinking about conflict transformation (1996). Lederach emphasizes that the process of conflict transformation needs to involve recognition not only of specific bursts of conflicts which he classifies as “episodes” but also a probing into the dynamics and patterns of interaction that undergird them or their “epicenter.” Lederach’s framework of analysis is helpful because it deepens discussions of the causality of conflict beyond those that provide economic arguments concerning the priority of greed over grievance (Collier 2001; Laitin and Fearon 2002) or those—already alluded to above—that reduce the causality question to essentialized conceptions of “culture,” “religion,” and “civilizations” (Huntington 1993; Juergensmeyer 2008). Lederach’s effort to distinguish between epicenters and episodes of conflict encourages an exploration beyond surface appearances of causality. It is indeed only such exploration of the underlying patterns of inequality and domination and the centralization of questions of structural violence that can yield a truly transformative and holistic approach for peacebuilding.

One example of how this important distinction between levels of causality can influence one’s analysis of a conflict is recognition that while Israel rationalized the launching of the offense on Gaza in the final days of 2008 by invoking the argument of self-defense against the intensification of rocket attacks by Hamas militants on the southern Israeli town of Sderot, this argument of self-defense is based on false premise. As tragic and as unacceptable was the Hamas’ disregard for the safety of noncombatant populations in Israel, the rocket launching may be analyzed as a form of resistance against a continuous state of occupation rather than as an act of aggression carried out by an independent nation-state against a neighboring state. Despite the unilateral withdrawal of Israel from the Gaza Strip in 2005, Israel has continued to control the air, ground and sea, effectively putting Gaza under a state of siege. This reorientation points to how, despite Israel’s claims to self-defense as a cause for the devastating offense against Gaza and despite effort to isolate the “Gaza problem,” the deeper cause of the violence can only be understood in the broader context of the occupation of Palestine and its underlying ideological justification. I argue that a transformation of the underlying root causes of conflict necessitates an introspective reassessment of the interrelation between religion, ethnicity, culture and notions of national identity and sociopolitical, cultural and economic entitlements. The relation between religion and nationalism is more complex than the utilitarian logic of Toft’s theory of religious outbidding may suggest.
What’s in a Choice of a Word?

I apply here the term “hermeneutics” because it does not only denote the act of interpretation but also refers specifically to a particular concern with the interpretation of religious concepts. The point of departure for the relevance of the notion of hermeneutics to thinking about questions of peace and justice in contexts defined by the deployment of ethno-religious claims to vindicate supremacy and domination—although it is certainly not limited to such contexts—is recognition of the “nation” (even in its self-identified secular variety) as amounting to a form of “political theology.” This recognition builds on the above mentioned critical contemporary challenges to the normative assumptions inherent in the modernist secularism thesis and stresses the importance of articulating how specific interpretations of religion may relate to interpretations of nationhood and how the process of reinterpretation or hermeneutics may alter not only conceptions of membership or citizenship but subsequently the question of peace and justice. I anchor such a conclusion on Pierre Allan and Alexis Keller’s insight that a process of introspection or a re-evaluation of the question *who we are* may lead us to re-evaluate the type of concessions we are willing to make (2006).

What’s in a Case?

I occasionally allude here to the case of Israel in order to exemplify the profound potential repercussions implied by the process of the hermeneutics of citizenship. While Israeli nationalism (Zionism) is not unique in its patterns of linking religious resources and symbols with national agenda, its contextualized specificities do accentuate the degree to which notions of membership could affect perceptions and attitudes toward peace and justice. How Israel defines itself in relation to Judaism is obviously consequential for the transformation of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. But the relevance of the conceptualization of the parameters of membership is central to understanding conflict and peace in other contexts as well. In a comparative study conducted under the auspices of the US Institute of Peace, scholar of ethnic and religious conflicts David Little found a direct connection between the degree of respect for human rights and especially minority rights and the likelihood of engaging in violent conflict (1995). The issue of minority rights bears directly on the question of the thresholds and criteria of membership in the nation-state. While the nation is by definition an exclusionary political entity, the further it moves away from an ethnoreligo-centric conception of citizenship, the greater it demonstrates more liberal and inclusive policies toward minorities. According to Little, the greater the proximity is to the ideal type of civic
nationalism (where one can clearly document a general respect for human rights conventions), the likelihood of violent conflict diminishes.

The Israeli case is beneficial for the analysis here because it exemplifies that the reimagining of the relation between Judaism and Israeliness can result in a paradigm shift concerning the question of peace and justice vis-à-vis the conflict with the Palestinians. Unlike theorists who argue—along the lines of an unrevised liberalism—for secularizing Israel and transforming it into a “state of all its citizens” by emptying it of its religious significance (Nimni 2003), I contend not only that such unrevised liberalism is conceptually deceptive because of the impossibility of attaining a neutral conception of membership but also that religion can play a central role in rethinking the parameters of membership and that such rethinking needs to demonstrate a multiperspectival approach to justice. I develop more fully what I mean by this approach later so it suffices to define it for now in general terms as a process of introspection involving recognition of how the other’s claims of injustice and suffering may directly challenge one’s own and propel one to devise novel and contextually embedded reinterpretation of one’s narrative. The study of religion in a conflict zone needs to take into account the multidirectional transformative interactions and interconnections between the institution of the nation-state, definitions of nationality, and religious traditions. This approach underscores the multiperspectival conception of justice. The IFD framework overlooks this urgent task of offering such an intra-tradition or intra-group critique in ethnoreligious national contexts of conflict. Therefore, it is not as productive a conduit as it could be for conceptualizing and enabling a process of internal reform.

The “Nation” as a “Political Theology”

The hermeneutics of citizenship amounts to an introspective exploration of the political theology underlying the definition of the modern “nation” and its institutions.

The view of the modern nation as a form of political theology draws on the eminent theorist of nationalism Anthony Smith’s ethnosymbolist analysis of modern nationalisms (Smith 2003). The theoretical study of nationalism also has been affected and shaped by the secularism paradigm which has dominated the social sciences. Smith, however, underscores the continuous indebtedness of the modern secular nation to its “sacred foundations.” That is the case despite nationalists’ frequent self-perception as “secular”—a self-perception that betrays an unrevised modernist understanding of the “secular” as well as of the “nation,” whereby secularity implies cultural and religious neutrality.
Smith offers a critique of modernist analyses of nationalism. He argues that—reflective of post-Enlightenment notions of human auto-emancipation—modernist approaches to the study of nationalism position the nation erroneously as an entirely secular category. He further adds that such modernist theories of nationalism—consistent with the classical secularism paradigm—view religion ultimately as a force of diminishing significance and as inconsistent with liberal values (see, for example, Marx 2003) and as constituting the distant background (Anderson 1993) from which the modern nation eventually emerged and distinguished itself. Other modernist theorists view the nation as an engineered invention to respond to the need to control the masses in the post-Reformation and post-industrialization landscape (Gellner 1983), while other theoretical frameworks argue that nationalism has absolutely nothing to do with religion and everything to do with politics (Breilly 1994).

In an effort to develop an alternative theoretical grid for the analysis of nationalism, Smith cites Elie Kedourie’s reformed modernism as an insightful springboard for the study of the interrelation between religion and nation. As Smith reads this celebrated scholar of nationalism, in his Nationalism in Asia and Africa, Kedourie articulates two qualifications to the classical modernist position (previously articulated by Kedourie himself). First, Kedourie analyzes how the transplantation of the western ideal and institution of the nation-state to African and Asian contexts involved a top-down manipulation of the “atavistic emotions” of the masses, generating the “pathetic fallacy” which he understood as “the belief that the interests, needs and preoccupations of the elites are the same as those of the masses” (Smith 2003: 12). Kedourie offers a second challenge to an unqualified modernist framework when he analyzes the modern phenomenon of nationalism as a secular version of millennial political religion. He views nationalism as “heterodox religion.” Accordingly, while anti-religion (anti-clericalism) has often been integral to the construction of national identity, the process of imagining a nation has appropriated “symbols, liturgies, rituals, and messianic fervor—which now come to possess new and subversive political and national meanings” (Smith 2003: 13). Analyzing the nation as a “heterodox religion” accentuates the seeming contrast between the secular content and religious forms assumed by various nationalisms. It also accounts for what may be viewed as cooptation or manipulation of religion in the service of secular political ends (Smith 2003: 13–14). While other theorists identify the “manipulation” and “cooptation” of religion as an oft-relevant variable for the analysis of the dynamics (not necessarily causality) of conflict (Toft 2007), Smith’s ethnosymbolist approach assists in clarifying the limits of such instrumentalist (and modernist) approaches to religion. It also exposes what
Benedict Anderson refers to as one of the paradoxes of modern nationalisms: their political power versus philosophical weakness (5). While Toft’s theory of religious outbidding may provide an explanation of how religion contributes to the escalation of conflict, it still does not explain why religion and not other “causes” becomes a central variable in the escalation of conflicts.

Smith’s approach to the study of nationalism incorporates Kedourie’s analysis of the relation between religion and nationalism but it underscores that, unlike medieval millennialism, “Nationalism is a distinctly this-worldly movement and culture.” Nationalism, Smith explains, does not aspire “to flee a corrupt world,” but rather it “seeks to reform the world in its own image, a world of unique and authentic nations” (2003: 15). While a central feature of millennialism is the expectation of a total destruction of the existing order by way of an imminent supernatural intervention, nationalists amplify the human act of auto-emancipation as a necessary progression in fulfilling the destiny of a nation. Hence, Smith concludes, that even though nationalisms integrate religious motifs and symbols in the process of articulating themselves, they should not be viewed as a simple continuation of traditional religion. Nor should they be analyzed as “secularized versions” of religion. One needs to be more nuanced in the analysis of the relation between religion and nationalism because modern nationalisms reflect selectivity in how they relate to traditional religions. Significantly, they tend to eschew notions of cosmic and other-worldly salvation (Smith 2003: 15–17). Yet, Smith adds, despite modern nationalisms’ rejection of traditional religions and their constitutive this-worldliness, they assume some religious motifs and popular forms. This insight leads Smith to suggest the need to uncover the underlying religious foundations of the nation. He writes:

We must go beneath the official positions, and even the popular practices, of modern nationalisms to discover the deeper cultural resources and sacred foundations of national identities; and that in turn means grasping the significance of the nation as a form of communion that binds its members through ritual and symbolic practices (2003: 18).

The importance of exposing the sacred sources of the nation becomes pronounced especially when perceptions of nationhood seem to be directly relevant to questions of conflict and peace as in the Palestinian-Israeli case. My analysis of the “nation” as a form of political theology therefore follows Smith’s conclusion that the modern nation “is best seen as a form of culture and a type of belief system whose object is the nation conceived as a sacred communion” (2003: 18). This view is central to developing the notion of the hermeneutics of citizenship as a mode for rethinking the appropriation of traditional resources and symbols in the continuous process.
Understanding the nation as a political theology involves the conscious or sublimated appropriation or retrieval of certain theological or religious motifs and traditions for the execution of a clear political agenda. Smith’s ethnosymbolist approach to the study of nationalism is therefore very helpful in highlighting the continuous and persistent religious motifs inherent in the phenomenon of modern nationalism. It is also insightful in underscoring the this-worldliness of nationalisms and their emphasis on human auto-emancipation and thus thoroughly “secular” character. These characteristics distinguish them from the religious foundations upon which they selectively draw. Incidentally, a paradigmatic case Smith has in mind is the case of political Zionism which rejected traditional Jewish notions of messianic redemption and insisted on the physical human-initiated redemption or act of return to the land.

With this in mind, there are two distinct yet interrelated productive implications for the analysis of Zionism—even in its secular variety—as a political theology. First, it allows us to expose Zionism’s conceptual blinders and underlying illiberality (see also Omer 2008). Accordingly, one can illustrate how and why the Zionist ethnonational commitment delimits the extent of Israeli liberalism as well as its modes of envisioning a just peace to the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. Second, interpreting Zionism as a political theology enables a process of reinterpretation or a hermeneutics where the religious and cultural symbolisms and motifs which define perceptions of nationhood are debated. The possibility of engaging in a public process of reinterpretation—a process which would necessitate an intra-group conversation—assumes a plurality of views as well as a requirement to explore the legitimacy of political claims through an inter-group exchange. In other words, analyzing the nation as a political theology or a heterodox religion challenges the inclination of nationalists to conflate “nation” and “religion” or “ethnicity” (when the latter constitute the primary principle of belonging). It also confronts the proclivity to essentialize such identities.

When the insights of the ethnosymbolist approach to the study of nationalism are combined with the thesis of the ambivalence of the sacred, a more nuanced understanding of the potential role of religion in peace-building begins to take shape. The classification of the “nation” as a political theology also points to what social theorist Max Weber identified as the “elective affinity” between indices of identity such as ethnicity, religion, and nationalism, but also to the possibility of rethinking or reimagining how they may relate to one another (Little 1995). But Smith’s framework does not address why certain interpretations of the religious, cultural and...
historical resources have gained dominance over and against others in the process of imagining a nation and what processes would bring about conditions for a reinterpretation of the relation between religion and nation. Such processes might necessitate a conscious effort to denaturalize underlying assumptions concerning the defining characteristics and boundaries of a group. Nor does Smith’s work enable an analysis of how and why the framework of the nation-state could introduce changes and reforms to how religious identities are or could be (re)imagined in light of a multiperspectival (contextual) approach to justice.

As noted by Israeli sociologist Yehouda Shenhav (2006), the patterns of interconnection and symbiosis between identity indices such as “ethnicity,” “religion,” and “nationality” are not random or inevitable but rather—in his analysis of Zionism—are reflective of the colonial, national, and Orientalist paradigms which defined them. Hence, in the case of Israel, the process of the hermeneutics of citizenship would not only require an engagement with hegemonic interpretations of the resources of Judaism in the construction and reconstruction of the nation through recognition of the “ambivalence of the sacred” but also with the forces and systemic conditions that have enabled the emergence and dominance of such interpretations. In order to develop respectful and generous political practices and conversations, liberal secularists need to reassess their indebtedness to religious memories and theological concepts as well as review the power structures underpinning the central societal rifts that define the dynamics of conflict. Creative potentialities and resources for these processes of reimagining and reassessment may be found precisely in the margins or in what cultural theorist Homi Bhabha called the third spaces created by the structures of domination. Bhabha describes the third space as a discursive site that demonstrates the fluidity, elasticity, and historicity of identities (Bhabha 1994).

What I finally mean by the process of the hermeneutics of citizenship is exactly the reimagining of the interconnection among subjective notions of identity. I subsequently argue that for such introspective reimagining of the relation between religion and nationality to be substantially meaningful as a peace- and justice-building tool, it needs, on the level of theory, to integrate some of the deconstructive insights of post-colonial literature. On the level of practice, this approach translates into the articulation of subaltern perceptions, counter-narratives and grievances as a space both for critiquing claims of identity and national historiography but also as a space for creative rethinking of the parameters of belonging and justice. In particular, the hermeneutics of citizenship stresses the power variable in the

2. For an analysis of how and why creative potentiality for rethinking the terms of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict are found in the counter-hegemonic narratives of the Pales-
construction of dominant interpretations of the relation between religion and nationalism and the dynamics of conflict. As far as the Israeli case is concerned—to briefly return to the primary example here—the argument goes as follows: in order to engage in the hermeneutics of citizenship, it is crucial to come to terms with the view of secular Zionism as representing a political theology and as such one which deploys the resources of tradition selectively. Such a realization opens a wide path for reinterpretations of its core motifs. This process would entail a context-sensitive reinterpretation from within the sources of Judaism and Jewish history.

By sensitivity to context, I mean that the reimagining of the interrelation between Judaism and Israeliness could not be divorced from a careful consideration of the experiences of the Palestinians (as well as other victims of Euro-Zionism) (Shenhav 2006; Shohat 1988; Massad 1996) and their grievances. Hence, the hermeneutics of citizenship amounts to an embedded interpretation of the resources of tradition—embedded in an understanding of the power structures and constraint by the conventions outlined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR). Hence, the role of religion in thinking through questions of just peace amount to the concurrent processes of an introspective self-examination of the resources of tradition and history as well as recognition of the other’s or others’ predicament. To this extent, the justice question by default pushes the conversation beyond the bounds of one tradition and/or the narrative of one group and demands a multifaceted, pluralistic, contextualized, and multiperspectival articulation of justice.

The Multiperspectival Approach to Justice

The multiperspectival approach to justice underscores the importance of evaluating particularistic and contextually embedded narratives and grievances of parties locked in protracted conflict. This contextualization is to be assessed in light of the universal framework of human rights norms and by taking into account counter-hegemonic perspectives which may challenge the inclination to essentialize national claims and homogenize national character. The designation “counter-hegemonic” refers here both to experiences and grievances of domestic and external victims of national agenda. I call this a multiperspectival approach to justice because it does not only take at face value the claims and historiography inherent in national narratives but also tests those narratives in relation to universal conventions of justice and to the particular experiences of those who fall

tinian citizens of Israel and the Mizrahim (Israeli Jews who trace their ancestry to Arab and Islamic lands and cultures), see Omer 2008a.
outside a normative definition of nationhood. Notably, the universality of the conventions of human rights does not suggest their position as an outgrowth of an unrevised liberalism: ahistorical, neutral or indifferent with respect to cultures. In fact, Johannes Morsink (1999) draws attention to various engagements in cultural translations by delegates involved in the drafting processes of the UDHR and underscores the Declaration’s historical location and how it and subsequent conventions have been profoundly and foundationally influenced by the legacy of Nazism and fascism and the feeling of “common revulsion” in their aftermaths. The universal framework of human rights may orient and ground the discussion but the focus on “third spaces” also suggests a multidirectional process involving rethinking the trajectories of human flourishing. Acknowledging the ethnocultural and historical specificity of the tradition of human rights, this multidirectional process invites a thick engagement with contexts, without becoming relativistic and without deploying the thin conceptions of justice articulated in human rights conventions as a conversation stopper (see also Omer 2009).

The multiperspectival approach to questions of peace and justice in zones of explicit ethnoreligious national conflicts brings into sharp relief the rather particularistic conception of justice informing the Zionist peace camp and thus exposes its limitations and conceptual blind spots. Israeli Zionist secularism as epitomized in the liberal peace camp has reframed its theological underpinning as historical and cultural modes of justification of the Jewish Israeli nation-state. Accordingly, Jewish “return” is interpreted as historical rather than religious metaphistorical entitlement and the Jewish character of the state of Israel as a “cultural” attribute and imperative. This secularization or neutralization of the motifs of return and redemption as “historical” or “cultural” does not, however, sever them from their roots in theological sources and in the religious imagination. Rather, the neutralization of these religious (messianic) themes exemplifies Smith’s ethnosymbolist analysis of modern nationalism as forming a complex relationship with religion or tradition. Neither is the nation found in a relation of uninterrupted continuity with tradition nor does it negate it. Instead, the relationship is one that reflects a modern this-worldliness and impulse for auto-emancipation as well as a focus on the attainment of political agenda, on the one hand, and selective retrieval of traditional and religious motifs in the construction of the “nation” as a sacred community and of its landscape as a sacred space.

Following the logic of the “ambivalence of the sacred” thesis, authoritative religious voices may potentially imagine alternative modes of relating Israel to Judaism. Yet, while the religious Zionist camp has indeed called upon the resources of religion in order to articulate its resistance to the
occupation of the territories and in order to develop an ethics of engagement with minorities within Israel, its overarching framework assumes an axiomatic status to the basic claims of Zionist political theology. This assumption limits its ability to contextualize and challenge Zionist interpretations of Jewish motifs such as return, redemption, and the ingathering of the exiles. Thus, in the case of Israel-Palestine, a multiperspectival approach to justice would have to include a careful consideration of Palestinian voices and experiences as well as those of Mizrahi Jews (Israeli Jews who trace their ancestry to Islamic and Arab countries) who have been systemically discriminated against and marginalized.

Therefore, the multiperspectival approach to justice developed here underscores the importance of two levels of inquiry. The first consists in the question whether particularistic narratives of victimization and perceptions of injustice are indeed consistent with international norms like those enshrined in the UDHR and subsequent documents. The second query relates to how subaltern voices and grievances articulated from within a national context challenge hegemonic definitions of nationhood as well as offer alternative perceptions of justice. Still, this multidimensional approach recognizes the authenticity of particularistic perceptions of injustice and notions of self-entitlement but deploys nonetheless universal norms of human rights as a framework for evaluating whether such entitlements informed acts of aggression that violated others’ basic human rights. This process of internal and external evaluation amounts to deconstructing the logic of national historiography and perceptions of justice and injustice. This kind of undertaking is thoroughly multidisciplinary because it requires drawing not only on the insights of the secularization debate central to sociology of religion and religious studies but on the theoretical study of nationalism, cultural theory as well as post-colonial theoretical frameworks.

The Missing Dimension of Religious Peacebuilding

The title of this section is a play on the title of a pioneering work, Religion: The Missing Dimension of Statecraft (Johnston and Sampson 1995), which propelled the development of the “religious peacebuilding” subgenre that focuses on religion as an important factor in diplomacy and peacebuilding efforts. The undergirding logic of this subgenre is anchored in the “ambivalence” thesis. As noted, this thesis points to the relevance of religion not only as a factor in the dynamics of conflict but also as a factor in peacebuilding and conflict transformation. Along these lines, much of the literature in religious peacebuilding involves itself in the retrieval of resources that could inspire peacemaking as well as offer intra-traditional
re-evaluation of the role religion has assumed in particular zones of conflict. This process of retrieval is transformative because it challenges essentializing conceptions of identity and presents the internal plurality of tradition as pivotal to the process of peacebuilding. It is further transformative because it reshapes and contextualizes but does not reduce the resources of tradition to the historical predicament under investigation. As exemplified by individuals such as Archbishop Desmond Tutu, religion and religious leaders have played increasingly important roles in post-conflict healing processes (Truth and Reconciliation Commissions). In the midst of conflicts, religious voices like the one raised by Jean Zaru—a woman, a Palestinian, a Quaker—are often at the forefront in resisting the structures of injustice and the rigidity of national rhetoric (see Zaru 2008).

However, the development of a theoretical framework for the analysis of the role of religion in conflict and peacebuilding necessitates more than just recognizing the courage and commitment of individual religious leaders. The reimagining of the nation or the reconceptualization of the interrelation between religion and nation needs to take into account how historical processes and the structures of domination and control—i.e. the dominant discourse—have affected seemingly axiomatic definitions of nationhood. This kind of an introspective (de-constructive) engagement is lacking in the “ambivalence” literature and is similarly absent from the IFD venue. Without such a deconstructive turn, the constructive promise of religious peacebuilding may only yield cosmetic and anecdotal benefits. It is precisely that difficult task of probing into the root causes of conflict—its “epicenter”—that would bring about a substantial transformation of the underlying structures of injustice. This task would often demand denaturalizing one’s identity and perception of one’s essential attributes—what makes her who she is.

The point is not just to recognize the correlation between chauvinistic interpretations of religion and intolerant or violent state practices but also to identify how the institutions of the state may transform and influence the religious identities associated with it. This exercise involves more than the mere recitation and retrieval of textual resources and histories consistent with the sensibilities of a modern liberal orientation (as so many in the religious peacebuilding business do) but it underscores the critical importance of scrutinizing the premises of ethnoreligious national ideologies (political theologies) such as Zionism through engagement in the hermeneutics of citizenship.

In the Israeli case, Jewish interlocutors who are engaged in IFD accept a particular meta-Zionist understanding of the relationship between Judaism and Israeliness as axiomatic and, without reflecting on how Zionist interpretations of Jewish history and destiny may constitute a root cause
of the conflict with the Palestinians, they accept a definition of Israel as necessitating the cultivation and maintenance of Jewish majoritarianism. For example, in an attempt to explain the position of the religious Zionist peace camp, Yehezkel Landau, who is himself a highly committed religious Zionist peacemaker, said: “For us, human life, justice and peace were holier than territory. It was a Jewish imperative to sacrifice territory in Judea, Samaria, and Gaza...for a Palestinian state so that Israel would remain Jewish, ethnically and religiously” (Little 2007b: 361–2). Clearly and despite his critique of ultra-territorialization and mistreatment of the Palestinians, Landau reaffirms the dominant Zionist interpretation of the relation between Judaism and Israeliness. Therefore he betrays a vision of peace and justice that is monoperspectival and that does not redress the root causes of the conflict. Instead, I propose that religion be identified as a critical dimension in any effort to redress the epicenters of ethnoreligious national conflict, where selective interpretations of religion are obviously entangled with collective notions of entitlement and subsequently with systemic questions of structural violence. The notion of hermeneutics is thus appropriate because I view Zionism (in its various forms) as well as other forms of ethnoreligious nationalism as an instance of political theology.

The main contention here then is that the growing scholarship and field of practice which identify religion as a valuable dimension of peacebuilding and conflict transformation (Schirch 2005; Smock 2002; Gopin 2002; 2009; Little 2007b; Abu-Nimer et al. 2007) have generally subscribed to an unrevised modernist understanding of the “religious” and the “secular” as occupying distinct realms of being and operation, thereby reaffirming rather than confronting the presuppositions undergirding Track I diplomacy as involving rational and mostly official actors who focus primarily on the geopolitical and thus “secular” implications of conflict resolution. Indeed, Lisa Schirch’s work stresses the symbolic and ritualistic aspects of peacebuilding and conflict transformation and it does so by integrating insights from ritual theory to her analysis of peacebuilding. Yet, to the extent that Schirch draws on the study of religion to deploy categories of analysis and practice most immediately associated with the religious life, she does not engage the question of how “religion” relates to the dynamics of ethnonational conflict and thus how, along the level of conduct and inspiration to act in a certain (peaceful or peacemaking) way, it may contribute to the transformation of conflicts on a substantive/interpretative level (here the assumption is that ethnoreligious national conflicts involve particular and contested interpretations of religious and cultural resources). Schirch’s work remains a “theory of praxis” because it is focused on the question of how symbolic acts of socializing.
and transformative ritual practice may function centrally and instrumentally in the practice of peacebuilding itself.

In many respects, Marc Gopin’s distinguished approach for and notable work in the field of religious peacebuilding exhibits similarity to Schirch’s focus on the ritualistic and theatric aspects of peacebuilding. His work has also focused on the potential contribution of peace-seeking and justice proclaiming religious resources and traditional (rabbinic) reconciliatory conduct rather than on a substantive engagement with how religious resources have been selectively appropriated and assimilated into ethnoreligious national political agenda and political identities. Informed primarily by his knowledge of the sources of Judaism, Gopin’s methodology of conflict resolution highlights those verses, rabbinic practices, stories and concepts that promote peace, justice and reconciliation; while recognizing the creative possibilities inherent in a substantive and content-sensitive as well as conduct-sensitive (symbolic acts, rituals, nonverbal gestures) integration of religious resources to the processes of peacebuilding. Therefore, Gopin’s work frames the scope of religious peacebuilding as falling outside of the purview of the secular political realm of peacemaking. Religion and the religious, it is argued, can provide an auxiliary path for secular (rational) attempts to transform conflicts and motivation to act in a certain peace and justice-promoting manner.

In light of my discussion above of the hermeneutics of citizenship as a transformative peacebuilding process as well as the critiques of unrevised secularism, I argue for the need to expand Gopin’s approach by highlighting the requirement on the part of religious activism to, on the one hand, recognize and acknowledge—as Gopin certainly does—the creative potentialities offered from within the sources of religion, tradition and cultural/historical memories. But similarly, on the other hand and especially in contexts where ethnoreligious claims form the primary vocabulary and modes of legitimization invoked by nationalist actors, religious peacebuilding will also necessitate a thorough engagement with violent interpretations of religion and will directly call for a contextualized and historically sensitive evaluation of how religion relates to nationalist agenda and to the construction and cultivation of systems of control and domination.

In other words, even when recognizing that ethnoreligious national conflicts cannot be framed in theological terms and that religious peacemaking cannot be conducted in a vacuum, the scholarship on religion and peace does not consider how the insights of recent debates on secularism (see discussion above) may bear on its analytical and practical understanding of the role of religion in peacebuilding. Identifying the political theology central to secular interpretations of the “nation” (especially in
contexts framed by ethnoreligious claims) clarifies the important task of broadening the scope of religious peacemaking to encompass intranational conversations over alternative interpretations of the interrelation between nation and religion and how they may affect questions of peace and justice. Likewise, the process of the hermeneutics of citizenship points to important and overlooked questions in the academic study of religion: how and why the institution of the modern nation-state might affect the transformation and reform of religion? And how the dynamics and realities of ethnoreligious national conflicts may relate to the academic study of religion? These questions will have to be addressed elsewhere.3

For religious peacebuilding to be effective and transformative beyond the off-Broadway theaters of Track II diplomacy, it would need to actively engage in the hermeneutics of citizenship rather than affirm ethno-republican and religious interpretations of membership in the “nation.” This process entails accessing subaltern counter-narratives (told from the viewpoints of internal and external “others”), traditions (the resources of religion, culture and historical memories) and hybrid constructions born out of the contexts of conflicts (for example, the Palestinian citizens of Israel). Religion may provide a vocabulary not only to counteract explicitly ethnocentric interpretations of the “nation,” as articulated by religious radical movements, but also to examine the political theology of self-identified liberal secularists in contexts such as the Sudan, Sri Lanka and Israel-Palestine in an effort both to expose their conceptual blinders and to re-imagine the “nation” along more inclusionary lines. This scrutiny may not only recognize the sublimated theological and religious dimensions of an unrevised definition of the secular nation but also attempt to develop a context-specific engagement with the interrelation between religion and nation.

To conclude: the paper bases its critique of the religious peacemaking literature on recognition of (1) the persistent role of religion in the processes of imagining and reimagining the nation as suggested in Anthony Smith’s work on nationalism; (2) David Little and Scott Appleby’s notion of the “ambivalence of the sacred” and the irreducibility of the resources of religion to interpretations of nationalism, despite what might be suggested by nationalist rhetoric; and (3) ongoing theoretical conversations which have challenged modernist interpretations of the “secular” as representing the absence or diminishing presence of religion and as subsequently implying a neutral public sphere. I argue that reimagining the


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relation between religion and nation may provide a mode for conceptualizing peacebuilding. This position suggests that religious sources may function centrally in the hermeneutics of citizenship and in devising interpretations of culturally embedded secularity in zones of ethno-national contestations. This view of the hermeneutics of citizenship advances an integrative and multiperspectival approach to questions of peace and justice.

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