Nationalism and the Comparative Study of Religious Ethics: Future Trajectories

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Nationalism and the Comparative Study of Religious Ethics
Future Trajectories

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Abstract
David Little’s work on ethnoreligious nationalism and religion, human rights, and the practice of religious peacebuilding offers both an important corrective and a conceptual foundation for further research in comparative religious ethics and an effective contribution to the sociological and cultural study of religion, conflict, and peace. Examining the two cases of Jewish Israeli settlers and Jewish American Palestine solidarity activists, the article establishes the centrality of nationalism and the institutions and practices it authorizes as well as the relevance of religious formations, reasoning, meanings, and practices within this context.

Keywords: ethnic conflict, religion, conflict, peace, nationalism

Introduction
In this essay I argue for an intersectional approach to the study of religious ethics. As in the feminist discourse from which I borrow the analytic lens, “intersectionality” here means highlighting social, political, and cultural locations as pivotal for and constitutive of religious reasoning. At the same time, religious traditions are not reducible to these contextual elements.
In other words, to analyze religious justifications within particular contexts, one must consider how religion relates to one’s identity, modes of reasoning, and actions as a citizen or a member of a movement for self-determination. In comparative religious ethics (CRE), David Little offers a promising exception to the theorization of the “state” as it relates to the “nation” that authorizes it. He has already corrected many of the conceptual problems of the “formalist” approach that his earlier work is most criticized for. His work on ethnoreligious nationalism and religion, human rights, and the practice of religious peace-building offers both an important corrective and a conceptual foundation for further research in CRE and an effective contribution to the sociological and cultural study of religion, conflict, and peace.

First, I establish the centrality of nationalism and the institutions and practices it authorizes as well as the relevance of religious formations, reasoning, meanings, and practices within this context. Here, I foreground the case of Jewish-American Palestine solidarity activists and how their critique of one form of nationalism, namely Zionism, is highly reliant on their other national identity, American, which, in turn, informs their religious innovation—how they reimagine their Jewish identity outside of Zionist narratives. I compare the case of these activists with religious Zionists committed to the settlement project in the Occupied Territories of 1967 and the ideology of the Greater Eretz Yisrael more broadly. These two radically different groups from within Judaism illuminate the degree to which nationalist discourse and state institutions (as well as divergent historical contexts) inform, innovate within, and potentially transform religious ethical reasoning and practice and vice versa. The case of Jewish-American Palestine solidarity activists also shows the role of ethical outrage in a relational process of religious innovations. Both cases are worthy of study within the subfield of CRE, but not in some neutral fashion that overlooks the normative questions of justice informed by the human rights tradition, which is open to dialectically informed expansion and corrections.

In the second part of the essay, I put CRE in conversation with theoretical advances in international relations (IR) and the sociological study of religion and nationalism. I contend that John Kelsay’s characterization of the turn to virtue ethics as suffering from a disjunction between ethics and sociopolitical analysis is correct and that his attendant suggestion that scholarship in CRE will “demonstrate how institutions and persons interact . . . so that we
can understand the variety of ways in which human beings are presented as responsible agents” (2010, 492) has deep theoretical and practical traction and relevance. This insight provides a pivotal point at which CRE intersects with peace studies.

I. Not in My Name; Yes, in My Name

Why Nationalism?

Many discussions of the history of CRE begin rightly with Comparative Religious Ethics: A New Method (1978) by David Little and Summer B. Twiss. As Kelsay explains (2012, 584–87), this work has been critiqued as “formalist” primarily due to its lack of sensitivity to context, a static interpretation of the stages of practical reasoning or the relations between norms and actions, and insufficient attentiveness to internal variations within religious traditions. The outcome of these lines of critique was a turn toward what Kelsay calls “perspectival studies” (see 2012, 596, for example) and virtue ethics, which, as he comments, ironically also carries risks of ahistoricity even while occasionally immersing itself in ethnographic data. This turn, Kelsay writes, has produced many ideographic works that, while interesting, nonetheless have blocked the necessary cultivation of common categories of knowledge and analysis in CRE. The result of this reactionary scholarship has been the marginalization of the field in the study of religion and the academy more broadly. This marginalization allows “experts” from other disciplines to interject commentary on religious ethics in a comparative fashion without attending to the long legacy and profound insights and critiques of the comparative study of religious ethics and other areas of religious studies. In other words, such new experts tend to rely on and replicate male-dominant, elitist, and reified interpretations of religious traditions. One does not need to look far to see how, for instance, in the early stages of the U.S. bombing against ISIL, experts and officials were at pains to distinguish “authentic” Islam from this brutal perversion. From the perspective of scholarship in religion, such labels as ‘good’ or ‘bad’ religion participate in a highly problematic ahistorical and spiritualizing discourse about religion that glosses over material and other grievances underlying the emergence of a group such as ISIL.

Hence, the problem these days is that many scholars from other disciplines dabble in religion in their attempts to analyze it as a “problem” and a potential
resource for change. Such dabbling can replace a textured engagement with religious sources with instrumentalist, essentialist, or apologetic approaches across geopolitical contexts (Philpott 2012, for example). Meanwhile, CRE seems to be more interested in navel-gazing than in applying itself to the problems of the time through scholarly engagement with political science, sociology, cultural theory, peace studies, and postcolonial studies. Moving beyond its fixation on the ethics of the use of force and analyses of technologies of the cultivation of the self, the subfield could take up religion’s role in authorizing and challenging sociopolitical and cultural structures and how those structures inform the possibility of change of both structures and religious traditions and identification. Religion here does not only function as a form; rather, the actual content of religious traditions matters and it matters in complex, highly relational, and elastic ways. The content of religion is precisely where CRE scholarship can contribute to an interdisciplinary and intersectional discussion of the relevance of religion to social, political, and cultural structures, institutions, and attitudes, as well as collective and individual actions.

To combat modernist biases against religious reasoning, scholars working within CRE need to gain clarity about the operative intersections of religion with other modes of identification and justification of action, including nationalism. Foregrounding nationalism in this way shares affinities with Hannah Arendt’s autobiographical recognition that seeing people as “nothing but human beings” in the abstract and stripped of citizenship (Agamben’s “bare life”) tends to result in entire groups of unprotected denationalized people (gradually) being sent to death camps (1978, 59). According to Bernstein, Arendt’s own experience of statelessness, of being a refugee, informs her analysis of the logic of totalitarianism, one that involves a process of denationalization, and highlights a general inability to clearly identify “those general [inalienable] human rights, as distinguished from the rights of citizens” (Arendt, The Origins of Totalitarianism, quoted in Bernstein 53). Therefore, the social, cultural, and religious meanings that constitute political and cultural thresholds and boundaries informing and regulating the legal and social discourse of citizenship need to be theorized centrally in contextualizing the production of knowledge in CRE. One’s location of marginality, exclusion, or inclusion vis-à-vis the normative boundaries of citizenship is pertinent, without being deterministic, to how religion then relates to one’s action and reason-giving. It is pertinent because religion, culture, language, historical
collective memories—all participate in drawing those boundaries and social distinctions, in ways that are distinct from one context to another.

The engagement with Jewish sources characteristic of Jewish-American Palestine solidarity activists differs from the mode of Jewish reasoning articulated by Jewish-Israeli settlers. I likewise show why Zionism as well as Jewish-American experiences operate in both the radicalization of Zionism (in the case of the settlers) and the de-Zionization of Jewish identity, practice, and liturgy (in the case of Jewish-American Palestine solidarity actors).

Extraordinary License
The messianic ideology informing the settlement movement emerged at a particular time to synthesize traditional Jewish conceptions of the possibility of return to the land of Zion and the Zionist human-initiated political program. The synthesis was first and most strongly articulated by Avraham Yitzhak Kook in the pre-state era under the British mandate. In the course of Jewish history, there had been a few episodes in which messianic impulses were foregrounded and suspended or subverted ordinary norms regulating actions. Each of these cases resulted in disaster, which is why the rabbinic norm had been to deflate and subvert this impulse. Zionism as a secular political movement operated according to the logic of modern nationalism, focusing on Jewish self-determination. However, it also relied on a selective retrieval of Jewish meanings, stories, and narratives—a pattern that is by no means unusual for nationalisms—to gain social traction for its objective of redemption (from persecutions) through self-determination.

For Zionism, the “return” to Zion constituted a historical, not a meta-historical, moment, and human, not divine, agency was the engine behind the process. The notion of self-determination was redemptive only in this sense, yet it intersected with, and was later coopted by, messianic conceptions of redemption. The early Zionist movement and later the narration, practices, and instruments of Jewish-Israeli socialization foregrounded Jewish motifs and memories of physical resistance and militarism previously downplayed and even dismissed within the parameters of the Zionist secular ethos. Specifically, the Zionist narration of Jewish history highlighted revolts against and instances of resistance to the Romans during the period marked as the
Second Temple era in Israeli national periodization (Zerubavel 1995). Amos Oz (2003), for instance, writes powerfully in his autobiography about how the stories of Masada and the Bar Kokhba Revolt loomed large in his imagination as a child in Jerusalem under the British mandate.

While retrieving the Second Temple period and the biblical stories of Hebraic promise and control of the land of Canaan, secular Zionism downplayed millennia of diasporic Jewish life. Modern Jewish nationalism, therefore, related directly to this particular narration of the past, subverting the traditional meanings attached to the revolts and to martyrdom as quietism and the persistent study of Torah, regardless of the threat of death and harassment. Indeed, Zionism rejected the traditional rabinic logic with respect to the prospect of return and in so doing, introduced a new Jewish logic for the justification of action, including the systematic displacement of another people from the land, to enable the fulfillment of the nationalist impulse. Zionism emerged as a European movement at a time when nationalism was a ubiquitous currency for social and political action. Critically, Zionism gained traction because it was also aided by the discourses of orientalism, colonialism, and anti-Semitism. While it cannot be reduced to these explanatory frames, they remain relevant to the analysis of Zionism and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

As a secular movement for national self-determination, Zionism, in its early stages, also exhibited a high degree of anti-clerical and anti-religious attitudes. In his attempt to articulate a synthesis between Zionism and traditional Judaism, especially one that would authorize the otherwise blasphemous act of settling the land by way of human agency, the British-appointed Ashkenazi Chief Rabbi Avraham Yizhak Kook (1865–1935) was a unique voice within the pre-World War II milieu of Palestine. In his influential *Orot*, Kook offers a link between Lurianic Kabbalah and messianism that, like Sabbatianism (in the seventeenth century) and Hassidism (in the eighteenth century) before him, underscored the role of awakening from below (*itraruta diletata*) and thus the role of individual Jews as participants in the process of redemption. Pivotal for interpreting human agency in the messianic moment is the notion of breaking the vessels (*shvirat kelim* or *klipot*), which would release divine sparks (*orot*) everywhere and even through seemingly mundane and evil vessels. This denotes what some analysts view as the “affinity between messianism
and violence” (Aran and Hassner 2013). Whereas Maimonides (writing in a context of deep interreligious exchanges in the Iberian peninsula of the twelfth century) attempted to normalize the messianic impulse by imagining possibilities for non-messianic Jewish political life, the affinity between mysticism and messianism foregrounds apocalyptic notions of the “pangs of the Messiah” (chevley mashiach or ikvata demeshicha grounded in a particular interpretation of Isaiah 56) and the appearance of the Messiah son of Joseph (the man of war) as a necessary stage in the redemptive process. Zionism was thus interpreted as the necessary evil or “the yeast in the making of the wine,” as Kook put it, to be ultimately discarded in preparation for the arrival of the Messiah Son of David in the aftermath of the apocalyptic moment of the War of Gog and Magog (Aran and Hassner 2013).

Fast forward to Zvi Yehuda Kook (the son of Abraham Yitzhak), and the settlement movement initiated in earnest in the aftermath of the Yom Kippur or October War of 1973. The marriage of mysticism and messianism became more pronounced within the context of an independent Jewish state, ethnocentric and chauvinistic in scope. The initial veneration of the Israeli state and its institutions, such as the military, exemplifies the kabbalistic impulse to identify sparks or sacredness in the mundane with the understanding that eventually they would be overcome and transformed. (The atheist Zionists accordingly were soldiers in a divinely unfolding drama despite their iconoclastic approach to tradition.) However, this veneration depended on believing the state indeed acted in fulfillment of the commandment to settle the land. Hence, when the military acted supposedly against messianic logic and evacuated settlers from the Gaza Strip during the so-called unilateral disengagement (2005), a shift in attitudes to the military and the political infrastructure took place.

Violence — of the deadly kind — is therefore interpreted as necessary and cosmic. By extension, actions such as uprooting Palestinians, harassing them, killing them, or throwing urine on their markets (as settlers do in Hebron, for instance) are authorized today: in this extraordinary time, ordinary morality as prescribed within the Jewish tradition is suspended. The Israeli soldiers who stand by permitting these abuses to continue do so, at least on the level of legal reasoning, because the settlers are under civilian, not military, jurisdiction. The very bifurcation of legal spaces, however, points to the pervasiveness of
an ethnocratic logic, which then informs the soldiers’ inactivity in the face of settlers’ vandalism and abuse of Palestinians.

Decades of impunity result in the sobering reports of widespread racism within Israeli society and explain the general domestic support of the Israeli assault on Gaza during Operation Protective Edge (Summer 2014) as well as the, at times, violent silencing of pockets of internal dissent. This outburst of racism did not emerge ex nihilo. Instead, it comes at the heels of a battery of proposed laws intensifying patterns of religious coercion and ethnocentric discrimination, pushed by the increasingly politically dominant descendants of the original nucleus of messianic settlers. This trend demands analysis not only of how secular Zionism and the institutions of the Israeli nation-state facilitated the particular modes of justification operative within the contexts of the settlement, but also how the settlement movement as it relates to the occupation of Palestinians over at least five decades transformed and coopted Zionism. The settlement movement has dramatically increased its presence in the Knesset and has become a dominant force in the highest echelons of the government, especially with the emergence of the religious Zionist political party Habayit HaYehodi (the Jewish Home) under the leadership of Naftali Bennett as a key partner in a Likud-formed coalition and, likely, as the second-largest political party in the Knesset. Espousing a Judeo-centric and territorial maximalist ideology, Habayit HaYehudi is aided by the secular ultra-nationalist Yisrael Beytenu (Israel is our Home) in entrenching exclusionary citizenship discourse, parasitical on a policy of “managing” the Occupation of Palestinians. This development is clearly embodied in Israeli Prime Minister Benyamin Netanyahu’s 2014 war cabinet, the majority of which espoused explicitly racist and chauvinistic outlooks, displayed orientalist attitudes, and dehumanized Palestinians while expressing strong commitment to the ideology of the Greater Eretz Yisrael. Nobody was surprised that Netanyahu approved a plan for a settlement in East Jerusalem only weeks after the brittle ceasefire with Hamas was reached, and nobody was surprised when he said: “These are not settlements. These are neighborhoods of Jerusalem. Jerusalem has been the capital of the Jewish people for thousands of years” (quoted in Adam Horowitz 2014). This rationalization echoes his predecessor Ariel Sharon’s justification of his provocative visit to the Dome of the Rock on the eve of Rosh Hashannah in 2000, a visit that, of course, sparked the eruption of the Second Intifada.
The argument about the eternal status of Jerusalem is highly problematic considering that for most of its long history, the city was the one square kilometer within the walls constructed by Suleiman the Magnificent in the sixteenth century. By the time Netanyahu approved the construction project called Plan 14295, the municipal boundaries of the city grew to a level of territorial contiguity with the West Bank. All of this space is supposedly non-negotiable due to its sacredness to the Jewish people. The ever-expanding boundaries of Jerusalem provide an illustration of how particular interpretations of Judaism relate to the justification of a national agenda and vice versa. Ordinary citizens’ religious and political lives and practices cannot be interpreted outside this context. Jewish-American Palestine solidarity activists offer a comparative case that illuminates the centrality of nationalism to their practical reasoning as persons with multiple and often competing identities.

**Not in My Name!**

“What does it mean to be Jewish?” was one of the key questions animating a recent Pew survey studying changes in Jewish-American identity. The findings are illustrative. Seventy-three percent identified remembering the Holocaust as an essential part of what being Jewish means to them. Potentially relatedly, 69 percent indicated that leading an ethical/moral life constituted an essential aspect of being Jewish with 56 percent highlighting working for justice/equality as a key meaning. “Caring about Israel” came in at fourth place with 43 percent after the 49 percent who indicated that “being intellectually curious” was essential to what being Jewish meant for them. Other responses included “having a good sense of humor” (42 percent), “being part of a Jewish community” (28 percent), “observing Jewish law” (19 percent), and “eating traditional Jewish foods” (14 percent). Indeed, “remembering the Holocaust” could correlate positively to the belief that Israel and support for Israeli policies are essential to Jewish identity. However, for many of the American Jews I interviewed, it was precisely remembering the Holocaust as well as their commitment to an ethical/moral life and to actually working for justice and equality that informed their moral outrage, their critique of Israel, and their solidarity work on behalf of Palestinians’ rights and quest for dignity. Their interpretation of the Holocaust is consistent with the broader American interpretation
of this event as at once unique and universal and one that ought to result in action focused on human security.

Based on in-depth, semi-structured interviews with thirty Jewish-American Palestine solidarity activists and seventy non-Jewish actors of diverse denominational or nondenominational backgrounds and geographic locations and on a systematic study of how the Jewish solidarity movement uses social media in relation to the broader Palestine solidarity movement, I identified patterns and resources that Jewish Palestine activists use in the bidirectional dynamic of critical caretaking. This bidirectional dynamic refers to the ethical commitment to the case in question and to how that ethical engagement propels innovation of the identity and constitutive elements of the tradition. Jewish Palestine activists in this way exhibit religious innovation, not dissolution. This is not ethical activism dressed up in the remnants of Jewish trappings.

The ethical outrage expressed by my interviewees was anchored in a profound sense of Jewish history as it relates to social action, namely a commitment to the “underdog,” which was a term they often used along with words such as the “oppressed” or “victim” or, in Hebrew, *ashukim*. For instance, a young man in his twenties told me: “I lived a mainstream Jewish American existence, liberal synagogue in Chicago. I learned that *tzedaka* [giving charity] is an important Jewish value. I understand my Jewish identity as shaped by the legacy of the Holocaust—this is the context within which I understand Jewish social justice work as an impetus to prevent genocide. Those values are influencing my activism now. I see strong connections between Palestinian diasporas and the pictures of the Jewish shtetles. Strong connections.”

Variations on this story recurred in all the interviews I conducted. Activists’ outrage was directed toward what Israel is doing in the name of Jews to the Palestinians of the West Bank and the Gaza Strip. Their outrage was also aimed at the silencing of intra-communal and broader debates about Israeli policies, in which any critique of Israeli policies is denigrated as either anti-Semitic or self-hating and an unconditional love of Israel is posited as a foundation of Jewish communal life. Accordingly, the narrowing of the space of critique means that Jews who are ethically outraged still choose silence and thus complicity.

Judith Butler, the renowned feminist theorist who has participated in counter-Jewish discourse, points out a profound irony: “The Jewish effort to
criticize Israel . . . is often portrayed as insensitive to Jewish suffering, in the past and in the present,” and yet, she underscores, “its ethic is wrought precisely from that experience of suffering, so that suffering itself might stop” (Butler 2004, 103–4). Butler and other Jewish critics do not turn their backs on their Jewishness but rather criticize Israel, as she stresses, “in the name of one’s Jewishness, in the name of justice, precisely because such criticisms seem ‘best for the Jews’” (2004, 114). But this form of Jewish critique is deeply embedded within a multiperspectival and relational conceptualization of justice discourse. The activists understand that the Palestinians have been wronged and that they themselves are implicated in these wrongs by virtue of the Zionist homogenizing narration of Jewish identity. This understanding is informed by a theory of justice that clearly discerns that bombing indiscriminately, constraining movement on a daily basis, humiliating at check points, and collectively punishing are all self-evidently wrong. Basic human rights are denied to an entire population just because they are Palestinians. Hence, the activists’ prior commitment to human rights informs their ethical outrage and their efforts to reinterpret their Jewish identity.

While for many Jewish activists, reclaiming their Judaism involves reinterpreting Jewish history and culture as uncompromising work for the oppressed and challenging oppressive structures, this commitment to human rights is also rooted in the sources of tradition. For example, Talmudic passages offer a common foundation from which the rabbinic contributors to the Palestinian Talmud blog illuminate the imperative to stand in solidarity with Palestinians. This thread within the Jewish tradition is juxtaposed with “Constantinian Judaism”—this is a term the activists themselves use—which is interpreted as a subversion and perversion of Judaism.

An activist from the San Francisco Bay area commented that she ended up in social activism circles in the first place because of her Jewish identity and upbringing in a progressive Jewish community in Santa Fe. Despite a rather conventional Zionist education in the United States, her exposure to Israel illuminated who she needed to stand in solidarity with. “Once I went to Israel/Palestine with a perspective about who is really the underdog here and with a sense that the commitment to the underdogs is so engrained in my understanding of Judaism—you have to be on the side of the underdog, the minority, the oppressed,” she told me. “The Jews weren’t powerless . . . the Jews
were not the victims here.” Interestingly, Jewish-American Palestine solidarity activists often explicitly understand themselves as occupying a position of white privilege. This self-perception offers further impetus for activism against Israeli policies, the intersections of Israeli and U.S. militarism, and arguments about security and terrorism. Hence, when analyzing why what Israel does is wrong, they coincide with non-Jewish Palestine solidarity actors who analyze the conflict using other categories such as settler colonialism. As Jews, they are outraged to be associated with a political entity that seemingly fits this description of settler colonialism. Therefore they say, “Not in my name.” However, rejecting the Zionist negation of exile and the presumption that Israel constituted the fulfillment of Jewish destiny invites, by way of solidarity with the Palestinians, a complete disengagement from a discussion about the limits of settler colonialism as an explanatory frame in this particular case.

The examples above certainly illuminate the sense of outrage undergirding Jewish activists’ participation in Palestine solidarity work. They also display an interesting reversal of Zionist teleology: now New York City with its diversity and urban cacophony seems more consistent with Jewish values than its Constantinian form embodied in the Israeli state. “Strong Jewish roots is something I cherish,” another interviewee from the Bay area told me. “I am more attuned to cultural Zionism. Valuing collective culture and wanting to thrive culturally isn’t the same as engaging in state power, so when you associate Jewishness with state power, it is destructive. Jewish culture can be stronger by diminishing political hegemony. Look at NYC. Jewish cultures and Jewish plurality flourishes there.” Another woman in her mid-twenties who is active in interfaith work echoed this sentiment: “Personally identifying with the diaspora (and not with Israel) is meaningful to me.” Many other interviewees expressed intense discomfort with what they saw among Israelis as racism of the kind that, as one of them told me, transported her back to what she imagines Mississippi was like in the 1950s. She was shocked to find there was no shame attached to casual racist pronouncements by Israelis. Various expressions of racism strongly contradict these activists’ sense of Americanness. In fact, it could be said that the possibility of filtering Zion out of the meanings of being Jewish depends on a sense of being at home in the United States and does not necessarily require theorizing the connections among religion, ethnicity, and the redrawing of geopolitical and cultural boundaries. In fact, when asked about
the optimal outcome for Israel/Palestine, many of the interviewees referred to some sort of utopian postnationalism or, at the least, to a liberal nationalism of the type predominant in the United States—one not grounded in *jus sanguinis*, but in *jus soli* principles of citizenship (though they recognize great discrepancies between stated principles and practices of citizenship in the U.S. case). Their imagined ideal future for Israel/Palestine was basically identical to that of non-Jewish Palestine solidarity activists.

Of course, they are not the first Jews to articulate a critique of Zionism grounded in ethical and philosophical impulses. They are situated in a formidable line of intellectuals from Hannah Arendt to Noam Chomsky to Marc Ellis to the Boyarins. This turn to an ethical critique of Zionism, however, invites two interrelated developments. The first is to theorize Zion out of Jewish identity through valorizing the diasporic and millennia of Jewish quietism. This subversion of Zionist logic informs the thin secularist imagining of the optimal solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. By “thin secularism,” I refer to the activists’ deployment of abstracted concepts of citizenship as regulative principles, as if such profound restructuring of geopolitics can be achieved without thick socio- and religio-cultural work. It is as if some activists believe the mere realization that Zionism is philosophically and ethically untenable, and coming up with a better idea, will open the way for theorizing the sociological and anthropological embodied realities of Zionism out of existence. On the other hand, my interviews and study of blogs and programs developed by the rabbinical council of Jewish Voice for Peace (JVP) show that, while in many respects parasitical on idealized interpretations of what American nationalism ought to be, the content and process of refiguring Jewish-American identity is highly relational and historical. It involves reimagining the Jewish meanings of liturgy through a Palestinian perspective and reconnecting to a Jewish tradition of social justice activism embedded within the prophetic motifs.

The holiday of Sukkot in 2013, for instance, offered an occasion for protest and constructive reimagining of Jewish identity. Activists associated with JVP marked the holiday publically by constructing ritual Sukkot outside Israeli consulates in key American cities. The public Sukkot meant to protest the Prawer Plan to displace Bedouins from the southern part of Israel by showing what the holiday was originally designed to commemorate. The activists
protested Israeli policies through constructing Jewish space (the Sukkah), a ritualistic act, and through reclaiming the Jewish meanings of the holiday: being in temporary and unstable resting places. The Sukkot example shows that Jewish resources can be employed to articulate a specifically Jewish critique of Israeli policies.

Jewish resources are also used constructively through reinterpreting apparent axioms by retrieving competing motifs within the vast tradition and by ritually practicing accordingly revised liturgies. That these developments happened through the space of solidarity illuminates the degree to which the broader tradition of human rights could influence religious practice, texts, and norms of engagement. Notably, however, this process does not amount to subordinating tradition to a set of norms supposedly over and against it; rather, it is an effort to reclaim alternative ways of being Jewish-American. I use the hyphenated construct here to underscore that the question concerning the meanings of being Jewish must be asked contextually, and understanding the answers requires unpacking the sociocultural and other resources employed in responding to it. The Jewish-American Palestine solidarity activists are first and foremost critical caretakers of an American Judaism, whether or not they have fully theorized or even recognized their indebtedness to their American context.

**Why the Comparison?**

The comparative study of religious justifications within the same tradition but in divergent contexts exemplifies the relevance of the study of nationalism. In the case of the American Jews, their Americanness increasingly overcomes the hegemonic hold of Zionist narration of Jewish identity. The ethical outrage and subsequent processes of reimagining their identity as Jewish persons outside the logic of Zionism are shaped by their Americanness, which allows them to engage in a process of de-Zionization of Judaism and which then informs their rationalization of social action. This process, clearly, is not available within the Israeli context, which points to the importance of substantively engaging national and sociocultural contexts in the analysis of an ethical reasoning, enmeshed in complex manners with religious traditions. The analysis of the two cases, notably, is oriented by the norms of human rights. Two
interrelated points emerge from my intersectional analysis of the two cases of contemporary Jewish ethical reasoning. First, focusing on the resources and the reasons underlying religious innovations makes it possible to study religious ethics in a nonconformist and nonconservative fashion. (A conservative study of religious ethics tends to rely on a narrative of modernity as a lamentable fall, asking either how religious persons challenge the imposition of a bifurcated and autonomous self or what kind of logic can be identified within the designated spheres of “religion” as it relates to other spheres of “secular” social relations.) Second, an expansive theorizing of violence as including deadly as well as systemic, cultural, and religious forms can facilitate scholarship that is attentive to silenced, nonofficial actors and how they justify their actions. This expansive interpretation of violence overcomes the tired critique of traditional CRE as abstracted from context, elitist, official, textually based, and/or biased.

At this juncture, it is worthwhile to discuss key developments in the study of religion outside the scope of religious studies in order to determine what kind of niche CRE can fruitfully occupy.

II. The Intersectional Approach to CRE
Rethinking International Relations Theory

The so-called global resurgence of religion generated interrogation of dominant paradigms in IR theory and practice. Drawing on works in religious studies that historicize the binaries of the religious and the secular and that foreground the colonial and orientalist legacies of the study and construction of “religion” as the binary of the “political” and the “secular” (see Shakman-Hurd 2008, for example), critics demand rethinking the templates that shape IR. These deconstructive critics complain that IR theory and practice need to come to terms with their historicity and the cultural, theological, philosophical, and ethnic particularities that belie their claims to universality. Immanuel Kant’s generic religion and the Westphalian synthesis are marshaled as key evidence in establishing the Christian- and Eurocentrism operative in the production of basic paradigms in IR. The de-naturalizers of IR are met, on one side, by those who wish to underscore the causal force of religion (read in a sui generis manner) in IR (Philpott is a prime example here) and, on the other,
with theological (Cavanaugh) and postcolonial (Mahmood) lamentation of the turn to modernity as a political project.  

Political theorist Daniel H. Nexon intervenes in the debates about religion in IR theory in a way that recognizes the validity of the discursive critiques and their challenge to the secularist myopia of the reigning analytic paradigms. However, he warns IR theorists against reinvigorating the old debate concerning the relative worth of materialist or idealist explanatory frames. Marshaling archival evidence, Nexon argues that recognition of “the importance of power-political calculations despite the pre-secular and religiously inflamed character of the Reformations era” challenges the impulse of critics to reconceive the explanatory frames in IR following the post-1979 “discovery” of religion as an under-theorized factor. Instead, Nexon contends, “the significance of religion should be evaluated by comparing the relative importance of material and ideational factors in any particular outcome” (2011, 151). Drawing on C. Wilcox et al., he is likewise critical of the constructivist temptation to theorize religion reductively (and in a biased manner) as “a set of preferences, choices, values, or identities” while also acknowledging “religion does shape, inform, produce, and otherwise translate into preferences, choices, values, and identities” (156).

Moving away from materialist or idealist monocausal explanatory frames concerning religion, Nexon asks IR theorists to think of religion as a discursive context that “creates the conditions of possibility for action” (157). “Shoehorning religion into the ‘ideas’ side of the material/ideal debate unacceptably restricts our ability to analyze the impact of religious forces on world politics.” His study of the Reformations illuminates “that religious beliefs proved flexible enough to accommodate a range of actions—most of which were also seen as religious imperatives” and that the deployment of religious reasons cannot be analyzed only as instrumental, but rather invites a deep and nonreductive analysis of how religion relates to shifting historical circumstances. Nexon wants to underscore that while religion is more than preferences and norms for the purpose of political science, it can be theorized as such because it “also manifests itself in a variety of different sources of behavior” (158). Avoiding cultural reductionism as well as a tendency within some sectors of political theory to posit “religion” as sui generis (essentially unaware of how this mode of analysis in religious studies was put to rest years ago), Nexon nonetheless
brackets religion-qua-“form” as the appropriate focus of IR. The operative question, accordingly, concerns how “religion implicates social relations that take form quite familiar to international relations theorists” (159). This abstraction would allow us to discern patterns regardless of variations, a conceptual move that would help IR theorists to approach religion through the familiar study of social organization (160). While Nexon solves a crisis in IR theorizing when confronted by its own secularist and modernist legacy, he leaves space for scrutiny of religion attentive to its relationships with historical, social, cultural, and political formations. The new theoretical scrutiny in IR is relevant to my discussion here as it sheds light on a space for the intersectional study of religion. In other words, the study of nationalism allows a nonreductive entry point for the study of religion because religion intersects with and authorizes collective identities in complex and varied ways. Within this line of analysis, political or nationalist reasoning also entails a particular (and always selective) mode of religious reasoning and justification. A name that comes to mind, in relation to the requirement to study religion through this prism, is Max Weber by way of David Little.

**Coming Back Home**

I therefore concur with Kelsay’s proposal that a way forward for CRE will involve embedding the Weberian insights that informed *Comparative Religious Ethics* within Weber’s overarching sociological work. In his own rethinking of CRE (forthcoming in the *Journal of Religious Ethics*), Little agrees with Kelsay’s assessment that, in focusing on correcting “Weber’s oversimplifications of the patterns of practical reasoning in early Christianity, ancient Judaism, ancient Buddhism, preliterate societies, and other traditions,” he and Twiss neglected to integrate “the sociological portions of Weber’s legacy” into the analysis. Little concedes that they “offered an account of ethical and religious reasoning that was almost totally abstracted from the social institutional setting in which such reasoning ordinarily takes place” (forthcoming). However, Little’s later work (for instance, 1995; 2011; 2012) offers a critical corrective to the so-called “formalist” approach. Its synergetic interpretive understanding of the relations between religion and sociopolitical institutions allows space for studying religious change in a way that picks up where a recalibrated political theory of religion (à la Nexon and Shakman-Hurd) leaves off. It also offers a substantive
challenge to “perspectival studies” and a way forward for theorizing future research trajectories in CRE. I further contend that one reason behind the traction of Little’s later comparative work is its interdisciplinary orientation, attentive to scholarship on nationalism and IR as well as to the cultural sociology of religion and peace studies. This interdisciplinary outlook is highly consistent with the Weberian approach and is key to the future scholarly and public relevance of the subfield.

Little’s typology of nation-states and religions highlights, for instance, how state institutions themselves influence the forms and content of religious traditions as they relate to conceptions of nationalism and vice versa. Drawing on various theories of nationalism and specific case studies, he underscores that the construction and reconstruction of the meanings and ideals of a “nation” relate to ethnic and religious proclivities and interpretations that “vary as to how tolerant (inclusive) or intolerant (exclusive) they are.” Additionally, Little’s typology distinguishes between a diversity of national ideals and their constitutive institutions and sociopolitical practices: constitutional democratic states, illiberal and liberal democracies, authoritarian regimes, and so forth. “Given that states are understood to be the product of their own specific ‘external influences,’ and that they exert their own reciprocal influence on the ethnic and religious values that make up the legitimating national ideals,” Little continues, “the interaction between nation and state is probably best described as ‘synergistic’ so as to avoid reductionist or simplistic theories of social causation” (2011, 15).

Little’s typology is valuable in determining a correlation between ethnic/religious interpretations of national ideals and the types of nationalism associated with such interpretations. With this in mind, the move toward greater exclusionary interpretations of Zionism as I discussed above is hardly surprising considering the logic of the Occupation with its system of barriers and check points, and the “elective affinities” between secular and religious varieties of Zionism. Indeed, types of nationalism are key determining factors that predict the likelihood of eruption of direct violence. Moreover, a clear move to a “religiously tolerant, inclusive definition of the ‘Nation’” and thus to liberal modes of nationalism with a high level of democracy and religious tolerance (and the state institutions that embody such ideals) positively correlate, Little argues, with the reduction of the likelihood of deadly violence. The opposite is also
correct: illiberal nationalism with its low levels of democracy and religious tolerance (associated with religious intolerance and an exclusive definition of the 'Nation') is a likely predictor of violence.

This attention to the nation-state as a locus for the comparative study of religious ethics is crucial because it acknowledges that the category of citizenship is no mere abstraction, but rather is filled with meanings and embedded in social practices and attachments. Benedict Anderson (2006) famously discussed modern nationalism as denoting radical shifts in conceptions of time and space from vertical to horizontal: from messianic time to empty time and with this a sense of the sovereign and bounded conception of space associated with nationalism. Nationalism is about a this-worldly redemption in the form of self-determination. To be authorized and sustained, however, it needs to generate in citizens sufficient passions and commitments to make them willing to offer potentially ultimate sacrifices for the perpetuation of this social construct that, as Anderson wrote, was imagined in relation to cultural and religious antecedent resources and not invented ex nihilo, as Ernest Gellner had it. The elective affinities and the relation of continuity and fulfillment between secular and religious Zionism expose the reliance of a modern form of nationalism on a particular mode of imagining cultural and religious antecedent building blocks. Likewise, the intensification of the co-imbrication of religious and secular Zionism in Israel demonstrates that legitimizing control of another people requires resorting to more and more explicitly Jewish arguments; a simple “universal” allusion to the right of self-determination holds diminishing traction.

Little draws on Anderson’s insights as well as other theorists of early modern nationalisms such as Anthony Marx, whose historical study Faith in Nation (2003) highlights the complex relations between proto-state institutions and institutional logic and religio-cultural modes of politicization and authorization of such institutions. The process of creating proto-nationalisms necessitated a selective targeting of a “domestic other” (such as what the Inquisition did to the Jews in Spain). However, Marx also argues that the logic of liberal democracies explains a trajectory from these exclusionary origins toward greater and greater inclusivity. In other words, he challenges the conventional myth of modernity as originating in the conception of tolerance that animated the new structure of the modern nation-state. The pertinent points here are
that modernity did produce a new form of political and social organization—the “state”—and that religio-cultural modes of identifications, meanings, and experiences informed, always in selective ways, the “content” and boundaries of the “nation.” Marx’s thesis also suggests that the particular institutions of the state significantly influence the processes of renegotiating the scope and meanings of the “nation” or its symbolic boundaries. To this extent, Marx’s analysis complicates ethnosymbolist approaches to the study of nationalism (see Smith 2003), which under-theorize the role of state institutions in reshaping national identities to a point in which they can subvert those symbolic boundaries and institutional practices. It also, therefore, complicates state-centric narratives about modernity that foreground the Foucauldian logic of biopower and ever-expanding governmentality.

The two terms of the hyphenated construct “nation-state” are not synonymous; rather, they call for analysis of how religion relates to the state’s authority and legitimacy as well as the embodied meanings and practices of citizenship. This insight allows Little to bring Weber’s discussion of the “elective affinities” among religion, culture, ethnicity, and nationality to the foreground. Another related point concerns the supposed secularity of the modern nation-state and its this-worldly focus on self-determination and the differentiation of spheres of social interactions. By “this-worldly” I refer specifically to Anderson’s insight that modern nationalism required “transforming fatality into continuity” (2006, 11) in the form of the perpetuation of the group or the nation as an extension of one’s family. This is, of course, a highly functionalist interpretation of nationalism as a replacement for a religion or as a quasi-religion.

Sociologist of religion Slavica Jakelić has critiqued this line of analysis, arguing that religions have always been what she calls “collectivistic” and thereby downplaying the supposed novelty of modern nationalism (2010). Durkheimian types of analyses only get us so far in scrutinizing how conceptions and practices of the “nation” can change over time and understanding the relevance of religious traditions, state institutions, and external factors to such change. Other sociologists of religion have contributed further theoretical and empirical insights that reinforce—though without directly engaging—Little’s effort to centralize the nation-state as the nexus for the study of religious reasoning and justification.
Sociology of Religion and Nationalism

Sociologist Roger Friedland, for instance, identifies the “erotic logic” of religious nationalism (in contexts as diverse as Israel, the United States, and India), whereby “religious nationalists direct the bulk of their attention to the bodies of women—covering, separating, and regulating their erotic flesh” (2002, 396). In this reframing, it is the family, not the individual, that functions as the basic unit of analysis and foundation of nationalism. “Religious nationalists,” Friedland writes, “seek to constitute the faith-based family, understood as a vehicle of divine creation, both as a model of the polity and as the elemental unit of which the nation is composed.” Hence, religious identification becomes the definitional fabric of the collective identity of the nation as well as “the source of its ultimate values and purpose on this earth. Religious nationalism fills existent state forms with new cultural contents, new sources of authority; it does not necessarily displace them” (383).

Friedland’s analysis of religious nationalism provides a different angle into Little’s typology—one in which sociological empirical study unpacks the processes behind the expansion or contraction of symbolic boundaries. Cultural sociologists, notably, theorize symbolic boundaries as “the lines that include and define some people, groups and things while excluding others. . . . These distinctions can be expressed through normative interdictions (taboos), cultural attitudes and practices, and patterns of likes and dislikes” (Lamont et al., 1). This definition, reflective of the lasting influences of Durkheim and Weber on the study of symbolic boundaries and their impact on classification and structures of inequality, points to the possibility of more centrally engaging sociological research in CRE.

Other works in the sociology of religion similarly venture toward deciphering the intersections between political or national formations and the sociology of religion. Friedland still operates with a secularist presumption of religious nationalism as constituting a binary “ontology of power” to the one informing secular forms of nationalisms, rather than as a spectrum of ways in which religion intersects with and authorizes political structures and communal modes of identification. Yet sociologist of religion Geneviève Zubrzycki’s comparative study of the role of religion in constructing or challenging national (not state) boundaries operates with significantly less pronounced binaries concerning the secularity of secular nationalism. Little’s line of
work is reinforced by Zubrzycki’s sociological research on the intersections of religious and political actions in the two Catholic but divergent contexts of Quebec and Poland. She makes a general argument and suggestion for further research on the “various registers through which religion, religious action, and religious tradition are rendered meaningful to social actors, used for different goals (religious and not), and transformed in the process” (2012, 443). She most directly engages the theory of religion developed by sociologist of religion Martin Riesbrodt. She argues that while Riesbrodt’s main focus pertains to practices oriented by a belief in superhuman powers, from the perspective of the study of nationalism, his main interest concerns how “beliefs and practices are yoked to issues of authority, political legitimacy, and social contest” (ibid.). Zubrzycki’s point of departure is not Durkheimian functionalism, however, because of her emphasis on content as well as form. Her study clearly demonstrates the importance of centralizing nationalism in analyses of religious and political actions and justification. With respect to the case of Poland, she documents how certain segments within Polish society celebrate Jewish heritage, despite the absence of Jews in Poland and in order to challenge the closure of the symbolic boundaries of Polish nationalism on the basis of Catholic homogeneity and the low level of public support for pluralism. That is, a curious philo-Semitism in the form of Jewish museums, Jewish festivals, and the establishment of departments of Jewish studies functions as a symbol of liberalism, pluralism, civic identity, and secularity in Poland, thereby opposing exclusive ethnoreligious Catholic interpretations of nationalism that have gained traction since the collapse of communism (444–46). In Quebec, though, a reinterpretation of Catholicism as secular “cultural heritage” is meant to counterbalance what xenophobic rhetoric labeled as excessive “accommodationism” with respect to immigrants and “others” who tend to be more explicitly and visibly religious (specifically Muslims, Sikhs, and Orthodox Jews). “Québécois,” Zubrzycki concludes, “remain ‘Catholic’ in their secularism despite relegating Catholicism (as Religion) largely to the past. Catholicism as religious tradition nevertheless continues to inform ‘who they are’ in a broad cultural way” (450) and in a manner similar to how secular Zionists reinterpreted their Jewishness.

Zubrzycki’s analysis, when combined with Friedland’s work on religious nationalism, underscores key issues that concern the sociological study of
religion and that relate directly to Little’s typology. These analyses open up possibilities for the kind of knowledge CRE can produce to further develop the intersectional approach to the study of religious, social, and political justification and action, and how those relate to normative concerns with violence and justice. The first is the distinctions they both draw between content and form and the subsequent limits of a Durkheimian analysis of nationalism as a religion replacement. The relations between nationalisms and religions are much more complex and cannot be subsumed under functionalist accounts, which is something that Anderson already recognized in his critique of Gellner. Second, that the same religious tradition intersects differently with collective socio-cultural and political identities foregrounds the need to analyze context, including the operative political institutions, cultures, and possibilities for dissent and protest. For instance, during communism, underground Catholicism in Poland was associated with ideas promoting an open society and pluralism, whereas since the end of the communist era, a more exclusionary interpretation of ethno-cultural Catholicism (supposedly based on demographic statistics indicating Poles’ homogeneity) has prevailed. Third, regardless of whether “religiousness” becomes interpreted as a “heritage,” whether tradition becomes synonymous with the nation, or whether the survival of a tradition depends on the political projects of the nation-state, both Friedland’s and Zubrzycki’s accounts underscore the elasticity in which religious spaces, rituals, memories, texts, practices, and so forth turn into national spaces, rituals, memories, texts, practices, and vice versa. The above detour into the sociology of religion substantiates the importance of the nationalist discourses within which religious and other types of actions take place. It also suggests that distinguishing religious from political action and identities can become quite a fuzzy exercise—and discounts the intersections of various identities within individuals.

Students of religion need to acknowledge that the nation-state and the inevitability of the discourse of nationalism and citizenship provide the orienting context for the scholarship and practice of religion: central to our analyses are modern concerns and institutions that foreground engagement with the meanings and structures of citizenship, pluralism, toleration, human rights, and so forth. Framing such concerns only as imperialist, Eurocentric, orientalist, and altogether a form of intellectual and cultural violence, as many critics
operating within the tradition of Talal Asad do, participate in a reactionary type of scholarship that is ironically modernist (in ultimately segregating the religious vis-à-vis the political and social), even while claiming to challenge modern conceptions of self, autonomy, and freedom (Mahmood 2005, 2012).

A focus on how religion intersects selectively with national imaginations and on the mechanisms for and content of socialization (national museums, mythologies, martyrs, and holidays) also makes room for the study of lived counter-experiences and narratives of citizenship, where and how religion intersects with these counternarratives, and why religion intersects with them differently (as in the two cases of Poland and Quebec or in the two cases of Jewish reasoning presented above). Thus, the analysis of religion’s intersection with the production of symbolic boundaries and the regulation of sociopolitical and cultural practices is pertinent and multidirectional.

Nationalisms (and the international system associated with the Westphalian moment are not only complexly related to religio-ethnic and cultural contents but also can become religiously and messianically significant either as a crucial instrument to defend a tradition, such as Sinhala Buddhism in Sri Lanka, or as the embodiment of an end-time drama, as in Jewish religious Zionism. In both cases, the consolidation and popularization of chauvinistic interpretations of the nation cannot be explained purely on the level of religious “content” but rather demand a historical, institutional, and sociocultural analysis. At the same time, careful attention to “content” and the vast repository of traditions remains crucial and requires expertise political scientists do not have and in any case tend to bracket (see the discussion of Nexon above). While the inclination of scholars and other commentators is to label such exclusionary interpretations of nationalism and tradition as pathological and antithetical to the authentic “good” and secular nationalism, the binaries they posit are more misleading than illuminating. Little’s approach does not presuppose the possibility of overcoming linguistic and other boundaries altogether; rather, he wishes to identify institutional, religious, and cultural resources and other variables that can encourage the cultivation of less exclusionary interpretations, which then could reduce violence and suffering. It is in this context that the later Little does his CRE. I find it curious that scholars of CRE mostly interact with the early Little, urging him to overcome his conceptual and
contextual white Protestant traps, not recognizing that he moved on a long
time ago by embracing the very Weberian sociological insights that he and
Twiss had previously neglected. He moved on, however, to offer a more
refined account than the reactionary “formalist” mode of analysis, and his
work in CRE has since had a wide-ranging influence across disciplines and
beyond the academy as well. The work of Scott Hibbard in comparative
politics exemplifies one direction of influence: Little’s typology of nation-
alism and states and its relation to a typology of religion helped Hibbard
productively compare religious nationalism in Egypt, the United States,
and India. Another area of Little’s influence is in the subfield of religious
peace building where special attention is devoted to what led certain indi-
viduals to develop religiously grounded outrage and formulate alternatives
to the ideological formations within which they are otherwise embedded.
This attention goes back to another old typology—prophetic vs. priestly
religion—that an analysis that centralizes nationalism expands.

Critique
So far, I have established the relevance of nationalism to the study of CRE.
I have argued that Little’s later work integrating Weber’s sociological approach
to the study of religious ethics and his overriding concern with the global
reach of legal rationality and secularization moved the field into a produc-
tive area of research. While not always fully embracing genealogical and
discursive critiques (2006), there is no reason why Little’s approach cannot
expand to theorize more fully the discourses of secularism as they intersect
with religious and political reasoning, meanings, and patterns of sociopoliti-
cal collective action. Little is preoccupied with two interrelated forms of vio-
ence. The cultural and systemic ones relate to violations of freedom from
compulsion and from the power of the state in matters of conscience. The
second manifests in deadly violence against minorities and additional per-
ceived cultural or ethnoreligious national “others.” Yet the “naturalness” of
national boundaries comes under little scrutiny. As in the case of Israel, failure
to interrogate the ethnocentric symbolic boundaries of Israeli nationalism can
perpetuate a misinterpretation of the question of Palestinian-Israelis as merely
one concerning minority rights and failing to consider how they became a
minority to begin with or how framing their status as a “minority” contributes
to their depoliticization and domestication. At this juncture, a genealogical and historicist critique can intervene productively to expose the historicity of ontological claims of identity. On the other hand, remaining only within the realm of critique—which has influenced the turn to virtue ethics—overlooks the importance of theorizing religious ethics within the nexus of the nation-state framework with its institutional constraints, sociocultural and political assumptions, and normative imperatives. The turn to virtue ethics reinstates unreconstructed modernist narratives about the emergence of the “state” as the ever-expanding site of governmentality operative on the logic of realist geopolitics. This is where radical orthodoxy meets the postcolonial critique of modernity: modernity is narrated as a lamentable break with pre-modern tradition and moral coherence. The religious person is presented here over against the Leviathan “state” with no attention to the authorizing discourse of nationalism, the person’s national formation, or how this formation intersects with religiosity and tradition. An intersectional approach to religion and nationalism is not “additive” (considering citizenship and religiosity as two distinct formations), but rather constitutive (whereby the meanings of citizenship and national belonging are entangled in constitutive ways when being Quebecois and Catholic or Jewish and Israeli are one and the same while sharing only a selective relation toward the respective traditions to which they relate). Glossing over this intersectionality by positing an abstract interpretation of the “state” and citizenship contributes to conceptualizing a purist and supposedly pre-political interpretation of religion. This theoretical bifurcation brackets the messiness of the intersectional approach by derailing CRE to the realm of virtue ethics and scrutiny of technologies of self-cultivation vis-à-vis the expansive logic of governmentality. One of the conceptual pitfalls of this derailment is a homogenizing narrative of modernity and the role of the liberal nation-state in its implementation of religious displacement. Zubrzycki’s work shows that attentiveness to contextual factors is crucial; it highlights not only the complex relations between religion and politics but also the modes through which both religious traditions and nationalisms change each other. Mahmood’s later work further reifies the modern state and its logic of governmentality whereby any use of the discourse of religious freedoms is denounced as imperialist and insidious (Mahmood 2012; see Omer 2015 for an extensive critique).
To suggest, as I do, that Little’s later work offers a way out of excessive critique of any kind of normative teleology—one that dissolves the categories crucial for the comparative enterprise—simply illuminates the centrality of theorizing the nation-state and the tradition of human rights as orienting variables without which conversations of religious ethics are highly decontextualized and even reactionary. Here, engaging with contemporary efforts to rethink conceptual paradigms in IR theory and the study of religion and nationalism can be beneficial for CRE. Little’s study of nationalism, and the various ways in which religious resources and hermeneutics intersect with state institutions and nationalism, is always guided by a normative commitment to human rights conventions. This commitment guides his typology, allowing and indeed demanding scrutiny of both inclusive (“good”) and exclusive (“bad”) interpretations, justifications, and embodied practices. This interpretive frame is by no means limited to “official,” elitist, and/or male-dominated resources. On the contrary, it is open to engaging lived, nonofficial spaces where counterarguments are articulated and enacted with greater consistency with human rights norms. My study of Jewish Palestine solidarity activists falls under this rubric.

This approach overcomes what Kelsay recognizes, following Pierre Hadot, as the “Foucauldian disjunction” between social analysis and ethics characteristic of the turn to virtue ethics (Bucar 2008; Mahmood 2009; Yearley 1997; Stalnaker 2005) and one that Michel Foucault himself eventually moved away from (Springs 2009), implying that undoing the systems of oppression entails using inherited resources. Indeed, “selves acting toward utopia are also acting out of an inheritance; one might even say that their ability to imagine better and more just social-political arrangements rests on a creative appropriation of existing mores” (Kelsay 2010, 491). Without theorizing the place of a particular telos framing the formation of selves, Kelsay stresses, the study of the formation of the self through the prism of virtue ethics becomes a form of “dandyism” (2010, 490). A crucial point that emerges from Kelsay’s response to the turn to virtue ethics in CRE is the charge that the Foucauldian legacy this wave of scholarship is riding is “devoted to the self as a work of art” to the exclusion of a “responsibility to make existing institutions better, and [scholars] thereby contribute to the oppression they profess to abhor” (ibid., following Hadot’s critique of Foucault 1992). Here Kelsay articulates the kind of normative
underpinnings that inform Little’s comparative study of religion and violent conflict in divergent national contexts. It is not only about how explicitly religious modes of reasoning and justification relate to questions concerning the use of force or pacifism but rather about how religion intersects with nationalism and state and the role of nonreductive, trans-historical resources of tradition as interpreted contextually. Likewise, multidirectionality is crucial: the study of how the very embodied and novel experiences, resources, and perceptions that emerge within the contexts of the nation-state challenge, transform, and innovate within the resources of tradition. To identify innovations would require moving away from a state-centric analysis of the political in the fashion exhibited in Mahmood’s work. Importantly, the nation-state, as Weber famously pronounced, aspires to a monopoly over the use of violence and force. That monopoly is authorized socioculturally and reinforced through a variety of channels, but not without the possibility of misfires in the processes of socialization, hence the multidirectionality I suggested above.

One does not need to commit to Weber in order to recognize the value of this approach and to acknowledge that it offers constructive and indeed necessary avenues for the future of the study of CRE. In Little’s comparative Intolerance Project, under the auspices of the U.S. Institute of Peace (researched during the 1990s), the analyst in cases under investigation needed to study religious and ethical reasoning as they play out within and in relation to the institutional contexts of the nation-state and whether the state conformed to prescribed norms regarding minority rights, freedom of conscience, and religious belief and practice. The analyst needed to be attentive to how the interactions between the institutions of the state and religious people potentially transform one another in a multidirectional manner where ethical resources of religious traditions play multiple roles. Little’s Intolerance Study and various similar trajectories not conventionally categorized under the rubric of CRE signal a direction for CRE if this subfield aspires to public and academic relevance. The problem is not that religious ethics has become irrelevant, but rather that scholarship, especially that associated with the so-called “third wave,” is detached, as Kelsay argues, from the obligatory Weberian insight concerning the need to analyze the relation between sociopolitical institutional frameworks and the processes of religious reasoning (2010; 2012). The nation-state system, as well as its distinct modes of negotiating the relations
between the religious and the secular and its underlying assumptions about human agency, authority, and community, is central to this effort to reconnect the study of religious ethics to the sociocultural and institutional contexts and to orient it to an elastic and self-correcting tradition of human rights.

To conclude, it is necessary to respond to the question of what kind of knowledge CRE can produce to establish itself as a distinctive subfield. Little was right to highlight the nation-state as the nexus of analysis and the relation of deadly violence to respect of the rights of minorities and religious freedoms and the freedom of conscience. The international system of nation-states embodies, as Little notes in his forthcoming assessment of CRE, the “globalization of legal rationality.” Therefore, what happens to “religion” in diverse contexts is of crucial relevance and an area of a particular contribution for CRE because different religious traditions offer divergent resources for responding to and reshaping the institution of the state. Some of these resources are transhistorical, thus the focus on retrieval and reinterpretation. Others emerge in the form of innovation in the face of lived and concrete historical challenges, as in the case of the Jewish Palestine solidarity activists profiled here. The condition of “statelessness” that Arendt was preoccupied with illuminates the importance of sociopolitical and legal boundaries to human rights discourses. Denationalizing groups of citizens involves often racializing religion, a process pertaining directly to reshaping national boundaries. The process, Little stresses, can also move in the other direction. Hence, it is crucial to pay attention to how religio-cultural interpretations relate to the construction, regulation, and deconstruction of symbolic boundaries and how such boundaries influence the practices of citizenship.

The intersectional approach to the study of religion and nationalism requires mixed methodologies and disciplinary modes of engagement, including religious, philosophical, theological, historical, historicist, and ethnographic. It requires recognizing that the discourse of citizenship is pervasive, and that persons’ formations take place within this space that is itself filled with cultural, religious, and ethnic content and mechanisms of socialization and commemoration. A nonreductive approach, however, also illuminates alternative historical, textual, and embodied arguments that could intervene in, negotiate, and potentially transform social, cultural, and political attitudes and institutions. One question an analyst might ask in any particular context
is why such alternatives are underplayed or gain momentum and what kind of sociocultural, political, and institutional practices might help cultivate these alternatives consistent with a relational interpretation of justice.

Notes

1. For critique of this approach to the analysis of religion and violence, see Asad (2007) and Cavanaugh (2009).
2. For a specific critique of this line, see Omer (2011, 2012).
3. For a discussion of Arendt on statelessness, see Bernstein (2005).
4. For an overview of some of these patterns, please consult the website of The Association for Civil Rights in Israel, http://www.acri.org.il/en/category/democracy-and-civil-liberties/anti-democratic-legislation/.
6. See Omer 2015 for a discussion of the ironic meeting points of radical orthodoxy and the Asadian line of analysis as exhibited in Saba Mahmood’s work on religious freedoms.
7. For a critique of this trajectory see Omer (2015).

Works Cited


