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# **THE POST-MODERN AS NEO-MEDIEVAL: INTERSECTIONS OF RELIGION, NATIONALISM, AND EMPIRE IN MODERNITY AND BEYOND (WITH AN EXCURSUS ON ALBANIAN NATIONALISM)**

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DOI: 10.1515/seeur-2017-0025

## **Abstract**

This essay connects Benedict Anderson's analysis of print capitalism as the enabling feature of modernity for the emergence of nationalism with an account of pre-modern sacral imaginings. It argues, following Bronislaw Szerszynski, that the contemporary post-modern ordering of the sacred vis-à-vis nature and culture designates a 'partial-return' to pre-modern imaginings and a reterritorialisation of religions which engenders emerging multiplicities and co-existing differences. It argues furthermore that the nation state (and its corollaries), an institution of modernity cannot adequately respond to the antagonisms generated by

the post-modern ordering of human communities and their identities. However, though this new ordering may be conceived, following Robert Bellah, as neo-archaic, it may also be conceived as neo-medieval. Accordingly, this essay proposes that the most congenial configuration to the post-modern ordering is the neo-medieval model of fuzzy borders and overlapping jurisdiction, particularly as it pertains to Albanian national identity and EU integration as a post-secular alternative to secular national-determination on the one hand, and neo-Ottomanist theocracy on the other.

**Keywords:** *modern / postmodern, secular / postsecular, nationalism, empire, Albanian*

## INTRODUCTION

It has become customary to begin an explication of the concept of a nation and its various working definitions by expounding Benedict Anderson's three paradoxes in the introduction to his *Imagined Communities*. I will not deviate from this academic orthodoxy, especially since this paper assumes a broadly Andersonian stance vis-à-vis the concept of the nation, however I will give to the Andersonian treatment a neo-medieval thrust. I will argue, after providing some general remarks about the nature of the relationship between religious and national identity processes, especially in the context of European modernity, that the neo-medieval model of European unity (particularly regarding the European Union's eastward expansion) provides a post-secular

alternative to national self-determination. I will ground this argument in an account of the origins of Albanian nationalism. Accordingly, Anderson articulates the following three insights about the antinomic nature of nations:

- 1 The objective modernity of nations to the historian's eye vs. their subjective antiquity in the eyes of nationalists;
- 2 The formal universality of nationality as socio-cultural concept - in the modern world everyone can, should, will 'have' a nationality, as he or she 'has' a gender – vs. the irremediable particularity of its concrete manifestations, such that, by definition, 'Greek' nationality is *sui generis*;
- 3 The 'political' power of nationalisms vs. their philosophical poverty and even incoherence (Anderson, 2006, p. 5).

(1) is most immediately a statement on primordialism, the essentialist and essentialising view of nations as ancient and natural entities – which is rejected in this essay - as a necessary property of all nationalist ethno-histories, and it is what I am going to focus on. Consider the now famous example of Sukarno, the first Indonesian president, who spoke honestly about resisting 350 years of Dutch colonialism in Indonesia, even though the latter is an essentially 20<sup>th</sup> century invention and the Dutch had only colonised its territories in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. However more fundamentally it is a statement on not the historical existence of nations but their fundamental orientation vis-à-vis historical time. For one way to characterise modernity is as that which eventuates the passion for the new, as the era in which being modern becomes a fundamental

value. This entails at the same time an orientation towards the future and towards the thinking of all political and moral ends in teleological or eschatological terms, which stands in opposition to the pre-modern orientation towards the past, especially when this is conceived as a relation to an originary beginning (such as original peace in Christianity). This is part of the reason why, as Hastings argues, Christianity was a condition for the possibility of 19<sup>th</sup> century nationalism, whereas Islam's historical role was generally one of hindrance (Hastings, 1997, p. 165). Christianity is arguably in this sense the first 'modern' religion since it eschatologises its own original peace in more conspicuously historical terms and as Taylor points out, it has become difficult to think historically without this concept (Taylor, 2007, p. 129). On the other hand, Löwith has argued convincingly that modernity distinguishes itself from both classical antiquity and Christianity with the full development of the 'modern' idea of progress (to which the nation and nationalism stand in an invariably ambiguous relation). For Löwith, this is partly because Christians are not a 'historical people' insofar as salvation history designates the salvation of individual souls and is therefore not connected to any conception of a nation (including in a pre-modern sense) (Löwith, 1957, p. 195). Furthermore, modernity has been defined by its apparently permanent supplanting of the Aristotelian teleological modes of thought which characterised the Catholic middle ages so that, *pace* Hastings, the religious context of the beginnings of European nationalism much more plausibly designates the opposition between Catholic and Protestant influences, broadly identifiable as hindering and encouraging, respectively.

## NATIONALISM AND RELIGIOUS MODES OF THOUGHT

One can see how the question of the relation between religion and nationality immediately enters the discussion (particularly in relation to ethno-national groups with religious content). For there is an important sense in which Anderson is right to claim that the 18<sup>th</sup> century as well as marking the dawn of the age of nationalism (at least primarily in Western Europe) also marked the dusk of 'religious modes of thought' (Anderson, 2006, p. 11).

Needless to say, I am not claiming that the appearance of nationalism towards the end of the eighteenth century was 'produced' by the erosion of religious certainties, or that this erosion does not itself require a complex explanation. Nor am I suggesting that somehow nationalism historically 'supersedes' religion. What I am proposing is that nationalism has to be understood by aligning it, not with selfconsciously held political ideologies, but with the large cultural systems that preceded it, out of which — as well as against which - it came into being (Anderson, 2006, p. 12).

However, one could plausibly make the weaker claim that nationalism responds to this erosion, thus generating the primordialist paradox since it is partly because of the loss of confidence in religious soteriological projects and this transformation of time (as both fundamentally forward-facing as well as homogeneous and empty, to borrow from Benjamin) that the national identity of the sort we are discussing becomes possible. The enabling cultural productions of print capitalism notwithstanding, a

number of intellectual developments which emerge in modernity make nations possible. This is already something acknowledged by Anderson, but perhaps not accordingly addressed in *Imagined Communities* (Anderson, 2006, p. 22). The loss of confidence in religious soteriological projects had been underway since at least the time of Francis Bacon (Bacon, 1965, pp. 350-351) and often in the context of the repudiation of the Aristotelian orthodoxy of the time which excoriated the teleological and therefore the eschatological or 'historical'. Unsurprisingly, Bacon himself based his account of the sciences on the psychological distinction between reason, memory, and the imagination and inaugurated the resulting divide, which would become increasingly characteristic of European modernity, between science, history, and the arts.

What emerges from these observations is a confusing picture about the role of Christianity with regard to the beginnings of modernity, nationalism and the nation. I have already intimated that much can be cleared up by pointing to the emergence of modernity as a phenomenon internal to the history of Christianity itself. Thus, as Milbank has argued in his genealogical work *Theology and Social Theory*, what may be regarded as quite exhaustively constitutive of modernity can be traced back to essentially theological developments in the late Middle Ages. (The post-Reformational division between Catholic and Protestant modes of thought vis-à-vis the nation is continuous with these developments.) It is moreover important to point out in relation to Anderson that the emergence of nations does not designate the emergence of imagined communities *tout court*. The conditions for the

thinkability of the nation, as well as the subsequent (if we indulge the demands of strict chronicity) conditions for its material emergence refer to a shift in the form of the imagination (and hence in its possibilities<sup>24</sup>). Imagined communities existed before the nation, and the latter in some ways, as I hope to show through an analysis of its relationship to religion, constitutes a moment in the historical evolution of different orderings of the sacred.

## PRE-MODERN IMAGININGS

The cultural systems which in the presently relevant sense preceded that of the nation were the religious community and the dynastic realm:

For both of these, in their heydays, were taken-for-granted frames of reference, very much as nationality is today. It is therefore essential to consider what gave these cultural systems their self-evident plausibility, and at the same time to underline certain key elements in their decomposition (*Ibid.*, p. 12).

Now Anderson's analysis of the former focuses on the significance of truth languages though he does not sufficiently emphasise the medieval Church as an imagined community. This may be because of the overidentification of the imagining process with the cultural productions of print capitalism, and indeed the latter displace for Anderson (and rightly so) the mediations of truth-languages (*Ibid.*, p. 18). However, he argues that nationalism ought to be treated as something belonging with

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<sup>24</sup>For the philosophical significance of possibilism over actualism (another repudiation of Aristotle), see Milbank, J., *Beyond Secular Order* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2013).

'kinship' and 'religion' rather than with something like 'marxism' or 'liberalism', and his very recognition of the mediating work of truth languages in the creation of the 'trans-European Latin-writing clerisy' (*Ibid.*, p. 15) of the Middle Ages is enough to think the medieval Church as an imagined community, indeed one whose objective was, unlike that of the communities of ethno-national groups, to incorporate within itself all political and civic life. This community, imagined as the community of the faithful, both alive and dead (and therefore more congenial to most traditionalisms), and conceived as a *corpus mysticum*, was capable of encompassing, as Troeltsch has shown, the whole of humanity (Troeltsch, 1931, pp. 238-239). This is a consequence, as we will see, of that period's monotheistic ordering of the sacred. Note that Anderson's famous example of the cenotaphs and tombs of Unknown Soldiers as the paradigmatic emblems of the modern culture of nationalism, conceived as such because of the relative unintelligibility of counterexamples like the 'Tomb of the Unknown Marxist' or the 'cenotaph for fallen Liberals' (Anderson, pp. 9-10), does not emerge from without at the dawn of nationalism, but from within the logic of the preceding sacral orderings. The reason that a sense of absurdity is unavoidable with regard to the examples of cenotaphs of dead Marxists above has to do with the fact that 'neither Marxism nor Liberalism is much concerned with death and immortality. If the nationalist imagining is so concerned, this suggests a strong affinity with religious imaginings' (*Ibid.*, p. 10). The same sense of absurdity does not follow the suggestion of a 'cenotaph of fallen Christians'. Though this would nevertheless be an undeniably modern phenomenon, it would not be nationalistic. Hence the common



inscription (not mentioned by Anderson) on the stones of empty tombs: 'known only to God'<sup>25</sup>.

The question of the relationship between religion or religiosity and the nation or nationalism typically involves many presuppositions about religion deriving from the state of modernity's sacral ordering without calling for an account of how the sacred came to be ordered in the way that it did at the time that nations were becoming imagined and how it was ordered before this emergence. As Debray has pointed out, the appearance of the monotheistic God of the Abrahamic religions in relation to which the emergence of the nations is mapped out is a 'delayed revelation'; a religious phenomenon appearing very late in the history of the human species (Debray, 2004, pp. 17-19). There is a tendency towards conflating monotheistic theophany with more archaic hierophanies which obscures the transition to a cultural system which enables the nation as a moment in a larger history of transitions of orderings of the sacred. Our studies of small indigenous societies which have survived into our modern period reveal an ordering of the cosmos bound by a circular temporality without the now common-place organisation by a distinction between the transcendent and empirical as well as arguably without, as Bronislaw Szerszynski has argued in Heideggerian terms, any ontological difference, *viz.* a difference between beings and the Being of beings (Szerszynski, 2005, p. 16). This is

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<sup>25</sup> Interestingly, the setting up of burial societies for the dead and often unknown dead was an early modern development as a function of working-class communitarianism forged through religious cooperation. This was in some ways a way of resisting the material excesses of the Industrial revolution and resulted in what Milbank and Pabst call 'an almost unique internationalist movement of patriots' (Milbank and Pabst 2016, p. 80).

important because the (at least seemingly) irreducible primordialism of nationalist ethno-histories hangs on the necessity to imagine the being of national communities as constituting the nation beyond the irreducible plurality of national members, even if as Anderson emphasises, this irreducibility is a function of the impossibility of absolute face-to-face contact in even the smallest nation (Anderson, 2006, p. 6). It follows that the imagining of national communities designates precisely this irreducibility, in so far as to imagine the nation is to imagine its irreducibility to its individual members, to think its limit and sovereignty (*Ibid.*)<sup>26</sup>. To suggest that nations can be understood in terms of how they order what they value and that these orderings should moreover be seen as developing out preceding orderings or the sacred which continue to be part of developments in the religious world is not to commit to a Durkheimian de-theologisation of the sacred. Following the mapping of the encouraging and hindering influences on European nationalism on the Catholicism-Protestantism axis, subsequent developments relating to the status of the nation and nationalism can be mapped onto the succeeding modern and postmodern sacral orderings. Hence the mapping of the intersecting forces onto a diachrony part of an evolutionist thesis (as in Robert Bellah or Szerszynski, which involves the 'supplanting' of the historic religion type or monotheistic or Catholic sacred by the early modern religion type or Protestant sacred) is made more intelligible by the addition to the systematisation (absent in Bellah) of the post-modern

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<sup>26</sup> Compare for instance, with the primal religion of the hunter-gatherer Mbuti pygmies of Congo who identify their community with the life-cycle of the forest (which is projected as a both paternal and maternal); 'When we leave the forest or when the forest dies, we shall die' (Szerszynski, 2005, p. 17). It is clear that this involves one kind of imagining process, but one ordered by a primal sacred which precludes even the thinkability of the nation.

sacral ordering (Szerszynski, 2005, p. 9) as a counter-ordering of the modern which is itself prefigured by the Protestant ordering. Much of this post-modern ordering designates a congenial inheritance of various 'Catholic' tendencies, as I will later argue in relation to the neo-medieval model of EU integration.

## POST-MODERN IMAGININGS

But even if, following Gellner, we construe the nation as something invented by nationalism rather than construe nationalism as the self-conscious awakening of a people *qua* nations (Gellner, 1964, p. 169), we should emphasise that imagining involves a creative processing of historical memory. Recall Todorova's reply in *Imagining the Balkans* to Cohen's claim vis-à-vis the Yugoslav wars that 'the notion of killing people... because of something that may have happened in 1495 is unthinkable in the Western world. Not in the Balkans' (Cohen, 1995, p. 24). Yes, the Yugoslav wars in the Balkans involved killing over something that happened 500 years ago; a considerably greater civility is by contrast attributable to the West because, in light of its longer span of civilised memory, kills over something that happened 2000 years ago (Todorova, 2009 p. 8). Thus, the distinction between a modern and a primal ordering of the sacred cannot be unproblematically expounded today in terms of a standard evolutionary theory of the Frazerian ilk. The implausibility of such views today is very much a contemporaneous implausibility and buffered by Szerszynski through the introduction of the post-modern sacred as a self-conscious structural synchronisation of the evolutionary forms (Szerszynski, 2005, p. 9). Historically however,

or at the level of the conception of the sacral orders as a terminated diachrony, the movements through the five forms still explicate the development of the conditions for the possibility of the nation and nationalism. The primal sacred is 'succeeded' by what is in a strict sense referred to as the archaic sacred, used by Bellah to refer to the religious systems of Africa and Polynesia (as well as the earliest religious systems of the ancient Middle East, India, and China) (Bellah, 1964, p. 364). The primary innovation of this form is the true cult which originates the complex of gods, priests, worship, sacrifice, etc.. (Following Szerszynski we can include within the archaic sacred the pagan cultures which obtained before the Abrahamic religions (Szerszynski, 2005, p. 17).) We can easily identify the modifications of significance vis-à-vis the development of the conditions for the possibility of the nation in the archaic ordering of the sacred, namely the sharpening of the distinction between men as subjects and gods as (newly objectified) objects (the overall cosmological monism which it shares with primal religion notwithstanding) leading to the necessity for a system of communication for human-divine interaction, which is crucial for Anderson's account of the role of truth-languages. Older and wealthier families begin to be seen as having a divine descent introducing more generally the potential for the sort of traditions national imagining will later involve. And it is at this time that the relationship between religion and politics becomes more interactive, in a way which arguably leads to a further differentiation of religion and the sacred. Social conformity which had up to that point been religiously enforced and sanctioned is problematised by the definiteness of deities as distinct from humans which now become involved in struggles between rival groups. This

change characterises the early history of Israel, as well as the early Greek preoccupation with the involvement of the gods in events of the Trojan War from which ensues the profound deepening of religious thought from Homer to Euripides (Bellah, 1964, p. 365).

Thus, it is easy to anticipate the monotheistic sacred or the historic religions of Judaism, Christianity, Buddhism, and Islam. The religious rationalisations of political change lead first to Judaism in the history of Israel, as well as to certain aspects of Greek philosophical thought, most notably Platonism and its permutations which become synthesised with various Jewish traditions (via Philo) into Christianity. Monotheism is important because it collapses the cosmological monism of primal and archaic religions in favour of what one might call an ontological distinction between the transcendent and the empirical, though this 'dualism' manifests in a number of complex configurations (including many which cannot be satisfiably expounded in dualistic terms). Because these religions are relatively recent they have generally be subjected to historical rather than archaeological, ethnological, and anthropological research. As Bellah puts it:

Not only is the supernatural realm "above" this world in terms of both value and control but both the supernatural and earthly worlds are themselves organized in terms of a religiously legitimated hierarchy. For the masses, at least, the new dualism is above all expressed in the difference between this world and the life after death (Bellah, 1964, p. 366).

The monotheistic sacred introduces a series of notions which become a key part of subsequent orderings of the sacred and Western civilisation

in particular; key ideas such as that of a single truth, of nature, and of society (Szerszynski, 2005, p. 18). Accordingly, diversity of religious belief is reconstrued in terms of orthodoxy and heterodoxy, viz. its deviations. It is only once one understands this aspect of the shift from primal and archaic religions to monotheistic religions that one begins to appreciate Marco Polo's famous description of Kublai Khan taken by Anderson as evidence of the role of the explorations of the non-European world on the decline of the European religious community.

What is so remarkable about this passage is not so much the great Mongol dynast's calm religious relativism (it is still a religious relativism), as Marco Polo's attitude and language. It never occurs to him, even though he is writing for fellow-European Christians, to term Kublai a hypocrite or an idolater. (No doubt in part because 'in respect to number of subjects, extent of territory, and amount of revenue, he surpasses every sovereign that has heretofore been or that now is in the world.') And in the unselfconscious use of 'our' (which becomes 'their'), and the description of the faith of the Christians as 'truest,' rather than 'true,' we can detect the seeds of a territorialisation of faiths which foreshadows the language of many nationalists ('our' nation is 'the best'- in a competitive, comparative field) (Anderson, 2006, p. 17).

What Anderson doesn't point out is that this territorialisation of faiths is at least in part a *re*-territorialisation (as Debray has intimated) – further indication of the coincidence of the modern and primitive in the structure

of nations and nationalisms. The monotheistic sacred of the historic religions, according to Bellah, effects a kind of 'demythologisation' relative to the ordering of the archaic sacred (Bellah, 1964, p. 366). This is true in so far as there can be no genuine henological sources of myth; the one God has no myth. And it is somewhat made more convincing by the emergence of apophaticism in Christian theology, the proper theological approach of speaking about God only by negation, i.e. in terms of what he is *not*. However, where there is perhaps an absence of a creation myth there is a creation doctrine; the constitution of the vertical axis of the monotheistic God totalises the human species creating the conditions for the very notion of a human society apart from nature.

As I have already indicated, the *prima facie* construal of monotheistic religion, and specifically in the relevant instance of the medieval Christian religiously imagined community, as a dualism in fact refers to a theologically developed complex of mediations between the natural and the supernatural, the human and the divine, achieved primarily through a semiotic subordination of the former to the latter. However, what has come to be known as the first truly 'modern' ordering of the sacred is the Protestant (or 'early-modern' for Bellah) sacred which strips away all the institutional and supernatural hierarchies which mediated the empirical and the transcendent (Szerszynski, 2005, p. 19). What changes with this Protestant sacred is that God's ontological transcendence becomes an epistemological one (Hyman, 2010, p. 71). This is the product, as Milbank has shown, of philosophical and theological developments consummated in the early 14<sup>th</sup> century, particularly in the work of Duns Scotus who first entertains a theory of

creation which posits creation as univocal to both the created and uncreated (Milbank, 2006, p. 305). The consequence of this move metaphysically is that 'Being' as such is not something merging from and created by God (as is it is paradigmatically for the monotheistic 'religions' initially), but is something which the human and the divine both share. The distinction between the two becomes merely 'quantitative' and is thus necessarily recast in epistemological terms. This is important because it effects a paradoxical double shift: on the one hand, it emphasises the transcendence of God, in so far as the divine is no longer mediated (especially materially) in the empirical world, and on the other it reconceives religious action as indistinguishable from the whole of life – as can be best understood from the Lutheran doctrine of the priesthood of all believers. It is only once the practices to which all other values are subordinated become secularised and wordly that the axiological content of the nation is thinkable and the practice of nationalism materially potent<sup>27</sup>.

The trans-European-Latin-writing clerisy defined by Anderson as the imagined community which preceded that of national communities in Europe involved the paradigmatic monotheistic ordering of the sacred, as did those predecessors of modern nations communities in other parts of the world, such as the Islamic world.

Take only the example of Islam: if Maguindanao met  
Berbers in Mecca, knowing nothing of each other's

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<sup>27</sup> Note, that this is partly because the univocity of being entails a compromise of ontological difference vertically and especially for religious traditions of mediation like Catholic Christianity.



languages, incapable of communicating orally, they nonetheless understood each other's ideographs, because the sacred texts they shared existed only in classical Arabic. In this sense, written Arabic functioned like Chinese characters to create a community out of signs, not sounds. (So today mathematical language continues an old tradition. Of what the Thai call + Rumanians have no idea, and vice versa, but both comprehend the symbol.) All the great classical communities conceived of themselves as cosmically central, through the medium of a sacred language linked to a superterrestrial order of power. Accordingly, the stretch of written Latin, Pali, Arabic, or Chinese was, in theory, unlimited. (In fact, the deader the written language – the farther it was from speech - the better: in principle everyone has access to a pure world of signs.) (Anderson, 2006, p. 13).

Thus, one could also understand the difference between Christianity and Islam in terms of their relationship to nationalism (one as 'constructor', the other as 'restrainer') in terms of the absence in the latter of the cultural productions of print capitalism (in the crucial early phases of its history). The irony that the 'Scotist revolution' did not quite occur in Islam, but that Scotus himself was in a way theologising the work of the Islamic commentator on Aristotle Averroes should not be underappreciated (Hyman, 2010, p. 69). But in any case, the early-modern ordering of the sacred described above gives way to the fully-fledged 'modern sacred' from within which nations and nationalism arise. Post-Scotist theology and subsequently Protestant thought is, in a manner which arguably is

anticipated in this kind of thought itself, heavily secularised, possibly with the neo-Stoicism of Justus Lipsius. The story is a long but one can trace its immediate effects in modernity:

The sixteenth century sees the taming of the unruly military aristocracy, and its domestication in court service, court attendance, or estate management. The eighteenth century begins to see the taming of the general population. Riots, peasant rebellions, social disorders begin to become rarer in Northwest Europe. Until we reach the rather high standards of non-violence which most Atlantic societies expect in their domestic life. And growing through all this development, partly driving it, partly strengthened by it, is a growing sense of our ability to put this kind of order in our lives. This confidence is at the heart of the various programmes of discipline, both individual and social; religious, economic and political, which begin to make us over from the sixteenth-seventeenth centuries. This confidence is consubstantial with the belief that we don't have to compromise, that we don't need complementarity, that the erecting of order doesn't need to acknowledge limits in any opposing principle of chaos. And because of this, this drive to order is both offended and rendered insecure by the traditional festivals of reversal. It cannot stomach the "world turned upside down" (Taylor, 2007, pp. 124-25).

Hence secularism becomes a methodology for achieving this kind of order, though the projects for the imposition of this new order happen to

involve the violent renunciation of the present order. Indeed – and one can see here the conceptual traces of Averroistic methodology – secularism becomes a way of achieving any project, including a religious one, in so far as in a Protestant or post-Protestant world religious projects become so wordly as to be ‘aided’ by secular praxis, this being precisely why the ‘integrity’ (in the numerous relevant senses of this word) of the religious content of such a project is always in a state of increasing excoriation. But more importantly, out of this dynamic comes the need to synthesise, perhaps both in theory and in practice, a ‘progressive’ element of the secular with a ‘regressive’ element of the archaic.

The post-modern sacred designates a much more contemporary ordering constituted by the coexistence of multiple standpoints and this (still) emerging pluralistic landscape excoriates the institutions of modernity including most notably that of the nation state. Szerszynski’s thesis is that this new ordering denotes a ‘partial return’ to the logics of the primal or archaic sacred because it is premised on the collapsing of the organising dualism of the monotheistic and Protestant sacreds<sup>28</sup> (Szerszynski, 2005, pp. xv, 22). Bruno Latour has argued in *We Have Never Been Modern* that modernity’s chief project of ‘purification’, viz., of the separation of nature and human society, or of pluralistic multiculturalism and homogeneous mononaturalism, has never succeeded and hence we have never been (successfully) modern. The organising dualism of the modern purification process however is not, *pace* Szerszynski, hegemonic in the monotheistic sacred, even if, as Milbank contends, it emerges in the late middle ages. I have suggested

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<sup>28</sup> Hence the common ‘post-modern’ moral relativism of arche-political visions.

elsewhere that this phenomenon of the post-modern excoriation of the modern via the partial return to the effectively pre-Christian engenders a dilemma between (to use a typology advanced by Josef Bengston) a French-Catholic and Deleuzian post-secular sacral vision<sup>29</sup>. The latter, which resonates with Szerszynski's post-modern sacred draws on the resources of the primal and archaic sacreds, particularly in what Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari identify as the 'first' philosophy of monistic immanentism (Deleuze et al., 1994, pp. 35-61). This division ensues partly from the fact that Christianity (and note that Szerszynski's monotheistic sacred includes pre-Reformation Christianity and Greek philosophical thought) never satisfiably appropriated Pagan philosophical thought even though the latter remains constitutive of its irreducible eclecticism (Milbank 2013, pp. 22-23). Thus, it becomes possible to think the post-modern sacred not only as neo-archaic but as neo-medieval, since the latter's supplanting of the organising dualism of the monotheistic and Protestant sacreds in fact refers to the supplanting of a model of a strict division between the immanent and the transcendent which originates in the middle ages, but cannot accurately be said to characterise the dominant model of medieval Christianity which instead involves the mediation of the immanent and the transcendent<sup>30</sup> (Bengston, 2015, pp. 112-115).

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<sup>29</sup> For a more detailed account, see Demjaha, D., (2018) 'Christianity or Barbarism: John Milbank's Aberrant Post-Secularity' in *The Routledge Handbook of Post-Secularity*, ed. J. Beaumont. London: Routledge. (Forthcoming)

<sup>30</sup> This confusion is part of a long-standing tradition of modern misreadings of medieval Christianity most immediately evinced by Comte who projected onto the Catholic middle ages a post-Reformational division between spiritual and temporal power.

## ***EXCURSUS ON ALBANIAN NATIONALISM***

I would like to now focus on some more specific reflections about the history of Albanian nationalism and the possibilities for its contemporary rethinking. It becomes possible to understand Albanian nationalism only in terms of the multiple religions of the Albanian populations of the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century in relation to which a couple of problematic theses ought to be rejected. Both of these, however, are half-true. The first is the view that the multiplicity of religions amongst Albanians constituted a divide across religious lines which stultified nationalistic unity. On this view, secularism overcomes religious division as nationalisms more generally overcame the religious communities at the time hence the platitude ‘Feja e shqyptarit asht shqyptaria’ (‘The religion of Albanians is Albanianism’) (Anderson, 2006, p. 11). It is true that secularism was a necessary way of ‘overcoming’ division across religious lines, but only in so far as it was part of a strategy which has already been intimated, namely towards a new drive for order, and more specifically, self-order. That religion was very much part of the nationalisms at the time is no surprise, but this incorporation was not merely contingent, though its presence in Albanian nationalism is made subtle by the very real existence of the religious divide. Albanian nationalism is considered unique because of its relation to Islam, and at the level of its historical manifestations this is obviously the case. But the sources of Albanian nationalism were something very much shared by other nationalisms in countries under Ottoman rule. For even though the Islamic world as a whole, where one is inclined to include the Ottoman Empire, was not changed by print capitalism in the manner in which the Western or

'Christian' world was changed, the Ottoman Empire was nonetheless subjected to a process of 'Westernisation' concordant with the secularising shifts of the modern sacred which affected the nationalisms of the countries under its control accordingly (and west of Constantinople this also included the imagining-processes of print capitalism).

Perhaps the most lucid illustration of this process is the *Tanzimât* reform of the Ottoman Empire that began in 1839 as a conscious but ironic project of self-protection against nationalist movements (Cleveland et al, 2009, p. 82). It expressed the Imperial drive, emblematic of modernity, to control the masses and the correlate drive of the occupied countries towards self-order and movement. The move to tame, first the military aristocracy (whose uniforms even were Westernised), and then the masses, described by Taylor in Europe, involved essentially the subordination of ethics to politics, as systemic and methodological secularisation requires and was exemplified amongst other things by mass conscription and total war – unsurprising, since one of the major *Tanzimât* reforms involved the replacement of the *Devşirme* military system - the very system through which the primary totemic figure of Albanian nationalism 'Skanderbeg' became, in a manner very much significant to Albania nationalist ethno-history, a nationalist soldier - with universal conscription (Deringil, 1993, pp. 9-29). A parallel development was the social policy of Ottomanism, intended to palliate possible (or in some cases actual or semi-actual) nationalist identities, which paradoxically entailed the equal treatment before the law of all peoples in Ottoman territories was instigated by Edict of the Rosehouse

(The *Gülhane Hatt-i Şerif*) (*Ibid.*). This essentially amounted to a recognition of all of the various peoples' individual identities precisely because it declared a universal nationalism (Ottomanism; as opposed to a universal religion) and therefore recognising the individual nations which Ottomanism subsumed. (This was fortified by the fact that the *Tanzimât* reforms also attempted the elimination all of the Empire's millets (which contrary to popular belief meant something like 'nation' only in the vocabulary of Turkish nationalism (Roshwald, p. 60) which designated externally imposed courts which defined peoples in terms of their religion. Most fundamentally, what this 'modernising' process that I have been describing achieved is the eliminations of particular genera vis-à-vis religion or alternatively the thinkability of a universal abstract genus, in predictably Scotist fashion<sup>31</sup>.

Though it may seem intuitive to think of a universal genus 'religion' which has Christianity and Islam (etc.) as its species, this is usually a misguided way of thinking about religion. Each 'particular religion', thinks its own universal such that, as Slavoj Žižek has argued, Christians and Muslims do not only disagree, but disagree on how the disagreement ought to be formulated (hence the nature of each identity as a 'concrete universal' which answers Anderson's second paradox) (Žižek 2000, p. 316). This abstract universal of secular modernity is what allows for what I have hitherto referred to as methodological secularism, and in the case of Albanian nationalism, the apparent construction of the secular

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<sup>31</sup> 'Whatever pertains to 'being', then, insofar as it remains indifferent to finite and infinite, or as proper to the Infinite Being, does not belong to it as determined to a genus, but prior to any such determination, and therefore as transcendental and outside any genus (Duns Scotus, 1962, p. 2).'

nationalistic 'religion' which Pashko Vasa in his late 19<sup>th</sup> century poem 'O moj Shqypni, e mjera Shqypni' called *Albanianism*. The importance of this poem (probably written in the year of the League of Prizren) as the primary literary source of Albanian nationalism or even more radically of 'Albanianism' - which it invents - cannot be overestimated. Its most famous line, '*E mos shikoni kisha e xhamia: Feja e shqyptarit asht shqyptaria!*' is construed in its traditional interpretation as a straightforward anti-religious statement which asserts the importance of national identity over against religious identity which compromises *Albanian identity* which is (always already) divided along religious lines. And this reading is essentially supported by

Ndër një qind çeta jeni shpërnda;  
Ca thonë kam fë ca thonë kam din;  
Njeni: "jam turk", tjetri: "latin"  
Do thonë: "Jam grek", "shkje"-disa tjerë,  
Por jemi vllazën t'gjith more t'mjerë!  
Priftnit e hoxhët ju kanë hutue,  
Për me ju damun me ju vorfnue!

However, it is also greatly problematised by the concluding line

*Të desim si burrat që vdiqnë motit, Edhe mos marrohna përpara zotit.,*

which paradoxically re-establishes the divine as the universal reference point for 'Albanianism'. The question is which God is being referred to in the poem, especially if the religious divide is being argued against. Is it simply Vasa's own God of Catholic Christianity? Interestingly, amongst the series of demonyms Vasa recalls as common self-designations of Albanians (Turkish, Greek etc.) is the pseudo-national



'Latin' (this is a trace of the trans-European-Latin-writing clerisy but also a more alien reference as will see). These, it is said, need to be overcome in favour of a unified Albanian nationality. But notice that Albanianism is precisely *not* simply Albanian nationality. One is tempted to say that it is the 'religious' content of Albanian ethno-national identity, though this not only does not answer the question above but also introduces a new set of questions about the specific identity of Kosovo Albanians. My focus here however is on Albanianism as such and my answer to the question above is the following.

The poem involves two essential projections. Each derives from one of the two stanzas, and the poem's division into two very long and uneven stanzas is no accident. The first stanza is a standard nationalist lamentation of Albania in its 'prelapsarian' state before its division and subsequent loss of the primordial national unity. But recall the early example of Sukarno and consider its similarity to the Albanian situation. The primordial Albanian situation whose loss is lamented by Vasa is pre-Ottoman Albania; the second stanza subsequently presents an ostensibly anti-Ottoman vision. However, the moment of oppression by the Ottoman Empire does not refer to the oppression of a primordial, pre-Ottoman Albania, but on the contrary the oppression of the vision of a free Albania (Žižek 2014, pp. 132-133). *That* is the vision of the primordial Albania which is projected onto the past (and that is the first projection). This is evidenced further by the second stanza which develops the virtuous Albanian response to what may be an Ottoman occupation, premised on the national unity of the Albanian people, which is its most authentic precisely in this opposition. (This is of course a

nationalist myth; there existed no such national unity of Albanians under Karl Thopia at the time of the first contact with the Ottomans, and even Skanderbeg's rebellion did not amount to a universal Albanian uprising and was in fact multi-ethnic (Schmitt, 2012, p. 55).) But the articulation in Vasa's poem, which is constitutive of his nationalist vision, of this virtuous rebellion as a coterminous correlate of primordial Albania, indeed as a *successful* rebellion, which, for Albanian nationalism to be successful, must be repeated<sup>32</sup>, is a reimagining of that already romanticised and nationalised past rebellion which now needs to be projected onto the future. One finds here both a regressive and a progressive projection: to the failed past rebellion against the Ottomans and the future rebellion which will redeem the past. *Albanianism* thus includes an irreducible religious content because its ethno-historical imaginings involve the Catholic-Christian context of the original counter-Ottoman rebellion of the late Middle Ages. 'O moj Shqypni, e mjera Shqypni' could have only been written by a Catholic for this reason. 'Besën e t'parëve t'gjith e harroni', writes Vasa, urging recollection of a vision of Albania and its Catholic ancestrality whose conditions of possibility were thusly context-sensitive and therefore now require re-establishing for the modern nationalist project.

It seems likely that what led Vasa, a privileged Catholic and Ottoman citizen to write 'O moj Shqypni' was precisely the need to redeem the 'failed' anti-Ottoman rebellion whose failure derived chiefly from the fact that the Albanian aristocracy (like other Balkan elites) accepted

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<sup>32</sup> Even though this rebellion was not successful, its repetition would presumably retroactively render it so.

Islam quite quickly and even those who didn't contributed troops to Ottoman conquests (Minkov, 2004, p. 98). In addition, Albanian Christian nationalists, though less secular than their Muslim constituents, sometimes (but always inconsistently as can be seen with Vasa) downplayed their Christianity because as Aviel Roshwald points out, one of the ironies of the Ottoman Empire was that Christian minorities were officially recognised as ethno-culturally autonomous by the *millet* 'system' (Roshwald, 2001, p. 60). (Vasa himself would die in 1882 whilst serving as *Mutessarif* of Mount Lebanon in Beirut, a post specifically created for Catholic Ottomans.) It is therefore striking that though the poem has an 'anti-Ottoman' register it only does so explicitly in the second stanza whilst the first stanza which performs the prelapsarian projection only asserts opposition (or more accurately supremacy) vis-à-vis 'Rumelia' or the Balkans. Hence it may be possible to fix Vasa's obscure anti-Ottomanism to an objection of the millet system which was at the time emerging as the primary object of critique amongst a broad range of nationally-oriented political radicals who would go on to form the CUP (which in its early days was predictably multi-ethnic). The problem with the *millet* courts was that it led to the legal alienation of Albanians across separate confessional communities. Incidentally, the religious group of Albanians most targeted by Ottomans was the Balkan Catholics, with the only Catholic Christians in the Empire integrated within a *millet* being the Francophile 'Latin Catholics' of the Levant. Vasa was intimately familiar with these communities (especially during his tenure in Lebanon which was set up by the French), but their confessional tradition was wholly alien to Albanians (including Catholic Albanians) in the Balkans. Vasa himself was

primarily French writer ('O moj Shqypni' is a virtually singular Albanian work) who saw (at least his) religion as neither stultifying nor enabling national self-determination but as part of a European cultural and historical tradition which mediated Albanian singularity.

The contemporary (and ongoing) repudiation of modernity's institutions in light of the emergence of a kind of post-modern sacred can be felt greatly amongst Albanians and other former Ottoman peoples. In Turkey, this has taken the form of a superficially arche-political repudiation of the Kemalist consensus and a neo-Ottomanist encroaching upon former Ottoman territories (though there exist also Albanian neo-Ottomans). The ebbing of Kemalism is today lamented by secular and nationalist Albanian intellectuals in Kosovo who consider it a role-model for Balkan Muslims and civic secularism (Demjaha and Peci, 2016, pp. 42-45), even though Atatürk's Turkey of the 1930s was repressive of non-Turkish minorities in a manner which is today notably resurfacing (Kieser, 2006, p. 45). However, such representatives are themselves participating in the post-modern (one can freely say neo-medieval) logic of upholding the EU as a bulwark against neo-Ottoman invasions (which include, in a distinctively post-modern fashion, things like cultural influence). Albania on the other hand, has resisted such developments by bolstering the secular nation-state and declaring all Albanian citizens as 'Albanians' (often at the expense of the non-recognition of minorities<sup>33</sup>). The irony of the legal implication of this move, namely that Albanian identity is now imputed by the Albanian nation state to citizens within

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<sup>33</sup> This is a complaint that is now being voiced in the European Parliament.

its borders where far fewer Albanians live than in territories outside Albania, should be noted.

## **CONCLUSION: THE NEO-MEDIEVAL ALTERNATIVE**

Accordingly, it is with some reflections about the relevance of the EU and its eastward expansion that I would like to conclude this essay. Our time is a time of re-emerging empires<sup>34</sup> insofar as the nation-state has stopped responding to the pressures and realities of 21<sup>st</sup> century international politics. Neo-Ottomanist and neo-Sovietist pressures abound in Eastern Europe, with the EU's eastward expansion as constituting an imperial bulwark against such invading forces. As Zielonka has observed, the EU's recent eastward expansion is an exercise in empire-building rather than a routine institutional operation (Zielonka, 2006, pp. 44-65). Furthermore, such expansion has led to 'more layers of authority, more cultural, legal, and political pluralism, more diversified and crosscutting institutional arrangements' (*Ibid.*, p. 3). The current debate between the two options for European integration, that of Westphalian super-state and of a neo-medieval empire tellingly performs the agonism between the modern and post-modern sacral-cultural paradigms. The latter, as may be anticipated, designates the excoriation of strict borders and of absolute sovereignty (which a Westphalian state would require) in favour of fuzzy borders and

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<sup>34</sup> See Milbank, J and Pabst, A., (2016). *The Politics of Virtue: Post-Liberalism and the Human Future*. Rowman & Littlefield International and , and Zielonka, J. (2006) *Europe as Empire*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.

overlapping jurisdictions. Furthermore, the federalist model, as a modernist solution, posits the need for a pan-European identity (rather than positing European identity as that which mediates the singularity of multiple nationalities) which, though flouted as a post-nationalist answer to the limitations of nationalism, is simply nationalism for the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Like the nationalisms of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, it is founded (though not nearly as exclusively) on a mostly creative ethno-history of historical European unity which in fact consisted of geographic and social realities far more congenial to those espoused today by neo-medievalists.

For contemporary Albanians, especially in Kosovo and Macedonia, the neo-medieval model of European unity is a post-secular alternative to current 'ideal' of national self-determination as well as its currently most popular alternative. Even if the patriotic legacy of the national renaissance is to be retained, these traditions were themselves ambiguously related to the emerging modern institutions of the time because they developed within the structures of the Ottoman empire. Indeed, the medieval *millet*s were the main sustainers of pre-modern ethno-cultural identities and the conditions for the possibility of modern nationalist movements. There ultimately exist three typological formations for contemporary Albanians: (1) national self-determination; (2) neo-medieval Europeanism; and (3) neo-Ottomanism. (1) may entail irredentism of sorts (which is increasingly popular in Kosovo) but it may just as well (as it has historically tended) entail the assimilation of Albanians outside the sovereign borders of the Albanian nation-state. (1) is a secularist option. (3) designates a new-found appreciation for Erdoğan's engagement with former Ottoman territories. However, this

neo-Ottoman engagement is deeper in Muslim Balkan territories for self-evident reasons. (3), like Erdoğan's general anti-Kemalism is decidedly anti-secular. It is important to keep in mind that though Kemalism drew heavily on the ideas of the CUP, as Hasan Kayalı *has argued, their policies often reflected adherence to a form of Ottomanism which is today notably resurfacing in Turkey* (Kayalı, 1997, pp. 72-74; Roshwald, 2001, p.106). *Albanians in Kosovo and Macedonia (and of course Bosnians) are still recovering from the failure of the analogous project of 'Yugoslavism'. Hence both (1) and (3) derive from the same sources of European modernity and consequently insist on the incommensurability of diversities, most pertinently perhaps, religious diversities since the modern project of the absolute sovereignty of the nation state leads either to a secular erasure of the religious or a theocratic erasure of a secular space for religious pluralism. (2) on the other hand, designates the option of the integration of Albanian territories under a neo-medieval and post-secular configuration of the EU which neither imposes the hard borders of the first solution, effecting divisions of historically overlapping communities (the real sites of national imagining) nor the encroaching of religious freedoms of the third.*

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