

Religion and Nation:
An Exercise in Comparative Political Theology
with Special Reference to Christos Yannaras and Sri
Aurobindo

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Pavlo Smytsnyuk, Campion Hall, DPhil, Theology and Religion, 2018

Short Abstract

This thesis is an analysis of the ideas of religion and nation from the point of view of their semantic overlap and interdependence. The principal argument of this thesis is that, from a theological standpoint, the line between the sacred and profane lies not where it has been drawn by modernity, i.e. between the religious and the secular or political, but within each sphere. The particular angle from which I am looking at this issue is that of modern nationalism. I challenge modernity's paradigm on two levels. Firstly, by analysing nationalist discourse and action, I claim that nationalism is far from being limited to what modernity defines as 'profane', but instead it often *sacralises* the nation, taking the place that previously belonged to conventional religion or to the pre-modern religio-political whole. Secondly, engaging theologically with Christos Yannaras and Sri Aurobindo Ghose, I argue that the Christian community is a holistic, profoundly political enterprise which, rather than identifying itself with the sacred, should also be able to discern and articulate the sacred outside its institutional borders, in

the secular world of nations. Yannaras and Aurobindo provide resources for challenging modernity's paradigm, but also serve as 'test cases', where both modern and anti-modern paradigms coexist in tension. I highlight this tension through analysis of the construction of respective Hellenic and Indian (or 'Eastern') identities in a theologically dangerous contraposition to the 'West'.

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Extended Abstract

This thesis is an analysis of the ideas of religion and nation from the point of view of their semantic overlap and interdependence. My analysis does not intend to offer a definitive statement on the relationship between nationalism and religion. Rather, what I attempt to do is to contribute to the understanding of this relationship by looking at it from a specific theological perspective, which approaches religion as a holistic and political endeavour. Such a perspective is provided by my comparative engagement with Yannaras and Aurobindo.

The principal argument of this thesis is that, from a theological standpoint, the line between the sacred and profane lies not where it has been drawn by the Enlightenment paradigm, i.e. between the religious and the secular or political, but within each sphere. Drawing on a critical engagement with Christos Yannaras and Sri Aurobindo Ghose, I argue that the Christian community is a holistic, profoundly political enterprise which, rather than identifying itself with the sacred, should also be able to discern

and articulate the sacred outside its institutional borders, in the secular world of nations.

This implies that the prevailing modern view on the sacred and profane is inadequate and incoherent. Since this view is, to a large degree, given or normative, theology should recognise and work 'through' this conceptual incoherence in order to develop an alternative and more suitable semantic framework. Engagement with Yannaras and Aurobindo can help to 'reclaim' the categories of sacred and profane for theology. These two thinkers provide resources for challenging modernity's paradigm, but also serve as 'test cases', where both modern and anti-modern paradigms coexist in tension. I highlight this tension through analysis of the construction of respective Hellenic and Indian identities in a theologically dangerous contraposition to the 'West'.

I propose that when nationalism imitates religion, it not only imitates some religious symbols and narratives, but rather religion's very structure as a holistic religio-political whole, and, no less importantly, religion as ideology—the latter being religion's constant temptation. In other words, nationalism is what religion has often become. In this sense, nationalism may serve as a mirror, in which religion is able to see its own ugliness.

In the first two chapters, I examine those aspects of nationalism which bear a resemblance to religious symbols and narratives. In chapter 1, I

introduce nationalism and the particular ways in which it is linked to modernity. I examine both 'objective' (language, ethnicity) and 'subjective' (sense of belonging) understanding of national identity. I indicate why they are inadequate (one of the reasons is that often nationalisms claim to be about universal humanistic values, rather than ethno-cultural ones). I opt for a solution which emphasises the importance of the *selection* of certain aspects of identity over others (e.g., religion vs. territory, or between various periods of history), and the *belief* that the selected aspects make individuals into a nation. I discuss nationalism in relation to other concepts, namely patriotism and communalism, and argue that the very distinction between these concepts is itself part of the nationalist struggle against its external and internal 'others'—foreign nationalisms and religion, respectively. There is something novel about nationalism, and the way it constructs identities and institutions, with respect to the political and identity paradigms of the past. However, many of its ways of proceeding are not invented *ex nihilo*, but use the mechanisms of the past. I argue that nationalism has recourse to sacred symbols, gestures and narratives, thus presenting itself as a sort of religion; I then discuss this phenomenon as linked to secularism. The final section of this chapter is dedicated to the most relevant *topos* of appropriation of sacrality by nationalism. I argue that it is through sacrifice—in its essential etymological meaning of *sacrum facere*, to make holy—that nationalism

conceives itself to be of the highest of value, being both sacred and capable of sacralisation. I end with the question of whether sacrifice and sacrificial ritual turn nationalism into religion, and whether nationalism can be understood as a religion or not, a theme on which the coming chapters elaborate.

Chapter 2 is dedicated to the 'sacred', and its appropriation by nationalism. Here I engage in dialogue with Emile Durkheim and Anthony D. Smith, in order to understand what meaning is being given to the sacred in general, and to see how this category is applied within nationalism. I discuss several major problems inherent in the Durkheimian conception of religion, in particular the semantic 'emptiness' and asymmetry of the categories of sacred and profane, and a 'tautological' articulation of religion and society. I conclude, however, that Durkheim's approach may yet be of value because the problem of 'tautology' arises as a product of a semantic extraction of religion from the other domains of life, which in itself can be incoherent and problematic. In fact, one can argue that our world—not only pre-modern, but also modern—can be better interpreted in terms of a single socio-religious whole. Moreover, a Durkheimian approach allows for examining nationalism as a continuity with previous legitimation models. I then show how the sacred vs. profane dichotomy works within nationalist discourse and symbolism. The symbols of the national community are purely sacred, set

apart from the profanity of mundane life, which nevertheless is permeated by national sacrality. I also relate the Durkheimian sacred/profane dyad to Schmitt's friend/enemy distinction. In particular, I discuss how a nation may delineate itself in terms of 'humanity' thereby consigning the 'enemy' to the non-human (this is otherwise described by Agamben as the 'bare life' of the *homo sacer*). The content of the first two chapters leads to the question of how it is that nationalism is inspired by religion, and, finally, what is religion. I address these questions in the chapters which follow.

In chapter 3, I begin the comparative part of my thesis. I am led by the theological insights of Yannaras, and use Aurobindo in order to illuminate and challenge Yannaras' arguments. For Yannaras, Christianity transcends all natural necessity, including 'religion'. His theological ideal is the event-church, understood as a *mode of existence*, which consists of communal search and verification of truth. The latter is understood by Yannaras as 'political', which refers to the Hellenic experience of the *polis*. In order to get at the idea of the 'political', I propose two ways of defining (from Latin *definire*, to set a boundary) this category: against (other) religions and against individualism. The chapter then introduces Aurobindo's vision of spirituality as something aimed at the holistic transformation of human life. Contrasting Yannaras with Aurobindo, the thesis raises the question of the possibility of a 'non-religious' Christianity, and of the realisability of salvific life in the pre-

eschatological epoch. Drawing on engagement with both thinkers, I develop the principal argument of this thesis: that the sacred and profane do not coincide with the domains of the religious and the secular respectively, but permeate each domain.

In chapter 4, I examine how the theological claim about the holistic and political nature of salvific life relates to the Enlightenment separation of the religious and the secular. I address this issue by engaging with three lines of critique of the category of religion; namely, that this category is itself a religious (Semitic or Christian or Protestant) concept projected onto other traditions; that religion is a secular category engendered by the modern nation-state; and that it is a tool of Western imperialism. I examine the reasons behind Aurobindo's and Yannaras' reluctance to describe their respective traditions in terms of 'religion' and argue that this reluctance constitutes a refusal to buy into the binary separation of the religious and the secular. Aware of the ideological content of 'religion', both authors are able to engage usefully with the category in order to articulate their respective traditions over against 'religion's' Western connotations and the West as such. I also argue that since pagan *religio* was appropriated by Christianity and changed in the process of this appropriation, there is no reason why the same cannot be done by Hindu traditions.

In chapter 5, I examine how the holistic visions of Yannaras and Aurobindo are contextualised in the nation-centric and Westernised context of modernity. If 'religion' is a Western construct, as argued in chapter 4, to what extent does polemic against it influence the theology produced by non-Western thinkers? I examine the respective articulations of salvific life by Aurobindo and Yannaras, and point out how they attempt to enhance the dignity of their respective cultures, and, in final analysis, of nationalism. I begin by discussing Hindu inclusivism, as an agent of nation-building, anti-Westernism, and Westernisation. Aurobindonian inclusivism can be contrasted with Yannaras' more unrealistic insistence on the return to the Hellenistic 'Golden Age'. I then point out the extent to which Aurobindo's and Yannaras' articulations of respective traditions in terms of 'experience' constitute an attempt to overturn the dominant Western paradigm. Discussion of experience as the essence of salvific life, leads to the question of how the 'essence' relates to particular religio-cultural matrices. I argue that secularisation implies losing the 'essence' in favour of keeping the cultural matrix or accessories. Finally, I argue that since Aurobindo's and Yannaras' ideas are permeated by a polemical rejection of the West, they are not only anti-Western, but indeed post-Western, i.e. conditioned by the West, rather than a return to the 'purity' of respective traditions. Aurobindo's and Yannaras' theologies are political in the Schmittian sense, i.e., as

perpetuating a friend/foe distinction through East vs. West tension. One of the implications of the polemical stance toward the West is that both thinkers—albeit to different degrees—tend to over-identify their own traditions as sacred, and fail to discern the sacrality within the 'other'.

Introduction

(I) Argument

This thesis is an analysis of the ideas of religion and nation from the point of view of their semantic overlap and interdependence. My analysis does not intend to offer a definitive statement on the relationship between nationalism and religion. Rather, what I will attempt to do is to contribute to the understanding of this relationship by looking at it from a specific theological perspective, which approaches religion as a holistic and political endeavour. Such a perspective is provided by my comparative engagement with Yannaras and Aurobindo.

The principal argument of this thesis is that, from a theological standpoint, the line between the sacred and profane lies not where it has been drawn by the Enlightenment paradigm, i.e. between the religious and the secular or political, but within each sphere. Drawing on a critical engagement with Christos Yannaras and Sri Aurobindo Ghose, I will argue that the Christian community is a holistic, profoundly political enterprise which, rather than identifying itself with the sacred, should also be able to discern and articulate the sacred outside its institutional borders, in the secular world of nations.

This implies that the prevailing modern view on the sacred and profane is inadequate and incoherent. Since this view is, to a large degree, given or normative, theology should recognise and work 'through' this conceptual

incoherence in order to develop an alternative and more suitable semantic framework. Engagement with Yannaras and Aurobindo can help to 'reclaim' the categories of sacred and profane for theology. These two thinkers provide resources for challenging modernity's paradigm, but also serve as 'test cases', where both modern and anti-modern paradigms coexist in tension. I will highlight this tension through analysis of construction of respective Hellenic and Indian (or 'Eastern') identities in a theologically dangerous contraposition to the 'West'.

I will propose that when nationalism imitates religion, it not only imitates some religious symbols and narratives, but rather religion's very structure as a holistic religio-political whole, and, no less importantly, religion as ideology—the latter being religion's constant temptation. In other words, nationalism is what religion has often become. In this sense, nationalism may serve as a mirror, in which religion is able to see its own ugliness.

Synopsis

In the first two chapters, I examine those aspects of nationalism which bear a resemblance to religious symbols and narratives.

In chapter 1, I introduce nationalism and the particular ways in which it is linked to modernity. I examine both 'objective' (language, ethnicity) and 'subjective' (sense of belonging) understanding of national identity. I indicate why they are inadequate (one of the reasons is that often nationalisms claim to be

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Aurobindo's and Yannaras' theologies are political in the Schmittian sense, i.e., as perpetuating a friend/foe distinction through East vs. West tension. One of the implications of the polemical stance toward the West is that both thinkers—albeit to different degrees—tend to over-identify their own traditions as sacred, and fail to discern the sacrality within the 'other'.

(II) Importance

Theological engagement with nationalism is important for several reasons. As Benedict Anderson noted some thirty years ago, "the 'end of the era of

nationalism', so long prophesied, is not remotely in sight"¹. Since then nationalism has not disappeared, but continues to constitute an important presence in modern societies, and is inexorably on the rise in many parts of the world. Nation inspires passion and commitment comparable, in a certain sense, only to religion. It is important therefore to look at nationalism through the lens of religion.

Nationalism, understood as an ideology of the nation-state, is more than just *one* ideology among others. Rather, it constitutes *the* way in which the political is being conceived and practiced in the modern world. This suggests the importance of a theological approach to nationalism, capable of evaluating the moral legitimacy of nationalism in its various aspects². This thesis does not aim to perform this sort of evaluation; it rather wants to provide an analysis which can contribute to laying a basis for approaching nationalism theologically.

But the importance of articulating a Christian understanding of nationalism flows not merely from the need to have an ever-more 'engaged' theology. Rather, it flows from the need to reclaim theology from secular modernity for the church itself. In fact, the modern nation-state, by deciding what is religious and what is secular and, even more importantly, by acting as a sacralising and desacralising force, often operates 'theologically' over against a Christian

¹ Anderson 2006, 3. Similarly, according to Wimmer, there is "no institutional form on the horizon of history that could bind the interests of political elites and masses" as does the nation-state (Wimmer 2013, 203-04).

² Cf. Nathanson 1997, 186.

Weltanschauung. Theology should be able to accomplish its own distinctions and draw its own borders. In this way, it will retain its ability to preach the good news and regenerate creation from Above (cf. *Jn.* 3:3-8). By calling for the church to recognise the profane within, and the sacred outside itself, this thesis contributes to the development of a new critical language around the religious/secular dichotomy.

(III) Method:

In recent decades, there have been important attempts on the part of Orthodox scholars to formulate a basis for a theological engagement with nationalism³. These attempts usually draw on eschatology and Eucharistic ecclesiology, and tend to accept modernity's secularist paradigm as given. The acceptance of this paradigm, I would argue, is to a large degree dependent upon the (fully justified) critique of a dangerous symbiosis of the church and state/nation in some traditionally Orthodox countries, like Greece and Russia. For this reason, many Orthodox scholars have looked to modernity as a solution to this problem⁴. This thesis will follow a different approach, namely to question some of modernity's postulates, and see whether new perspectives on openness to, and engagement with, the world could be found in the very challenge to

³ Among the most recent contributions, see Papanikolaou 2012; Kalaitzidis 2012; Kalaitzidis and Asproulis 2012. Cf. Stamoulis 2010; Loudovikos 2012; Hovorun 2015.

⁴ Cf., for instance Kalaitzidis 2002; Hovorun 2014.

some of those postulates.

Comparative political theology

This study is a theological investigation that avails itself of an interdisciplinary approach. Firstly, it uses political theory and research on nationalism (studies both of general character and those that deal with Indian and Greek cases specifically). Secondly, it has recourse to sociology and philosophy of religion, engaging with various approaches to religious phenomena, in particular with Durkheim and Girard. Thirdly, it draws on the insights of postcolonial theory, especially insofar as it applies to an Indian context. At the same time, the thesis is a contribution to Christian theology.

Comparative theology

‘Comparative political theology’ in the thesis’ title suggests that I intend to pursue my analysis by bringing together two approaches, comparative theology and political theology.

When I speak of ‘comparative theology’, I refer to a relatively new discipline, advanced by scholars such as Francis Clooney, John Thatamanil, Hugh Nicholson, and others⁵. The particularity of the discipline—as different from other

⁵ For a general introduction to the method of comparative theology, see Clooney 2010a; b. For some of Clooney’s comparative work, see Clooney 2001; 2015. See also Thatamanil 2006; Nicholson 2011. For some recent engagements, see Clooney and Stosch 2018. For critique of the approach, see, for instance, Drew 2012; Balagangadhara 2014. For a positive evaluation of

approaches, in particular from comparative religion—is that it does not conceive of itself as neutral with respect to the traditions from which it seeks to learn, but rather as committed to the scriptures and practices of the tradition to which the comparativist belongs⁶. In other words, it takes its *theological* element—in *primis* one’s own, but also that of the ‘foreign’ tradition—seriously⁷. The possibility of such an endeavour is based on the understanding of theology in terms of faith seeking understanding, or of human reflection on God and God’s action. A Christian theologian can learn from the ways a ‘foreign’ religious tradition exercises understanding and reflection—without necessarily the need to pronounce on the validity of the presuppositions of the ‘foreign’ tradition. In this sense, comparative theology is a going out of one’s own tradition to a new one, “learning from—rather than merely about” this tradition⁸, and then coming back, with fresh insights, better understanding of, and sometimes challenges to, one’s own tradition.

Comparative theology allows one to approach theological problematics in a way which enables one to see one’s own tradition in a new light. Comparative

comparative theology from an Orthodox perspective, see Papathanasiou 2014, 104. He argues that it is “absolute[ly] imperative” for the Orthodox to be involved with this approach (Papathanasiou 2014, 104).

⁶ Cf. Clooney 2010a, 9-10; Fredericks 1995, 506.

⁷ This also implies a commitment, on the part of the comparativist, not only to the community of scholars, but also—in different ways—to the ‘foreign’ tradition, and especially to her own religious community (cf. Thatamanil 2006, xii and 172, n. 3). However, this allegiance to the communities remains rather intellectual than based on a direct ‘I-thou’ relationship, since it is the texts that are compared (cf. Papathanasiou 2014). Most academic theology, however, is subject to the same limitation.

⁸ Drew 2012, 1042.

theology is “justified by its promise of highlighting features of the compared traditions that otherwise might escape notice”⁹, because they might seem too familiar to those who inhabit the traditions. In this sense, comparative theology is a work of defamiliarisation. According to John Adair,

Familiarity breeds conformity. Because things, ideas or people are familiar we stop thinking about them. [...] Seeing them as strange, odd, problematic, unsatisfactory or only half-known restarts the engines of your minds. Remember the saying that God hides things from us by putting them near to us¹⁰.

This thesis is a work of comparative theology, as described above, in the sense that my engagement with the Hindu tradition is undertaken on Christian grounds, with a desire to see—and, no less importantly, question—the Christian tradition in light of another. I do not intend to produce a list of similarities and differences between Yannaras and Aurobindo. Rather, I will approach them in a specific way, for a specific purpose. The particular angle from which I will be reading them is intended to see how they relate the articulation of their respective traditions with respect to what can roughly be called modernity. Do they accept the post-Enlightened division of reality into the religious and the secular, or the sacred and the profane, and, if not, how do they articulate this lack of acceptance? How does this lack of acceptance affect their respective theological frameworks? Since each of the authors responds to the context of

⁹ Nicholson 2011, 193.

¹⁰ Adair 2009, 17.

modernity, which is perceived as Western and alienating, I will also study whether the responses of one can provide resources for the difficulties of the other.

The last point to be mentioned in relation to comparative theology's method, is that this thesis—in line with Clooney and Fredericks—does not want to be a work in *theology of religions*. Therefore, I will learn from Aurobindo without discussing or pronouncing myself on the question of the validity of Hindu tradition from a Christian theological perspective. However, I will be less radical, than Clooney, in dissociating my work from the problematics of theology of religions. I see two ways in which the thesis relates to the theology of religions. First, I acknowledge that deciding to put Christian theology into dialogue with Hindu tradition, rather than with 'nationalist theologising', implicitly presupposes some criteria, according to which I assess the latter as 'typologically' different from the former. Second, the problematics studied here (in particular my reflection on the *semina verbi* outside church's borders, in chapter 3) will raise the question of how to evaluate other traditions.

The difference between Christian and Hindu traditions is profound, one may even argue that it is so immense as to make them incomparable. But, as Thatamanil rightly observes, there is no other means to postulate the degree of difference, other than comparison itself¹¹. At the same time, the specific focus of my comparison, namely how respective ideas of Aurobindo and Yannaras relate

¹¹ Thatamanil 2006, 4-5.

to certain features of Western modernity, provides what can be called a *tertium comparationis*, a communality, which can serve as an additional reference point of the comparison¹².

Political theology

Another field, to which this thesis belongs is political theology. What do I mean by political theology? Principally, I mean a special link between theology and the political or, more specifically, the interdependence between theological ideas and political concepts. Let me provide a brief genealogy of political theology, in order to better situate this thesis. The reflection on political theology in the twentieth century was, to a large degree, determined by the debate around Carl Schmitt's friend/enemy distinction, and his famous claim in *Political Theology* that "[a]ll significant concepts of the modern theory of the state are secularized theological concepts"¹³. Schmitt's opponent in this debate, Eric Peterson, in his *Monotheism as a Political Problem* refers to 'political theology', when he argues that the faith of the church makes a "fundamental break" with "every 'political theology' that misuses the Christian proclamation for the

¹² Cf. Reinhold 2012, 966.

¹³ Schmitt 2005, 36. Later on, in *Political Theology II*, Schmitt explains that his work deals with a correspondence between theological and *juridical* concepts; he also suggests that his work is not theological, strictly speaking (Schmitt 2008, 148, n. 2). Blumenberg, commenting on this passage, argues that it "reduces the secularization thesis to the concept of structural analogy. [...] [I]t no longer implies any assertion about the derivation of the one structure from the other or of both from a common prototype" (Blumenberg 1983, 94).

justification of a political situation”¹⁴. Although—as Schmitt rightly observes—Peterson’s claim is ambivalent as to whether Christianity renders impossible political theology as such, or only such political theology that *misuses* the gospel’s message¹⁵, it is clear that the accents that both authors put on ‘political theology’ are different¹⁶. Schmitt is dealing with a sort of *genealogy* of (juridical) concepts, while Peterson is more interested in *justification* of political models by references to Christian dogmatics. Although the debate between Schmitt and Peterson about the possibility of political theology was never explicitly about nationalism, it was profoundly connected to this phenomenon, in particular to how it was articulated in Nazi Germany, and to the question of individual resistance to the nation-state¹⁷. It therefore has important implications for one’s understanding of nationalism¹⁸.

The term *political theology* has different meanings in Schmitt and Peterson. What I mean by this term, particularly in the title of this thesis, overlaps with but is different to the meanings given by these authors. In line with Schmitt, it attempts to grasp the fact of ‘migration’ of religious narratives and symbolisms to nationalism¹⁹. Unlike Schmitt, and more in line with Peterson, it intends to offer

¹⁴ Peterson 2011d, 104. Peterson sees his task in demonstrating “the theological impossibility of a political theology” for Christianity (Peterson 2011d, 234, n. 168).

¹⁵ Schmitt 2008, 104-05.

¹⁶ Cf. Adam 2006, 144ff.

¹⁷ See Nicoletti 2012, 525-29; Rosito 2015, 45ff.

¹⁸ Cf. Asad 2003, 189.

¹⁹ I borrow the concept of ‘migration’ from Cavanaugh 2011.

a more robustly theological—i.e. as *logos* which does not want to lose *Theos* from its sight—analysis of the church in relation to what is outside its borders. However, unlike Peterson, it does not dare to come with such a clear-cut separation between what is theological and what is political.

Religion and nationalism: Circularity

The argument of this thesis is developed in a continuous circular movement between nationalism and religion, in order to understand better each phenomenon/category, and to allow one category to illuminate the other. In the initial chapter, I start with nationalism and move towards religion, along with the question of sacrifice, *sacrum facere*. In chapter 2, I do the reverse, beginning with the religious sacred/profane dichotomy, and later applying this dichotomy to nationalism. Chapters 3 and 4 reflect on religion in its different articulations, from holistic to privatised entity, and point out the implications of these articulations for the way in which the secular and the nation-state are conceived. Chapter 5 is a return to nationalism through the study of particular theological ideas. This 'circular' method in fact demonstrates the interpenetration of the religious and the secular.

Choice of authors

The choice of authors for this thesis—who define themselves as non-Western, and belong to contexts which may be described as post-colonial (in different senses of the term for both India and Greece)—constitutes an attempt to look at the religious/political dichotomy from *outside* the framework where this dichotomy was developed and became normative. In other words, Yannaras and Aurobindo help us to see and feel both the pre-modern and anti-modern picture of the link between the religious and the political.

Both authors have been very prolific. Yannaras is the author of more than 50 books. *The Complete Works of Sri Aurobindo* amount to 36 volumes²⁰. Within this vast landscape, I limited myself to those which can be interpreted as dealing with issues of political theology, namely those works which illuminate the interrelation between religion and the political.

From Yannaras' many writings, I engage primarily with *Against Religion*²¹ and *Orthodoxy and the West*²². The former, on the one hand, argues that Christianity is a 'political', rather than 'religious' enterprise, and, on the other hand, provides tools to articulate various ideologies, in particular nationalism, in terms of 'religion'. As for the latter book, it constitutes an example of a political (in the Schmittian sense of friend/enemy distinction) theologising, in which

²⁰ The final reference volume is in process of being published.

²¹ Yannaras 2013.

²² Yannaras 2006.

Orthodoxy is articulated in opposition to the West. I will occasionally have recourse to his other essays²³.

As far as Aurobindo is concerned, besides casual references to other writings, I will primarily engage with what I call the 'social trilogy', namely *The Human Cycle*, *The Ideal of Human Unity* and *War and Self-Determination*²⁴, and his four essays on Indian culture²⁵. These provide material to grasp his political thought and interpretation of Indian past.

This thesis will therefore offer a partial perspective on both authors, and not aim to be a definitive study of Yannaras' and Aurobindo's political thought.

(IV) Novelty

Theology in captivity

In his highly influential *Ways of Russian Theology* (1937), Russian émigré theologian Georges Florovsky argued that Russian Orthodox theology has been subject to a "Babylonian captivity"²⁶. By this, Florovsky meant such a transformation in which the foreign influence (by Roman Catholicism and

²³ For basic theological presuppositions of Yannaras' thought, I will occasionally have recourse to the following works: *The Freedom of Morality* (Yannaras 1984); *Elements of Faith* (Yannaras 1991); *Exi philosophikes zografies* (*Six Theological Sketches*, Yannaras 2012). For his political thought I will occasionally refer to his many articles, both in Greek and English, and the *Kephalaia politikēs theologias* (*Chapters on Political Theology*, Yannaras 1976).

²⁴ Published as volume 25 of his *Complete Works* (Ghose 1997e).

²⁵ These essays (namely, *The Renaissance in India*, *Indian Culture and External Influence*, "Is India Civilised?" and *A Defence of Indian Culture*) have been published as volume 20 of the *Complete Works*.

²⁶ Florovsky 2009. Published in English translation as vv. 5 and 6 of the *Collected Works* (Florovsky 1972-1989). On the metaphor of 'Babylonian captivity', see Gavriluk 2014, 57-59.

Protestantism, as well as German idealism) has profoundly affected Russian theology—not necessarily in its contents, but rather in methods and questions. Subsequent generations of theologians have elaborated on this intuition. Yannaras, in his *Orthodoxy and the West*, shows the extent to which Greek theology, in the Ottoman epoch and afterwards, has been influenced by Western questions and methods, even in the very moments of radical polemics with Western theological ideas²⁷. Recently, George Demacopoulos and Aristotle Papanikolaou have suggested that it could be helpful to approach Neo-Patristic synthesis as a postcolonial phenomenon²⁸. This thesis approaches Yannaras through the postcolonial lens, and, more specifically, through a comparison with Aurobindo. I am unaware of any other attempts undertaken in this sense, with regards to Orthodox theologians.

Looking at religion through the lens of nationalism

Unlike many other studies, which approach nationalism through a comparison with religious identity construction, this thesis not only reads nationalism through the lens of religion; it also suggests that the reverse can be done. In other words, in analysing nationalism, we can see certain things within conventional religion with a clarity which would be unattainable through an intra-

²⁷ Yannaras 2006, 83.

²⁸ Demacopoulos and Papanikolaou 2013.

or inter-religious comparison. In this sense, a critique of nationalism can become for theology an introverted endeavour or, to adopt Yannaras' expression, a 'self-critique', a mirror in which to see its own ugly face.

(V) Explanation of some terms

At this point I will provide some initial working descriptions of the key concepts of this thesis. I will problematise these concepts at various points in my writing, but since some of them will be introduced at later stages, it seems opportune to present them, very briefly, straight from the beginning. They are preliminary in the sense that they are intended to exclude some meanings, rather than elaborate a positive content.

Nation

By 'nation' I understand a large group of people linked by a belief that some selected communalities (such as language, territory or common descent) make them into a special community, which may qualify for self-determination. To put 'nation' in the title of this thesis implies that this is also a study of nationalism and the nation-state. As I will point out in chapter 1, nation, nationalism and nation-state are intimately, in fact, circularly, linked. On the one hand, national identity is defined by nationalism. On the other hand, the modern

state is based on an understanding of society, which considers the nation to be the only source of political legitimacy.

Religion, the secular and salvific life

I will deal in depth with the concept of 'religion' in chapter 4. For now, it will suffice to mention that when not otherwise qualified, I denote with 'religion' or 'conventional religion', a term I borrow from Will Herberg, "the system of attitudes, beliefs, feelings, standards, and practices that, in the particular society, generally receive the name of religion"²⁹. (The full sense of this tautology will become clearer in chapter 4.) Accordingly, 'religious' is an adjective describing what pertains to the sphere of religion. Conversely, 'secular' is what lies outside the sphere of religion. I do not consider the spheres of 'religion' and of the 'secular' as rigid entities. Throughout history, things secular entered the domain of religion, and vice-versa.

To avoid the risk of distorting Orthodox and Hindu traditions, I will begin by treating them as religions only hypothetically, and will be developing a more nuanced approach as the argument of the thesis proceeds. Moreover, as it will become clear from chapter 3, both Yannaras and Aurobindo are, to various degrees, reluctant to describe their respective traditions in terms of 'religion'. In order to minimise the distortion of the authors compared, I will propose that both

²⁹ Herberg 1962, 145-46. Cf. Dobbelaere 1986, 137.

traditions (or rather the ideals of the respective traditions which both thinkers articulate) could be described through the concept of *salvific life*, which I use as a 'comparative category' or *tertium comparationis*³⁰. However, since 'religion' is engaged by both Aurobindo and Yannaras, and, although it is used differently, both authors overlap in pointing out the Western elements of 'religion', I will propose that the category 'religion' itself can be used as *tertium comparationis*. In this sense, it is through Aurobindo and Yannaras' polemical rejection of 'religion' that we can retrieve a better understanding of their articulations of their respective traditions.

Sacred/profane

While I begin with an initial understanding of the 'religious' and the 'secular' as potentially neutral way of speaking and descriptive of a conventional understanding, I consider 'sacred' and 'profane' as categories of theological value, which may or may not overlap with the 'religious' and 'secular'. The problem here, is that sacrality and profanity are categories articulated differently within various value systems. For example, what nationalism regards as sacred (a flag or a place) is not so from a point of view of Christian theology. The fact that

³⁰ I borrow the concept of comparative category from Thatamanil. Drawing on Neville, he argues that in order for comparison to avoid distorting other traditions, a 'comparative category' could be formulated. The latter is conceived as a product of "extract[ing] an abstract pattern from its context by purifying it of strictly tradition-specific details", so that it may be adequately applicable to both traditions of comparison (Thatamanil 2006, 14).

two perspectives on the sacred do not overlap, as Bernard Lonergan points out³¹, suggests the importance of distinguishing between *theological* and *non-theological* sacrality. Although, unlike Lonergan, I will apply 'sacred' and 'profane' to both the domains of religion and the secular, I will make clear whether the sacrality/profanity to which I refer is theological or not.

³¹ To use an example, provided by Lonergan, "meat from animals offered in sacrifice was regarded as sacred by the pagans. Such sacredness was overruled by St Paul as in principle of no account" (Lonergan 2004, 270). Lonergan argues that another set of terms, apart from the theological sacred/profane, is needed. He thus proposes the sacral/secular dichotomy: "the terms 'sacral' and 'secular' are relative in meaning. They do not tell what really is sacred and what really is profane. They only tell what the participants regard as sacred and what they regard as profane" (Lonergan 2004, 271).

Chapter 1. How to make a nation?

(I) Introducing nationalism

It is difficult to provide a satisfactory definition of nationalism. The preference often goes to a rather descriptive solution, either referring to nationalism as “an umbrella term”¹ under which the whole range of different phenomena is collocated, or as a concept involving “a web of other notoriously difficult terms”². These include both a theoretical framework, or ideology, of nation, and corresponding social values and sentiments which define and protect national identity.

This difficulty is also a consequence of the existence of a huge variety of ethnic phenomena, which are described by this term, and it is hard to find a common thread to unite them all. The configurations of nationalism are dynamic and fluid, taking various shapes in different historical and cultural contexts. This particularity of nationalism(-s) is well expressed by Greenfeld, who insists that when “the idea of the ‘nation’ was transferred from one society to another, the nature of nationalism changed. [...] [T]he imported idea was everywhere modified in accordance with the local circumstances”³.

The above observations imply that a definition, based, e.g. on the French

¹ Greenfeld 2006c, 69.

² Backhouse 2013, 42.

³ Greenfeld 2006b, 76. Similarly Özkirimli 2010, 205.

case, might bring confusion rather than clarity, when one tries to apply it to Greece or India, and vice-versa.

Notwithstanding the difficulty of defining nationalism, I would like to propose two definitions which clarify what this thesis means by 'nationalism'. The *first* is drawn from Nenad Miscevic, who defines nationalism as a "complex of attitudes, claims and directives for action ascribing a fundamental political, moral and cultural value to nation and nationality and deriving obligations [...] from this ascribed value"⁴. This definition is significant for two reasons. *On the one hand*, it has the benefit of emphasising the fundamental centrality of nation as identity maker, and the prominence of an allegiance to, and identification with, the nation. As Rogers Brubaker rightly points out, "[t]here is no compelling reason to speak of 'nationalism' unless the imagined community of the nation is widely understood as a primary focus of value, source of legitimacy, object of loyalty and basis of identity"⁵. Isaiah Berlin, Hans Kohn and Anthony Smith emphasise that nationalism elevates national identity and loyalty to the nation over anything else⁶. Not that other identities and loyalties disappear

⁴ Miscevic 2014.

⁵ Brubaker 2012, 14.

⁶ According to Berlin, nationalism is "the elevation of the interest of the unity and self-determination of the nation to the status of the supreme value before which all other considerations must, if need be, yield at all times" (Berlin 1980, 338). Cf. Kohn 1985, 9. For Smith, the essential proposition of nationalism is that "the nation is the source of all political power, and loyalty to it overrides all other loyalties" (Smith 1998, 187). Cf. Llobera 1994, x.

or no longer matter, but the national one is stated as the most important, embracing all the others. *On the other hand*, Miscevic's definition succeeds in keeping together both the theoretical basis, or an attitude held by the members of a nation, and *praxis* or action to be performed. Similar intent lies behind Joseph Llobera's choice to describe nationalism with Alfred Fouillée's term *idée-force*, "thought that leads to action"⁷.

The *second* definition belongs to Roger Scruton, for whom nationalism is "the *ideology* of the modern state: the set of doctrines and beliefs that sanctify this peculiar local arrangement, and legitimize the new forms of government and administration that have emerged in the modern world"⁸. This definition masterfully points out the link between nation and modern political theory. Whether one identifies oneself as a nationalist or not, the fact remains that the nation has become a normative category in the modern world. Nowadays, nation is, as Jonathan Eastwood and Nikolas Prevelakis put it, the "central cultural-organizational framework for social order"⁹. And, as Eric Hobsbawm suggests, it is because of this universally recognised normativity of nation-state that nationhood has become the only *acceptable* reason for independence¹⁰. In fact, it is nation—and no other community or

⁷ Llobera 1994, 218. Cf. Miscevic 2014.

⁸ Scruton 1999, 280, emphasis in original. Cf. Gellner 1983, 1.

⁹ Eastwood and Prevelakis 2010, 96.

¹⁰ Hobsbawm 2013, 177-78. On the process which leads the nation-state to triumph over the other ways of conceiving the relationship between politics, community and territory, see Philpott 2001. Both Philpott and Gellner emphasise that nation-states are not *per se* natural

institution—that has the right to self-determination. One of the outcomes of this state of affairs is that national claims to power are granted “a legitimacy [...] that surpasses that of other claims and appeals, making it more likely that ethno-political conflict escalates into violence and full-scale civil war”¹¹.

Although the two definitions are not mutually incompatible, I would suggest that there exists a tension between them regarding the perspective from which they view ‘nation’. The first tends to describe nationalism with special focus on the feelings of nationalists. The nation here appears as the object of devotion and loyalty, the aim of action and obligation. The second definition, by contrast, tends to present the nation as part of the international order. Although, I suggest, the two approaches are complementary, the paradox consists in the fact, emphasised by Umut Özkirimli, that “it is nationalism that defines nations”¹². In other words, without the *idée-force* of the nationalists, there is no entity with which international law can deal. To use Anthony Smith’s categories, without nation as the “object of the ideology of nationalism” there is no concept of nation for “analytic uses”¹³.

We thus seem to be enclosed in a vicious circle. In fact, *objective*

or universal institutions (Philpott 2001, 253; Gellner 1997, 6).

¹¹ Wimmer 2013, 201. On ethnicity and violence, see Eck 2009.

¹² Özkirimli 2010, 206.

¹³ Smith 2009, 126. According to Smith, other social categories, e.g. that of identity, are not immune to similar problems either (Smith 2009, ch. 6). Cf. Conversi, who argues that “the lack of a universally acceptable definition of the nation and of nationalism derives precisely from the fact that the nation is itself a tool of definition” (Conversi 1995, 77).

criteria for nationhood, such as common ethnicity, language, religion, culture, history, territory etc., seem to be unsatisfactory. As Eric Hobsbawm convincingly argues,

[e]ither cases corresponding to the definition are patently not [...] 'nations' [...], or undoubted 'nations' do not correspond to the criterion or combination of criteria. [...] the criteria used for this purpose—language, ethnicity or whatever—are themselves fuzzy, shifting and ambiguous¹⁴.

On the other hand, in some of the most paradigmatic cases of nationalism, nations claim to be defined not so much by ethnic or cultural elements, but primarily by universal values¹⁵.

An alternative to those objective criteria of nationhood which fail, would be a *subjective* criterion, described by Hobsbawm as “consciousness of belonging”: a nation would be what its members conceive as a nation. Hobsbawm is correct in arguing that such a criterion also appears inadequate, since it would be both susceptible to voluntarism (any group of people would be able to claim it is a nation), and tautological (in its use of the term subject to definition as a very part of the definition)¹⁶.

What is the solution to the failure of both objective and subjective criteria? Hobsbawm resolves the dilemma by stating that, although “agnosticism is the best initial posture”, an “initial working assumption should be to treat as ‘nation’ “any sufficiently large body of people whose

¹⁴ Hobsbawm 2013, 5-6.

¹⁵ Cf. chapter 5.

¹⁶ Hobsbawm 2013, 7-8. Cf. Nathanson 1997, 177.

members regard themselves as members of a 'nation'"¹⁷. Now, what happens when we try to look at this "assumption" keeping in mind Hobsbawm's critique of both objective and subjective criteria of nationhood? I cannot but conclude that, in reality, Hobsbawm's "assumption" does have recourse to both kinds of the criteria that he is rejecting: size is an objective criterion, while "regard" of the members is a subjective one. At the end of the day, "to regard" oneself as belonging to a nation is not substantively different from having a "consciousness of belonging"—a term Hobsbawm uses to describe this subjective criterion.

Stephen Nathanson, who also struggles with Hobsbawm's dilemma, proposes a solution which I find convincing:

Different people believe that their claims to be a nation are rooted in different sorts of facts. As theorists, we can look at all of these claims and see that the essential thread uniting them is simply the *belief* about group membership and not the specific basis on which this or that group rests that belief¹⁸.

Nathanson thus prefers to leave the dilemma unsolved. However, he introduces, I suggest, two important points, which explain, to a certain degree, the communication between the propositions in dialectical tension: these are *selection* and *belief*. The first aspect, which seems to be implicit by Nathanson's argument, consists in the suggestion that the members of a

¹⁷ Hobsbawm 2013, 8. Curiously, Hobsbawm concludes his book, entitled *Nations and Nationalism...* (!) by saying that "'nation' and 'nationalism' are no longer adequate terms to describe, let alone to analyse, the political entities described as such" (Hobsbawm 2013, 192).

¹⁸ Nathanson 1997, 177, emphasis in original.

nation *select* what they believe to be the ground of their common identity. The implication is that the nation chooses (subjective element) which of various communalities (objective element) should constitute the basis of their nationhood. In other words, what counts as difference and what does not, is itself a matter of selective decision. This is particularly visible in borderline cases, where a group decides which of the possible criteria are decisive for their belonging to one nation or another, and which criteria are secondary to this endeavour. The choice could include selecting whether language is more relevant than religion, whether ethnicity is more important than values, or which parts of history are more decisive for common identity¹⁹. The second point of Nathanson's dialectics is *belief*. Belief entails the adherence of individuals and communities (subjective element) to a set of contents (objective element). The paradox remains, and the subjective and objective poles are always in tension. Later in the thesis I will contextualise this tension, referring to the cases of India and Greece.

Nationalism vs. patriotism

In what follows, I will further elucidate the meaning of nationalism. In order to do so, I will briefly explore two other concepts—patriotism and communalism—which are often contrasted with nationalism.

¹⁹ I will return to the question of selection within nationalism in chapter 5.

Let us start with *patriotism*, which various scholars distinguish from nationalism²⁰. What is usually claimed is that the object of nationalism is a nation, while patriotism is concerned with the loyalty to, and identification with, a specific country, *patria*²¹. Thus, patriotism would be about civic rather than ethnic allegiance. The conclusion, drawn by some scholars, is that patriotism is a better and more ethical alternative to nationalism, on the assumption that ethnic allegiance is exclusive and aggressive, while civil allegiance is liberal and defensive²². Other scholars disagree with such a position, seeing little difference between the two phenomena, especially as far as the ethical implications of the distinction are concerned²³. For example, Stephen Backhouse, who approaches patriotism from theologically, argues that patriotism is in no way more acceptable than nationalism, since both model themselves on religion²⁴.

²⁰ For some recent debates on the topic, see Kleinig, Keller, and Primoratz 2015a. Cf. Yack 2012, 33-42; Primoratz and Pavković 2007; Viroli 1995.

²¹ See Kleinig, Keller, and Primoratz 2015b, 4-5; Primoratz 2015, 75-76. On the contrary, MacIntyre, while dealing with patriotism, uses 'nation' and 'country' almost interchangeably (MacIntyre 2003). Cf. Miscovic 2014. Etymologically, however, *natio* (Lat. birth) and *patria* (from Lat. *pater*, father), both implicitly refer to a common—even racial—origin. I am grateful to Joseph Simmons for pointing this out to me.

²² See Viroli 1995. Cf. Habermas 1996b.

²³ Kateb 2006, 9-10, 23; Yack 1998. Cf. Primoratz who, while accepting the distinction between patriotism and nationalism, argues that they should be "understood as the same type of set of beliefs and attitudes and distinguished in terms of their objects, rather than the strength of those beliefs and attitudes, or as sentiment versus theory" (Primoratz 2015, 76).

²⁴ Backhouse 2011, 2-14. He argues that "patriotism still enjoys a symbiotic relationship with the nationalist ideas of particularity, sentiment and selective memory", while "the laws and social structures that are the supposed objects of patriotic affection are themselves deeply rooted in the collective (un)consciousness of an historical community" (Backhouse 2011, 12-13). Cf. Backhouse 2013.

I would suggest that it is not the distinction between nationalism and patriotism in itself, but an attempt to draw certain ethical implications from it, that is problematic and misleading. As Bernard Yack suggests, "the practice of republican patriotism has never lived up to the shining image fashioned by its leading advocates. [...] [Patriotism] is merely a form of discourse, i.e., a way of *talking* about our shared sentiments and identities"²⁵. Patriotism is thus an idealised way of speaking about identity, which is not necessarily confirmed empirically. That is why I agree with Zygmunt Bauman, who argues that

the patriotism of that opposition is the 'marked' member of the couple, the unsavoury realities of nationalism being cast as the 'unmarked' member: patriotism, more postulated than empirically given, is what nationalism [...] could be but is not. Patriotism is described through the negation of the most disliked and shameful traits of known nationalisms. [...] Though this distinction is fine and morally and intellectually laudable, its value is somewhat weakened by the fact that what is opposed here is not so much two options equally likely to be embraced, as a noble idea and an ignoble reality²⁶.

An insight into how the dichotomy of nationalism and patriotism, as interpreted by Bauman, can be used in the hands of nationalists is provided by Michael Billig. He argues that a "rhetorical distinction" is used in order to distinguish between "'[o]ur' loyalties to 'our' nation-state", described in terms of *patriotism*, "a beneficial, necessary [...] force", vs. loyalty of the others to their nation states, labelled as *nationalism*, "which is [seen as]

²⁵ Yack 1998, 204.

²⁶ Bauman 2006, 174.

dangerously irrational, surplus and alien"²⁷.

Whilst earlier I have suggested that 'nation' is defined by nationalists, it now seems safe to argue that not only 'nation', but 'nationalism' itself is defined, polemically, by nationalists against other nationalists.

Nationalism vs. communalism

The second 'other' against which nationalism is compared, is *communalism*. This term is often used in a South Asian, and particularly Indian, context. Wilfred C. Smith defines communalism as "ideology which emphasizes as the social, political, and economic unit the group of adherents of each religion, and emphasizes the distinction, even the antagonism, between such groups"²⁸.

What I am interested in here is not communalism *per se*, but the way it is related to nationalism. A brief engagement with a recent essay "Reflections on Nationalism and History" by Indian historian Romila Thapar will suffice for this purpose. Thapar contrasts "genuine nationalism", which unites people "irrespective of their *sub-identities* of religion, caste, language, region and such like"²⁹ with communalism (and other "concepts of nations based on a

²⁷ Billig 1995, 95. Primoratz puts it concisely: "we are patriots, while *they* are nationalists" (Primoratz 2015, 76).

²⁸ Smith 1943, 185. Cf. Dumont 1998, 315. For a discussion on various definitions of communalism, and their ideological presuppositions, see Pathan 2009, ch. 1.

²⁹ Thapar 2016, 4, emphasis added.

single exclusive identity") which she also describes as "pseudo-nationalism"³⁰. Thapar embraces the former, and rejects the latter. There are two points in Thapar's narrative which I find particularly interesting. The first has to do with inclusion/exclusion, and the second with history.

First, Thapar argues that nationalism is an "inclusive" ideology, based on the "idea of the unification of diverse groups to form a new community of citizens"³¹. She goes on to discuss the existence, in India, of the "axiomatic belief that the primary concern of nationalism was to ensure the welfare of the entire society, and of all its citizens. This was defined as establishing the equality of all citizens and their entitlement to human rights"³².

Communalism, on the contrary, by considering religion as the core identity, "gives priority to only one group", constitutes a "force of divisiveness", and leads to exclusivism³³.

I suggest one can agree with Thapar that nationalism has been aiming towards uniting Indian citizens, while communalism has placed the core of social identity elsewhere. My problem with Thapar's account, however, has to do both with how she postulates national identity as normatively prior to any other identity, and the way she emphasises inclusivism in relation to this claim. When Thapar speaks of nationalism as comprehensive of "sub-

³⁰ Thapar 2016, 7-8.

³¹ Thapar 2016, 7.

³² Thapar 2016, 4.

³³ Thapar 2016, 7.

identities" like language and religion, the implication is that the latter have been already included into the national identity, a super-identity, as it were. The question which arises is: Why the 'national' identity based on the colonially established borders should prevail over other identities, that have existed for centuries?³⁴ The reasons for such a choice are not provided. Another important point regards the way Thapar articulates inclusivism, implying that the more inclusive, the better. I wonder whether, by the same logic, it is possible to propose that a religion or a language become a master identity, with nations as "sub-identities"? If the final criterion of judgment is inclusivism/exclusivism, what about the exclusivism promoted by nationalism? I would argue that Thapar's dichotomy gives a wrong impression in that nationalism is seen as being equivalent to an open-minded cosmopolitan pluralism, inclusive of every identity. This is usually not the case. Thapar does insist that "genuine nationalism" is not about being hostile to other nations³⁵. But even beyond the question of hostility, nationalism also has its rules of inclusion *and* exclusion, while nation-states

³⁴ Hobsbawm suggests that empires have united colonial peoples according to their own judgement. With the de-colonisation process, those political units have become 'nations', and ever since they have condemned communalism and tribalism (Hobsbawm 2013, 178-79). William Archer, a colonial writer, with whom Aurobindo was polemicising, defended the continuation of the British dominion over the subcontinent on the grounds that "the unification of India is not an accomplished reality", and that the British functioned as a plaster of Paris, a "premature removal" of which would leave India "a hopeless cripple" (Archer 1918, 310).

³⁵ Thapar 2016, 5-6.

have their borders, citizenship laws and immigration services—each of which ensures exclusion occurs.

My *second* difficulty stems from Thapar's evaluation of the interpretations of history by nationalism and communalism. Thapar deplors that "history in India has become the arena of struggle between secular nationalists and those endorsing varieties of religious or pseudo-nationalism"³⁶. Thapar argues that "[n]ationalist historical writing visualized history as supportive of the interlinking of the communities that constituted Indian society", and praises nationalists for "their emphasis on understanding Indian society in terms of its continuity and common characteristics"³⁷. On the contrary, communalists both "exaggerate" the importance of one religious group in history, and ground their interpretations in "political agenda"³⁸. I find Thapar's argument persuasive and coherent. The only problem I have with it is that she fails to see how nationalism—which she praises—is susceptible to the same critique she uses against communalism. The problem here for me is that Thapar does not give due attention to the

³⁶ Thapar 2016, 11. Here Thapar both explicitly describes nationalism as "secular", and implies that "religious" nationalism is a *a priori* "pseudo-nationalism".

³⁷ Thapar 2016, 12.

³⁸ Thapar 2016, 11. Thapar argues that for communalist 'history' writers, "the past has only to do with Hindu history of the early period and the victimization of Hindus under Muslim tyranny in the medieval period" (Thapar 2016, 12). In an earlier essay, Thapar reproaches communalist historians for selective distortion and "abuse" of history in order to show the continuity of antagonism between the Hindus and Muslims throughout Indian history (Thapar 1990, 4-5). There she also criticises communalism for understanding politics mainly as "the interaction of religious communities" (Thapar 1990, 4-5).

fact that the agenda of nationalists, in all its difference from the agenda of communalists, is no less *political*. It can have a different scope; it can emphasise cooperation between different religious groups, rather than conflicts between them, but it is no less prone to imposing its own vision upon society³⁹. Moreover, Thapar herself concedes that nationalists use history as “supporting” certain values. The same can be said about the selective use of history by the nationalists in order to prove their points. As will become clear from the following sections of this chapter, nationalism has a tendency to read the history of the world—often also retrospectively—as the interaction of different nations, and to use history selectively, prioritising certain moments over others. Thus, the fact that the agenda of “genuine nationalist[s]” is secular, does not mean that it is in any sense more neutral, or deprived of utilitarian calculations. The difference lies not in the modality of using history, but in the agendas pursued.

Thapar thus seems to be perpetuating the position of Indian nationalists, formulated since pre-colonial times. As Pandey points out, the latter has conceptualised ‘communalism’ as “divisive, primitive and [...] the product of a colonial policy of Divide and rule”⁴⁰. ‘Nationalism’, on the contrary was imagined as “forward-looking, progressive, [and] ‘modern’”⁴¹.

³⁹ Cf. Nicholson 2010, 201-04; Nicholson 2011. See chapter 5 of this thesis.

⁴⁰ Pandey 1997, 235.

⁴¹ Pandey 1997, 241. Cf. Veer 1994, 17-18.

According to Pandey, both nationalism and communalism in the 1920-30s “were part of the same discourse” and nationalism could be validly interpreted as “nothing but communalism driven into secular channels”, just as communalism had been interpreted as “nationalism driven into religious channels”⁴².

I argue that what seems to be at play here is not a competition between the noble ideals of nationalism and aggressive communalism, but rather the choice of which one, among the many identities held by human beings, should be more important than others: national or religious. In other words, it is a debate on the hierarchy of identities. I suggest that this conclusion could be valid too for the patriotism vs. nationalism dyad; it is also a choice between two identities: one related to ethnicity, and the other to civil values and institutions. Ethnic, civic and religious loyalties have led to explosions of both solidarity and violence in history. I wonder, therefore, whether there is a reason for one specific loyalty being seen *a priori* as more benign than the other.

To conclude, while in the patriotism vs. nationalism dyad, the latter is a term with a pejorative meaning, in the nationalism vs. communalism dichotomy, nationalism appears as a positive term. Patriotism relates to nationalism in the latter dichotomy, as “genuine nationalism” relates to

⁴² Pandey 1997, 236.

“pseudo-nationalism” in Thapar’s analysis. The basis for the distinctions and, even more importantly, for drawing certain ethical judgments, appears in both cases to be a product of nationalist self-affirmation over against other nationalisms (in patriotism vs. nationalism) and religion (in nationalism vs. communalism). In both cases, the unwanted elements are pushed into the ‘unmarked’ member of the dyad (nationalism and communalism, respectively), which allows the ‘marked’ member (patriotism and nationalism, respectively) to be defined by idealised features. This is why both dyads of categories, rather than being descriptive of observable phenomena, are *themselves* part of nationalism’s struggle for power.

New or Old?

Earlier I mentioned a tendency to interpret nationalism in terms of religion, and link its rise to secularisation. I would suggest that the basic presupposition of this tendency is that nationalism is something fundamentally modern. If nationalism is a continuation of the way identity was lived in the past, there is no reason to link it to modern secularism, or other modern trends, such as individualism and rationalism. Is not allegiance to one’s nation something that has always existed, from time immemorial? One of the difficulties with answering this question is that human beings are apt to consider their thoughts, perceptions and tastes as universally valid,

expecting them to be shared by others. This sort of projection is exercised not only geographically, on those who live elsewhere, but also diachronically—on those who lived in the past. Liah Greenfeld rightly observes that “[w]e tend to project our experiences onto the past and see all governments and political communities as states, in the same way as we tend to ascribe to the people of the past national identities. Social reality is hardly conceivable for us without states and nations”⁴³. It follows that, when speaking about nationalism, one must be especially aware of this human tendency to ‘project’. There is a special projection, proper to nationalism, which is connected to the idea of continuity. As Llobera puts it, the ideologies of nationhood offer a narrative of a “quasi-eternal, motionless reality” of the nation, underlying the continuity between a modern nation and the past⁴⁴.

Against the tendency to think that one’s relationship to her nationality is similar to that of one’s medieval ancestors, and against the nationalist discourse of continuity, the so-called ‘modernist’ school—represented by scholars such as Ernest Gellner and Eric Hobsbawm—points out that both nation and nationalism are utterly new and “quintessentially modern”

⁴³ Greenfeld 2006b, 77-78.

⁴⁴ Llobera 1994, x.

phenomena⁴⁵. While Gellner explicitly argues that nations are “invented”⁴⁶, Benedict Anderson prefers to describe the emergence of nations as a creative process which implies “imagination”, rather than invention⁴⁷. Anderson speaks of the paradoxical contradiction between the “objective modernity of nations to the historian’s eye vs. their subjective antiquity in the eyes of nationalists”⁴⁸. Imagination implies both a selective historical remembering, and a forgetting. Anderson quotes Ernest Renan’s claim that “the essence of a nation is that individuals have many things in common, but also have forgotten many other things. [...] [E]very French citizen must have forgotten Saint Bartholemew’s Day”⁴⁹. Not only memory, concludes Anderson, but also “amnesia” becomes an instrument of nation-building⁵⁰.

On one of the key dates of the October Uprising of 1917, Anatoly Lunacharsky, an eminent Marxist revolutionary, wrote to his wife: “These are really terrible times, on a knife-edge. There’s a lot of anxiety and suffering,

⁴⁵ Gellner 1964; 1997; Hobsbawm 2013; Anderson 2006, 187ff. The quote is from Taylor 1997, 43. For discussion, see Smith 1998, spec. 188-89; Hastings 2003; Greenfeld 2006b; Veer 2013. On various classifications of theories in terms of the relationship between nationalism and modernity, see Özkirimli 2010. He concludes his analysis by claiming that “[t]he classification of a particular theory or writer into the existing categories depends to a large extent on who is doing the sorting” (Özkirimli 2010, 200).

⁴⁶ “Nationalism is not the awakening of nations to self-consciousness: it invents nations where they do not exist” (Gellner 1964, 168).

⁴⁷ Anderson 2006.

⁴⁸ Anderson 2006, 5.

⁴⁹ Anderson quotes the French original. The translation provided here is by Iain H. Grant (Renan 1996, 51). Renan also claims that “[f]orgetting, and, I would even say, historical error are an essential factor in the creation of a nation” (Renan 1996, 50).

⁵⁰ Anderson 2006, 199ff.

and perhaps we're threatened with an early death. At the same time, I'm happy to be alive at a time of such great events, when *history is not half-asleep but is flying like a bird over trackless wastes*"⁵¹. One cannot but recall here the mighty image from the opening of Genesis, in which the Spirit of God is moving upon the formless waters, ready to start Creation (*Gen. 1:2*). The revolutionary imagines himself as a participant in a new eschatological creation.

I suggest Anderson grasps this feeling very well when he observes that in the rise of nationalism in the USA and France—cases which then became universally paradigmatic—political actors were conscious that what they were doing was something extremely new and creative. The American Declaration of Independence makes no attempt to justify the independence with any reference of an historical nature, while the French Revolution symbolically repudiates its history, beginning its republican calendar with the Year One⁵². Nationalist rhetoric, however, often describes the fight for independence as an 'awakening from sleep', thus suggesting not a new beginning, but rather the restoration of a forgotten, or lost, original reality⁵³. As Gellner argues, without the "doctrine" of the "dormission (sic.) of nationalism", "there would be no way of squaring the natural, self-evident, universal standing attributed

⁵¹ Cited in Kern 2013, 221, emphasis added.

⁵² Anderson 2006, 193.

⁵³ Anderson 2006, 195-96. For an example of awakening rhetoric, see Ghose 1997j, 4.

to the nationalist principle (which the nationalist passionately upholds), and the frequent and conspicuous historical absence of any real concern with that principle"⁵⁴. Is then invention and imagination a *via principalis*, by which nations try to fill the gap between modernity and the past?

I accept Anderson's argument about the importance of imagination for nation-building; nonetheless, I would suggest that the latter should not be exaggerated and, even more importantly, should not be taken as *the* argument for nationalism's modernity. The nation is not the only community which is 'imagined'. As Peter van der Veer rightly observes, "[t]he process of invention and imagination does not start with the rise of nationalist discourse; it is the process of history and culture itself"⁵⁵. It would seem, however, that such a line of arguing would not be incompatible with Anderson's own position.

First, I would argue that Anderson, in citing the decline of sacred languages as one of the conditions which enables the imagining of the nation, implies that a nation, which speaks in the vernacular, is imagined as being not unlike e.g. Latin-oriented Christendom was imagined beforehand⁵⁶. I would also argue that what we have here is an implicit

⁵⁴ Gellner 1997, 8-9.

⁵⁵ Veer 1994, 197.

⁵⁶ Anderson 2006, 12ff.

suggestion that the modern nation imagines itself through the model of religion. I will return to this idea later in the chapter.

Second, Anderson admits that “all communities larger than primordial villages of face-to-face contact (and perhaps even these) are imagined”, thus suggesting that not only modern nationalism but every relatively big community is a product of imagination⁵⁷. To conclude, every nation is an imagined community, but not every imagined community is a nation. Imagination is not nationalism’s monopoly.

A challenge to the ‘modernist’ position comes from the recognition of a striking resemblance between modern nationalism and certain historical articulations of identity. Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan noticed the similarity between modern nationalism and past prototypes when he remarked that “[i]f the modern Frenchman, German, or American is sincerely convinced of his own immeasurable superiority to the ‘lesser breeds without the law’ and proclaims himself as the source and consummation of world civilization, he is only the spiritual heir of the Greeks and the Jews”⁵⁸. Indeed, a scholar even

⁵⁷ Anderson 2006, 6.

⁵⁸ Radhakrishnan 1989, 17. The similarity between modern nationalist features and Jewish and Greek ethos is also emphasised by Kohn, who argues that “[t]hree essential traits of modern nationalism originated with the Hebrews: the idea of the chosen people, the emphasis on a common stock of memory of the past and of hopes for the future, and finally national messianism. [...] The Greeks shared with the Hebrews the feeling of cultural and spiritual superiority over all other peoples [...]. In addition the Greeks developed the concept of supreme loyalty to the political community, in their case the city-state or *polis*. Every citizen had to identify himself completely with the life of the *polis*, to become thoroughly politicized” (Kohn 1985, 11-12). On ancient Jewish, Greek and Indian concepts of ethnic unity and territorial sovereignty, see Roshwald 2006.

remotely acquainted with the Old Testament will notice parallels between the modern allegiance to a nation and the ethos of ancient Judaism. One could wonder whether the imaginative logic of identification of the nation with the figure of the Unknown Soldier is not strikingly similar to that of Adam Kadmon of the Jewish tradition⁵⁹. Both would correspond to what Wheeler Robinson develops in his concept of “corporate personality”⁶⁰, a model which has been subsequently borrowed by Christology in order to speak of Jesus, not just as a person, but also as a community of believers (church as the Body of Christ)⁶¹. Interestingly, Hans Kohn uses the term “corporate personality” to describe how modern nationalism imagines the communality of “thoughts, sentiments and purposes” of members of a nation⁶². I find it significant that Robinson’s idea of “corporate personality” was, as he himself recognises, influenced by Emile Durkheim and the latter’s conception of the identity of community with its totem, which allows a certain “fluidity” between the individual and society⁶³. As I will argue in chapter 2, the parallels Durkheim draws between totemism and modern patterns of social organisation can be helpful in understanding nationalism. This would imply

⁵⁹ A similar attitude of identification with the past, seems to be implicit in the rites of the Jewish Passover meal. See Bokser 1984, 85ff. Cf. *Ex.* 13:8.

⁶⁰ On the concept of corporate personality, see Robinson 1936; Wilson 1989, 187-89; Porter 1990, 298).

⁶¹ For a Greek Orthodox approach, see Afanassieff 2007, 172; Zizioulas 1987, 331; 2006, 290.

⁶² Kohn 2008, 457.

⁶³ Robinson 1936, 53. Cf. Mol 2009, 111ff.

that at least some features of modern nationalist loyalty are not totally novel in history.

Is nationalism, then, an attitude that has always existed, as the 'primordialist' school would have it? The latter challenges the 'modernist' approach—"the principal current orthodoxy in nationalist studies", as Adrian Hastings puts it—by emphasising a certain continuity between modern nationalism and the past, especially medieval, ways to conceive and live an ethnic identity⁶⁴. This position is described by Nenad Miscevic: "nations are like artichokes, in that they have many 'unimportant leaves' that can be chewed up one by one, but also have a heart, which remains after the leaves have been eaten"⁶⁵.

I suggest that the truth lies somewhere in between. The 'imagined' character of modern nationalism should be balanced by the *loci* of identity from the past. As John Hutchinson rightly argues, "in the absence of such [earlier ethnic] identities nations cannot easily be constructed"⁶⁶. I would thus postulate that nationalism is better described as a "dialectical precipitate of the old and the new", to use Llobera's phrase⁶⁷. This would imply rejection of the conception of the nation as created *ex nihilo*: modernity only transforms

⁶⁴ Hastings 2003, cited from p. 2; Gat and Yakobson 2013.

⁶⁵ Miscevic 2014. The artichoke metaphor belongs to Stanley Hoffman, who used it in a different context.

⁶⁶ Hutchinson 2005, 43.

⁶⁷ Llobera 1994, x.

existent, or perhaps even 'dormant' historical and cultural elements, established in pre-modern times⁶⁸.

However, a crucial point of this "dialectical precipitate", I suggest, is that the past here is sifted through a very modern sieve. As A. Smith, who comments on the usage by nationalism of previous religious material, convincingly argues, "nationalist[s] can be seen to have 'chosen' and interpreted some, and not others, of the pre-existing symbolisms, mythologies, attachments, and beliefs of traditional religions and outlooks, and to have legitimated the routes they took by reference to prior, nationally 'relevant', belief-systems"⁶⁹. A similar line is taken by Özkirimli—otherwise critical of Smith's ethno-symbolic approach, which he rejects as a "retrospective ethnicization"—who claims that

[i]t is the selection process that matters, the ways in which these materials are used and abused by modern nationalists, and this necessarily reflects present concerns. [...] [T]he present cannot alter the past, but it can ignore certain elements and emphasize others, exaggerate the relevance of some, trivialize that of others, and it can certainly distort realities⁷⁰.

The choice of which past resources are selected and which are not is, therefore, motivated by modern context and, more specifically, by ideas of popular sovereignty, representative democracy and secular rationality.

⁶⁸ Cf. Veer 2013, 656.

⁶⁹ Smith 2003a, 6. Smith is a proponent of an 'ethno-symbolic' approach. See Smith 2009. It is a matter of ongoing discussion whether 'ethno-symbolism', which is also critical of 'modernist' position, should be classified as a part of 'primordialist' school, or as a separate category. See Özkirimli 2010, 201-04.

⁷⁰ Özkirimli 2010, 214.

Moreover, this (democratic) context also promotes belief in the transhistorical nature of the nation. In fact, as Denis Guénoun convincingly points out, the idea of the nation as eternal is needed in order to legitimise the modern state⁷¹. I shall return to this in chapter 5, where I will indicate the ways in which Aurobindo and Yannaras selectively use traditional religious sources to construct something new. For now, what is important is the novelty of the context in which traditional ethnic identity is stimulated to develop in a very different way, with respect to the past.

Something should also be said about the universality of nationalist ideology. Nationalism, as a modern construction, constructed using the sources inherited from the past, originated in the post-Enlightenment West. From there it has spread throughout the world to constitute, as Anderson puts it, “the most universally legitimate value in the political life of our time”⁷². As I pointed out earlier, national identity became an international phenomenon: today one cannot easily avoid belonging to a specific nation. For instance, as Donald E. Smith convincingly argues, the need to construct Indian national identity from various pre-existent loyalties is due to the fact that “it seemed absolutely *improper* [...] to be without a nationality”⁷³. Such an attitude, as Mark Juergensmeyer suggests, was adopted by most modern

⁷¹ Guénoun 2013, 81-82.

⁷² Anderson 2006, 3.

⁷³ Smith 1963, 140-41. Cf. Gellner 1983, 6.

nations, Western or not⁷⁴. This poses the question of the relationship between nationalism and colonialism, to which I will return in chapter 4. But what are the reasons for nationalism's relatively quick universal diffusion, 'popularity' and its tenacity over time? One of the reasons, I argue, is a unique way in which nationalism succeeds in providing a strong identity to the people and in building communities.

New community for new men

In what follows I will argue that nationalism—as a community-building *idé-force*, usually with the goal of creating a nation-state—constitutes an attempt to bring together political or civil, and cultural or ethnic identities. I will further argue that those identities are not linked at a conceptual level, which has potential for provoking conflict. I will also begin to address the question of why nationalism is so resistant and tenacious.

In modernity, the reference to a common national identity becomes the principal discourse/means of community building. Existing scholarship asserts that the unity, created in the process of nation-building, is similar to that existing within religious communities. For example, Mark Juergensmeyer suggests that the 'longevity' of nationalism is connected to its "religious" character. For him, both nationalism and religion

⁷⁴ Cf. Juergensmeyer 2008a, 11.

can provide the moral and spiritual glue that holds together broad communities. Members of these communities—secular or religious—share a tradition, a particular worldview, in which the essential conflict between appearance and deeper reality is described in specific and characteristically cultural terms. This deeper reality has a degree of permanence and order quite unobtainable by ordinary means⁷⁵.

There is much here which resonates with Liah Greenfeld's assertion that nationalism, similarly to religion, is able "to justify otherwise distressing social arrangements, to create a sense of a just social order, and to make social suffering sufferable, that explains their endurance over time"⁷⁶. This resemblance between two phenomena leads Greenfeld to argue that "nationalism has replaced religion as the main cultural mechanism of social integration"⁷⁷.

Nationalism, as a community building *idée-force*, arose in the West in the epoch of modernisation and industrialisation which corroded traditional social relations and originate others⁷⁸. As Jürgen Habermas observes, nationalism arrives when economic and cultural modernisation has led to the isolation of people as individuals⁷⁹. In a very different way in Africa and Asia, colonisation also leads to the disruption of social hierarchies and traditions⁸⁰. In fact, as I will argue in chapter 5, nationalism in a post-colonial context

⁷⁵ Juergensmeyer 2008a, 21.

⁷⁶ Greenfeld 2006a, 96.

⁷⁷ Greenfeld 2006a, 95.

⁷⁸ The relationship between nationalism and capitalism remains a debated issue. Cf. Llobera 1994, 95-105.

⁷⁹ "The political consciousness of national membership arises from a dynamic that first took hold of the population after processes of economic and social modernization had torn people from their places in the social hierarchy, simultaneously mobilizing and isolating them as individuals" (Habermas 1996a, 493).

⁸⁰ See Kedourie 1971.

becomes an ideology, proposing new ways of imagining community identity, with respect to the traditional.

Thus what we have is an entirely new way of imagining community. Gellner and Taylor convincingly make the case that in modern society, unlike in earlier times, people can relate to the state without mediation⁸¹. Taylor describes this as a shift from “hierarchical, mediated-access societies to horizontal, direct-access societies”⁸². Unlike in the past, where one belonged to the society through belonging to what Gellner calls a “sub-group”—a religious entity or a communal body—today, those groups have become “ephemeral and optional, and have no important legal powers over their members”, while one is related to the state directly, without mediation⁸³. I would suggest that this analysis leads to a significant conclusion about the link between nationalism and individualism. An argument can be made that nationalism appears as a kind of attenuating remedy, or counteraction for individualism. While modernity disempowers or even destroys traditional communities, leading to individualism, the individuals are given an ‘abstract’ community in the nation⁸⁴.

⁸¹ Cf. Cavanaugh 1999, 191-92; Guénoun 2013, 74-5, 87.

⁸² Taylor 2005, 39.

⁸³ Gellner 1997, 28. Gauchet ironically observes that the moment when modernity proclaims the autonomy of the civil society, is also the moment of “the monopolistic appropriation by the state of the institution of the social bond, and the irresistible dispossession of the old islets of sociality (*îlots de socialité*) of their public dimension” (Gauchet 1985, 285, my translation).

⁸⁴ Cf. Arendt 1973, 231.

Nation-state

Nationalism is strictly connected to the idea of the nation-state.

Community, united by national identity, tends to express itself politically. An axiom of nationalist ideology, very widely, if not universally, accepted is that “nations can only be [...] fulfilled in their own sovereign states”⁸⁵. In this sense, it could be said that nationalism is not only community-building, but also state-building. It tends to disempower or destroy pre-modern structures (empires and intermediary sub-groups) and to create a *nation-state*.

I argue that the concept of nation-state, in spite of its normative character in modern political thought, contains an ‘ontological’ ambiguity which consists in a potentially deficient overlap between *nation* and *state*. In other words, nationalism constitutes an attempt to bring together the political and cultural identities, which are not linked at a conceptual level, and may lead to a potential clash.

Nationalism develops as the conjunction of two distinct movements of thought: one, civic, is exemplified in the political ideals of the French Revolution, while the other, ethnic or cultural, can be connected to Romanticism. Let us start with the *first* type. Modern nationalism is linked to the concept of the sovereignty of the people. Even a ‘primordialist’ such as

⁸⁵ Smith 1998, 187. Cf. Nathanson 1997, 177-78; Glover 1997, 12.

Llobera recognises that nationalism could be considered as something that emerged *ex nihilo* only if “in the definition of the nation the main emphasis is placed on the idea of popular sovereignty”⁸⁶. American and French paradigms (followed, to a large extent, by other nations ever since) connect the movement of nation-building to the political ideas of freedom, equality and social contract⁸⁷. Erica Benner rightly points out that “[m]ost of the concepts that are now regarded as basic elements of nationalist doctrine—nation-building, national identity or consciousness, national self-government—were first elaborated in the late eighteenth century by thinkers with strong republican sympathies”⁸⁸. It should be mentioned however, that the idea of the sovereignty of the people, or of social contract, linked to the rise of modern nationalism, does not automatically mean democracy in our modern sense⁸⁹.

Besides this civic or political nationalism, there is a cultural nationalism, one constructed on the pre-modern foundations, such as common descent, language, religion and various “ethno-symbolic” elements, to use Anthony Smith’s expression⁹⁰. The latter include myths, memories,

⁸⁶ Llobera 1994, 3. Cf. Veer 2013, 656.

⁸⁷ Cf. Llobera 1994, 151-64.

⁸⁸ Benner 2013, 36.

⁸⁹ For example, for Hegel, as Benner observes, “[p]olitical unity and common defences were the main prerequisites for nation-building; the question whether Germans should opt for a monarchy or a republic was a secondary issue. Hegel admitted that unification might only be achieved by force” (Benner 2013, 46).

⁹⁰ Smith 2005.

traditions, values, rituals etc.

Both political and cultural aspects of nationalism are historically very strongly interconnected, and some scholars insist that they form a part of one whole. Benner, to mention just one, criticises as a misleading generalisation an approach that “posits idealized contrasts” between ethnic and civic nationalism⁹¹. To sustain her point, Benner cites Rousseau, who “offered equally penetrating accounts of the reasoning behind civic voluntarist and defensive ethnic forms of nationalism, and implied that the two are not fundamentally opposed”⁹². Benner concludes that “[i]f we presume that civic nationhood is clearly distinct from ethnic, or that liberal individualism must preclude imperialist or racist forms of nationalism, we may overlook the combinations and alliances formed among these doctrines during the past three centuries”⁹³. It seems that Anderson goes in the same direction, when he asserts that one of the principal conditions of imagining nation was the loss of faith in the monarch as the centre of political society, who rules on a divine mandate⁹⁴. There is much here which resonates with the assertion by Habermas that the democratisation of governments was rendered possible through the ethnic homogeneity laid by the nation-state⁹⁵. According to

⁹¹ Benner 2013, 37.

⁹² Benner 2013, 40.

⁹³ Benner 2013, 37.

⁹⁴ Anderson 2006, 36.

⁹⁵ Habermas 1996a, 493.

Habermas, in the modern age nationalism and republicanism were in a “complementary relation [...], one became the vehicle for the emergence of the other”⁹⁶. At the same time, Habermas insisted that “this social-psychological connection does not mean that the two are linked at the conceptual level”⁹⁷. This latter statement, I suggest, is of crucial importance. I have mentioned this issue earlier, during my discussion of nationalism vs. patriotism, but would now like to expand on it a little.

I argue that, from the very beginning, nationalism has been constructed through the conflict between its political/civic and ethnical/cultural dimensions. The main reason for this is that *natio*, nation as ethnic entity, and *civitas*, state as political entity, do not coincide in most cases; however, even if they did, it would not be easy to provide a satisfactory answer to the question of legitimacy. The dilemma of whether the nation is created by the free choice of the *citizens*, or is conditioned by birth (*natio*), common history and culture, remains unanswered. While cultural nationalism normally recognises that humanity is divided into nations and that each nation should decide and provide for its development, civic nationalism has its goal in the formation and well-being of the state. However, the history shows that borders often change, and states sometimes

⁹⁶ Habermas 1996a, 495.

⁹⁷ Habermas 1996a, 495.

lose or expand their territory, absorbing other 'ethnic material'. As Llobera convincingly shows, territorial expansion and cultural homogeneity are incompatible and can be resolved only through the use of force⁹⁸. Similarly, the use of force is considered as being required in cases where the state does not wish to expand, but perceives (sometimes not without good reason) that the minorities, present on its territory, are a dangerous exception to the general homogeneity⁹⁹. Thus, in cases where smaller nations are dominated by larger ones, the nationalism of the smaller nations becomes not state-building, but anti-state¹⁰⁰. It follows that loyalty to the nation does not automatically coincide with loyalty to the state¹⁰¹. Another way in which the clash between civil and ethnic often manifests itself in the contemporary world is the tension, pointed out by Smart, between "individual rights", which modern democracies claim to protect, and "collective values" which are the basis of the nation-state¹⁰². This resonates with Hannah Arendt's analysis of the way the function of the state has transformed with the advent of nationalism. With the disappearance of the sovereign as the sign of a

⁹⁸ Llobera 1994, 215-19.

⁹⁹ On the issue of multiculturalism and the position of minorities in modern nation-states, see Taylor *et al.* 1994.

¹⁰⁰ Llobera qualifies the articulations of national identity in Catalonia, the Basque Country and Ireland as "nationalisms against the state" (Llobera 1994, 142-43). Cf. Glover 1997, 12.

¹⁰¹ As Stephen Backhouse rightly points out, "[n]ationalism does not demand that the individual focus his loyalty upon the *state*, but upon the *nation*. As such, nationalism is a force that often works against the state, not in service to it" (Backhouse 2013, 43). Cf. Baumann 1999, chapters 3 and 4.

¹⁰² See Smart 1995, 5. On the interrelation and tension between nationalism and democracy, see Lecours and Moreno Jerez 2010.

state's unity, "[t]he only remaining bond between the citizens of a nation-state without a monarch to symbolize their essential community, seemed to be national, that is, common origin"¹⁰³. Thus, while in the past the state was not supposed to discriminate among its subjects for reasons of ethnicity, the new situation entailed "the identification of the citizen with the member of the nation", the outcome being that "the state was partly transformed from an instrument of the law into an instrument of the nation"¹⁰⁴.

Arendt's analysis points to another, more theoretical, problem, that of the sovereignty of the nation-state. What is the ultimate basis of sovereignty and legitimacy: ethnic nationhood or the social contract? Historically, the justification for the new nation-state was based on cultural identity. However, the ideology of nationhood seems to be unable to provide the basis for a political body. This inadequacy had already been pointed out already by Rousseau and Kant who, according to Benner, admitted "a fundamental difficulty in applying any theory that locates the source of political legitimacy in pre-defined group identities, rather than in the wishes of its members. Someone has to decide what counts as the pertinent forms of identity, and what particular cases meet their criteria"¹⁰⁵. I suggest that the conflict between two dimensions is exemplified by the fact that civic nationalism (e.g.

¹⁰³ Arendt 1973, 230. Cf. Lefort 2006.

¹⁰⁴ Arendt 1973, 230-31, 75.

¹⁰⁵ Benner 2013, 44-45.

in the French and American Revolutions) often expresses itself in universal and humanistic—therefore common to all—values¹⁰⁶. One should, I suggest, question why one would need a (border-protected) state-nation at all, if its identity consists in values shared by all humanity?

For now, I would propose two preliminary conclusions. *First*, the tension between civic and ethnic nationalism remains. And perhaps the famous hyphen, joining the ‘nation’ and the ‘state’, is the final surrender to the unavoidability of their semantic antagonism. *Second*, since in the very nature of nationalism there is a tension of the ethnic and the civic, nationalism should be approached not only as a cultural and ethnic phenomenon, but also as an issue which belongs to political theory and raises the question of legitimacy. In terms of the scope of this thesis, it would mean that, if the idea that nationalism constitutes or functions as a religion is to be explored, it must be done on both ethnic and civic levels.

Nationalism, religion and secularisation

Let us return to the two definitions of nationalism I provided earlier. I would suggest that both Scruton’s conceptualisation of nationalism as a “set

¹⁰⁶ Taylor argues that a re-shaping of the state in the name of ethnicity is easier than in the name of universal values. It is for this reason, that the original American and French ‘patriotisms’ were re-interpreted in a more ethnic way (Taylor 1997, 40-41). On the ambiguous relationship between universality and ‘locality’ of nationalist rhetoric, see Guénoun 1993, 133-34; 2013, 90, 113-14; Rasmusson 2000, 181-82; MacIntyre 2003, 299-300.

of *doctrines* and *beliefs* that *sanctify* [...] and legitimize the new forms of government"¹⁰⁷, and Miscevic's emphasis on the fundamental value of nationalism as key identity and allegiance reference, call for a parallel between nationalism and religion. Nathanson's emphasis on *belief* as a decisive mark of national belonging goes in the same direction. Thus, there seems to exist a curious correspondence between the two phenomena. How exactly are they related? And why is nationalism—the main framework of post-Enlightened social integration—being described in terms belonging to a religious universe?

In what I consider one of the best descriptions of the relationship between religion and the ideology of the modern nation-state, Dumont argues that in the past *religion* held the place of the highest value and identity provider, which in modernity is being taken over by the nation-state:

medieval religion was a great cloak—I am thinking of the Mantle of Our Lady of Mercy. Once it became an individual affair, it lost its all-embracing capacity and became one among other apparently equal considerations, of which the political was the first born. Each individual may [...] recognise religion [...] as the same all-embracing consideration as it used to be *socially*. Yet on the level of social consensus or ideology, the same person will switch to a different configuration of values in which autonomous values (religious, political, etc.) are seemingly juxtaposed, much as individuals are juxtaposed in society¹⁰⁸.

Descombes, commenting on Dumont, argues the following:

A *nation* implies the *principle of secularism* [...]. A society cannot define itself as a nation for as long as it does not agree to abide by the individualist requirement for *freedom of conscience*, which means that religion must [...] become a personal practice¹⁰⁹.

¹⁰⁷ Scruton 1999, 280, emphasis added.

¹⁰⁸ Dumont 1971, 32, emphasis in original.

¹⁰⁹ Descombes 2016, 166-67, emphasis in original.

I will return to the consequences of this shift for religion later in the thesis. For now, I would only suggest that nation thus takes over from religion. In modernity religion, which—at least in some ancient and medieval societies—formerly embraced and conditioned all other identities, has seen its place taken by nation. The latter requires a total allegiance, according to which death in its interests is not only a heroic but a sacred duty. Nationhood as a core value of modernity has potential for conflict with religion, for which an absolute allegiance is due to the transcendental ultimate reality.

Here, Dumont is pointing out the link between nationalism and secularisation¹¹⁰. Although Dumont, unlike Descombes, finds the notion of ‘secularisation’ “vague”¹¹¹, his argument fits in with what A. Smith describes as “secular replacement”, i.e. a process in which “nationalism progressively replaces religion in the modern epoch”¹¹². I would suggest that there are enough reasons to defend this thesis.

Kedourie, more than a decade before Dumont, has argued that nationalism, as a new political order, is intellectually based on the Enlightenment and Kantian revolution, in which the human being constitutes the absolute value, while “[t]he existence of God [...] depends on the need of

¹¹⁰ There exists a vast literature on secularisation. For a general overview, see Casanova 1994; Taylor 2007; Ward 2009, 119-58. For the relationship between secularisation and nationalism, see Eastwood and Prevelakis 2010.

¹¹¹ Dumont 1971, 40, n. 6.

¹¹² Smith 2003a, 13.

man"¹¹³. The self-determination of the nation is, according to Kedourie, one of the developments of the self-determination of the human person, the latter being in tension with the predominant theological narratives about the primacy of God¹¹⁴. This resonates with Anderson's argument in his acclaimed *Imagined Communities*. There Anderson asserts that nationalism became possible in the moment when the three following conceptions ceased to be universally accepted: (a) a particular status of a sacred language, e.g. Latin, which unites communities dispersed through different political entities and assures a special access to truth; (b) a belief in the supernatural legitimacy of monarchs; (c) a conception of time, in which the past and present, cosmology and history were felt as almost identical¹¹⁵. Now, secularisation would certainly constitute a much more complex phenomenon, impossible to reduce to the decline of conceptions indicated by Anderson, but it is clear that each of three concepts can, in the final analysis, be linked to a religiously constructed worldview. Similarly, Brubaker convincingly argues that nationalism, with its particular ideology, according to which "[a]uthority is seen as legitimate only if it arises from 'the nation'", is likened to secularisation. Although Brubaker, drawing on Casanova, is critical of those aspects of the secularisation thesis which suggest the decline and

¹¹³ Kedourie 1961, 25.

¹¹⁴ Kedourie 1961, 20-31.

¹¹⁵ Anderson 2006, 9-36.

privatisation of religion, he still maintains that “the core of the secularisation thesis—the claim that the differentiation of various autonomous realms of human activity from religious institutions and norms has been central to, even constitutive of, Western modernity—remains valid”¹¹⁶.

But are we dealing only with change in the way legitimacy is imagined, or with the functional substitution of religion by nationalism? Some scholars of nationalism, who base their research on the usage by nationalism of religious symbols and narratives, go so far as to call nationalism a religion of modernity¹¹⁷. Even some theologians refer to nationalism as a quasi-religion¹¹⁸ or an ersatz religion¹¹⁹.

For example, Ninian Smart, in his essay “Sacred Nationalism” lists seven dimensions of religion, displayed by nationalism¹²⁰. Since they are important for the argument of this thesis, I will list them here:

(1) The material dimension, which includes land itself, natural and historical monuments, battlefields, national religious sites, war memorials and cemeteries. All of them are considered sacred by the citizens, and the aim of pilgrimages. The flag and even buildings which host state ceremonies partake in the nationalist sacrality.

¹¹⁶ Brubaker 2012, 16. Cf. Casanova 1994.

¹¹⁷ See Hayes 1960; Llobera 1994. Cf. Gentile 2005; Marsh 2008, 105.

¹¹⁸ Tillich 1961, 4-6.

¹¹⁹ Cavanaugh 2011, 3.

¹²⁰ Smart 1995.

(2) The mythic dimension: history, which “is somewhat idealised and censored”; in the absence of history—“a hypothetical future to fill out the past”¹²¹ — statesmen, scientists, artists and poets are made into the “‘saints’ of the patriotic religion”¹²².

(3) The ritual dimension: celebrations of victories and commemorating defeats, inaugurating chiefs of states are considered by Smart as nationalist rituals. “[E]ven speaking the language can be seen as a ritual act”¹²³.

(4) The ethical dimension, which includes moral and legal values, and which are not dissimilar to the religious ones. The mandatory schooling secures that the young are “trained to be good citizens, to pay taxes, and to be ready to fight if necessary in war”¹²⁴.

(5) The doctrinal dimension: the idea that each nation should have its own state is considered by Smart to be a sort of nationalist dogma. Apart from that, “pure nationalism is [...] feeble metaphysically”, and therefore needs to reach out for its principles in religious or humanistic traditions. Smart calls this borrowing a “‘double-decker’ religion”: “[w]hile a nationalism is itself a religion, it acquired a doubly religious character through its history’s being itself interpreted in a traditional religious light”¹²⁵.

¹²¹ Smart 1995, 1.

¹²² Smart 1995, 2.

¹²³ Smart 1995, 2.

¹²⁴ Smart 1995, 3.

¹²⁵ Smart 1995, 3-4.

(6) The experiential dimension: nationalism tries to provoke a pronounced emotional response from the citizens. Music, anthems, patriotic songs, and even sports events—the latter being “a nice substitute for war”—accomplish this task¹²⁶.

(7) The organisational dimension: “A nation has its priesthood”—monarchs, symbolic presidents, and foremost schoolteachers¹²⁷.

Some of the aspects, pointed out by Smart, such as the ‘dogma’ about a state for each nation, or a particular approach to history, have already been mentioned in this chapter. The other aspects of the nationalist sacrality have been widely commented upon by scholars¹²⁸. In what follows I would like to concentrate on only one expression of nationalist ‘sacrality’, implied by Smart, namely that of dying for the cause of the nation and the subsequent commemoration of such a dying, which, I will argue, is *par excellence* the moment of nationalism’s imitation of religion. I will do this through an engagement with the concept of sacrifice.

¹²⁶ Smart 1995, 5.

¹²⁷ Smart 1995, 5.

¹²⁸ See chapter 2 *infra*.

(II) Sacrifice

Sacrifice and religion

As I argued earlier, modern nationalism demands allegiance from the members of the nation. This allegiance can become total in the case of civil unrest or war. In modernity, citizens are called to give their life for the nation if requested. Military service—compulsory in many countries—is a reminder of the sacred duty to defend the motherland and destroy its enemies. The scholarship on nationalism stresses the sacrificial nature of this discourse. Many symbols of the nation or state, mentioned by Smart, make reference to the sacrifice, or at least can be interpreted in such a sense: the flag, civic ceremonies, feasts of victories/defeats, national anthems, various monuments, battlefields and cemeteries¹²⁹. In fact, the etymology of the term sacrifice, *sacrum facere*—to make holy, is already very illustrative. The sacrifice is thus in direct relationship with the sacred, and constitutes an act by which the sacred is defined and preserved¹³⁰.

It would therefore be useful to analyse nationalism through the lens of sacrifice. I will start by approaching the concept of sacrifice and then apply it to nationalism. I propose to approach this topic from three different perspectives: sacrifice as (a) a means of social harmonisation, (b) the

¹²⁹ See Smart 1995; Marvin and Ingle 1996, 770; Cavanaugh 2011, ch. 7.

¹³⁰ See Benveniste 1969, 223.

transcendence of death, and (c) mediation between the sacred and the profane. The reasons for such a threefold approach to sacrifice are, first of all, the complexity of the phenomenon and thus the impossibility of a single paradigm to explain it¹³¹ and, secondly, each approach reveals something important about nationalism.

Sacrifice as harmonisation

I will begin my engagement with the concept of sacrifice with the French philosopher René Girard, who engaged with this topic throughout his career¹³². For Girard, sacrifice is a key concept in the history of humanity, as far as it is radically linked to the origins of both culture and religion.

“[V]iolence and the sacred”, Girard argues, “are one and the same thing”¹³³.

In order to grasp Girard’s conception of sacrifice, one may briefly look at his conception of violence. The core idea here is that of *mimetic desire*.

The human being, as Palaver puts it, “does not know what to desire and, consequently, imitates the desires of others”¹³⁴. Consequently, she wants and

¹³¹ See Hubert and Mauss 1964, 97; Flood 2013, 130; O’Leary 2014, 290.

¹³² See Girard 1977; Girard, Oughourlian, and Lefort 1987; Girard 2001. My account of Girard’s thought is mainly based on this latter work (Girard 2001). This choice is partly motivated by the fact that some of Girard’s positions changed with time, as he himself has declared (Girard and Adams 1993). There exists a vast secondary literature on Girard. For some recent engagements with his thought, see Cowdell, Fleming, and Hodge 2014; Palaver 2014. See also *Contagion: Journal of Violence, Mimesis, and Culture*, published since 1994, which attracts essays by scholars inspired by Girard. For a Girardian reading of Vedas, see Collins 2014.

¹³³ Girard 1977, 262.

¹³⁴ Palaver 1992, 48.

does what others are wanting and doing (Jessica Frazier significantly calls Girard's theory a "narrative of borrowed values"¹³⁵). Mutual imitation, so the argument goes, often leads to rivalry and conflict between the model and his/her imitator, which is normally resolved through violence.

This mimetic violence is witnessed by the ancient myths, which often begin with a description of chaos. The community believes the malaise to be caused by someone who threatens them, often a foreigner—to whom then unanimous violence and lynching by the community are directed, and peace and harmony are thus restored¹³⁶. Or, as Girard puts it, "the disastrous violence of *all against all* [is transformed] into the healing violence of *all against one*"¹³⁷.

This is what Girard calls the *scapegoat* (or *single victim*) *mechanism*¹³⁸. The sacrifice, from this perspective, is thus a symbolic re-presentation, which functions not unlike the Freudian displacement of aggression, and is directed towards the discharge of violence within a community¹³⁹. According to Girard, "[b]loody sacrifices are attempts to repress or moderate the internal conflicts of primitive or archaic communities, and they do this by reproducing as exactly as possible, at the expense of the victims substituted for the

¹³⁵ Frazier 2013, 100.

¹³⁶ Girard 2001, 62-70.

¹³⁷ Girard 2004.

¹³⁸ Girard 2001, 94.

¹³⁹ See Frazier 2013, 102-03. Cf. Beattie 2006, 201.

original victim, a real act of violence that had occurred in the indeterminate past"¹⁴⁰. Such an act, according to Girard, "truly protect[s] mankind from its own violence"¹⁴¹. Throughout history the nature of the 'scapegoat' changed: animal sacrifices have replaced human sacrifices; the former, however, were considered to be less efficacious and "[i]n cases of extreme danger, in classical Greece, for instance, there was a reversion to human victims"¹⁴². The victim could have been killed or, as an alternative, expelled from the community.

The original violence and following peace are, for Girard, at the foundation of human society. Girard borrows Mircea Eliade's concept of 'creative murder' (*meurtre créateur*) and tries to give "the universal explanation" of it¹⁴³. Creative murder becomes for Girard a hermeneutical key to understanding all ancient mythology, from the Vedic dismemberment of Purusha to the biblical murder of Abel¹⁴⁴, to cite two examples from the traditions with which this thesis is concerned.

For Girard, the state as such is founded upon this creative murder. Cain becomes the founder of the first city; Romulus founds Rome after killing

¹⁴⁰ Girard 2001, 78.

¹⁴¹ René Girard, cited in Vattimo and Girard 2010, 106.

¹⁴² Girard 2001, 81.

¹⁴³ Girard 2001, 82-83.

¹⁴⁴ Girard 2001, 82-83. According to Girard, the biblical story of Cain and Abel is not itself a founding myth; it only gives the explanation of the founding myth. Cain becomes the founder of the first culture, which is a culture of murder: he is afraid of being killed (Gen. 4:14), and the punishment for the killing of Cain is also a murder. One can see here the perpetuation of the logic of murder.

Remus; the Roman empire rises from the collective murder of the Caesar, whose name becomes title for the successive Roman and Byzantine emperors¹⁴⁵. The New Testament's distrust toward the state—described, in Girardian interpretation, as “powers” and “principalities”—is explained as a critique of the collective violence at its basis¹⁴⁶.

I have thus introduced the Girardian account of violence as an explanation of *internal* violence. But what about the violence *ad extra* of the group? According to the French philosopher, the original violence was a violence within an already existing group. This violence—having acquired “a mythico-ritual character”¹⁴⁷ through repetition over the time—becomes more exterior and is discharged outside the group, in a form of ‘foreign’ war: “aggressive tendencies that are potentially fatal to the cohesion of the group are redirected from within the community to outside it. Inversely, there is reason to believe that the wars described as ‘foreign wars’ in the mythical narratives were in fact formerly civil strifes”¹⁴⁸.

Another element of Girard's scapegoat mechanism, which deserves to be mentioned, is what he calls the *double transformation*¹⁴⁹. Since the killing or expulsion of the victim brings peace and harmony into a community, the

¹⁴⁵ Girard 2001, 98-99.

¹⁴⁶ Girard 2001, 95. Cf. *Eph.* 6:12.

¹⁴⁷ Girard 1977, 249.

¹⁴⁸ Girard 1977, 249.

¹⁴⁹ Girard 2001, 62-70.

victim becomes considered as the benefactor of the community:

unanimous violence has reconciled the community and the reconciling power is attributed to the victim, who is already 'guilty' [...]. The victim is thus transfigured twice: the first time in a negative, evil fashion; the second time in a positive, beneficial fashion. [...] The same human groups that expel and massacre the individuals on whom suspicions fall switch over to adoring them¹⁵⁰.

This is what happened with Julius Caesar and, in a certain sense, with Jesus of Nazareth. The psalmist's expression, "The stone the builders rejected has become the cornerstone" (Ps. 118:22) is cited by Girard as biblical and Christological, an example of a *double transformation*¹⁵¹. He concludes: "[t]he peoples of the world do not invent their gods. They deify their victims"¹⁵². Thus, the victim appears as contemporarily supremely evil (the cause of the malaise, to be eliminated), and as supremely good (the source of recovered social harmony), cursed and blessed.

Girard explicates the 'mythological' account of crisis-scapegoating-harmony only to reject it and to propose instead the biblical narrative. The latter, also described by Girard as the "demystification of sacrifice"¹⁵³, sides not with the lynching crowd, but with the innocent victim, Jesus Christ, and thus breaks the vicious cycle of violence. According to the Judeo-Christian perspective, as interpreted by Girard, the cycle of violence can be broken only through the total renunciation of violence—not only of the 'real' one,

¹⁵⁰ Girard 2001, 66.

¹⁵¹ Girard 2001, 156.

¹⁵² Girard 2001, 70.

¹⁵³ Girard 2004.

but also of the 'symbolical' violence of the sacrifice¹⁵⁴. This message makes Christianity different from religion (understood as obsession with the sacrificial order and rules)¹⁵⁵. Such a conclusion would allow Girard to be listed among the other proponents of non-religious Christianity, such as Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Karl Barth and Christos Yannaras¹⁵⁶.

There are several problems with the Girardian theory. First, as Jessica Frazier tellingly argues, Girard's insistence on desire as mimetic or, better, automatically mimetic, leaves aside what she calls "an original desire that is not itself generated mimetically, but arises from an independent valuation, or choice, by the original desirer"¹⁵⁷. In other words, at least some desire is not mimetic. Second, since the original desire is non-mimetic, it must be based on choice. This should be true even for the subsequent mimetic desires. In fact, as Frazier puts it, "we must still choose the one whom we imitate"¹⁵⁸. Third, not all desire leads to a violent—nor even cryptically violent, as in the case of sacrifice—outcome. Girard is criticised for not being able to contemplate the possibility that desire might manifest and realise itself as a "non-competitive mimesis and non-acquisitive enjoyment", as Frazier puts

¹⁵⁴ Forgiveness is believed by Girard to be key to breaking this vicious circle (Girard 1986, 212).

¹⁵⁵ Girard, Oughourlian, and Lefort 1987, book II. On Girardian concept of 'religion' and uniqueness of Christianity, see Depoortere 2009.

¹⁵⁶ Cf. Palaver 1992, 50.

¹⁵⁷ Frazier 2013, 107.

¹⁵⁸ Frazier 2013, 108.

it¹⁵⁹. In other words, instead of conducing to rivalry and violence, human desire can lead to cooperation and generosity.

In what directly concerns our topic, Frazier criticises Girard for reducing the sacrifice to the (violent) sacrifice of the 'other', and overlooking alternative typologies, whereby sacrifice is conceived and practised as a *gift* and *self-sacrifice*, as in both the biblical and Hindu traditions¹⁶⁰. This suggests the need to go beyond Girard, in search of other models of understanding sacrifice.

Sacrifice as transcendence of death

A noteworthy way of approaching sacrifice is proposed by Gavin Flood. In his essay "Sacrifice as Refusal", Flood draws his theory from the sacrificial ethos of the Upanishads, which tends to identify sacrifice with renunciation¹⁶¹. He then reads it through Georges Bataille's perspective, which considers sacrifice (and war) to be a means to consume the excessive value and energy of the community¹⁶².

Flood argues that the 'renouncing' dimension of sacrifice consists in giving up something that is precious, and thus can be useful for the offerer, but instead is willingly refused by the offerer in the name of a higher goal,

¹⁵⁹ Frazier 2013, 105-07.

¹⁶⁰ Frazier 2013, 110ff.

¹⁶¹ Flood 2013.

¹⁶² See Bataille 1989, 43ff. Cf. Biles 2011; Traylor 2014; Arnould-Bloomfield 2016.

individual or communitarian. In this way, Flood seems to suggest a sacrifice is always a self-sacrifice, while “the gift destroyed is the pure gift, the gift that represents the transcendence of present time and space”¹⁶³.

Relevant to my argument is that Flood connects sacrifice and the concept of order¹⁶⁴. In fact, he argues that sacrifice should be understood as an act of structuring the universe.

Some of the elements, highlighted by Flood, we find in Aurobindo’s reflection on sacrifice. *First*, the latter relates the sacrifice to the world-order. In his *Essays on Gita*, Aurobindo reminds us that creation itself is the product of sacrifice¹⁶⁵. The sacrifice is called by Aurobindo “the law of the world”¹⁶⁶, and it is necessary in order to grasp the meaning of existence. He explains this in the following way:

The universal law of sacrifice is the sign that the world [...] belongs to God and that life is his dominion [...]; not the fulfilment of the ego, [...] but the discovery of God [...] through a constantly enlarging sacrifice culminating in a perfect self-giving [...], is that to which the experience of life is at last intended to lead¹⁶⁷.

In other words, sacrifice indicates to the human being her place and mission in the world. *Second*, Aurobindo interprets the sacrifice in terms of

¹⁶³ Flood 2013, 124.

¹⁶⁴ “Sacrifice orders life and ways of seeing the world in many sacrificial cultures; it functions to order the human world in relation to a divine realm and fosters a social stability that becomes repeated [...] through the generations” (Flood 2012, 71). Behind Flood’s link between sacrifice and order-making, one recognises Geertz’s conception of religion as a “world view” (Geertz 1973, ch. 4).

¹⁶⁵ Ghose 1997c, 114. See *Bhagavad Gita*, 3.11. On the sacrifice of Purusha, through which the world and the hierarchical social order have been created, see Collins 2014, 71-81.

¹⁶⁶ Ghose 1997c, 122.

¹⁶⁷ Ghose 1997c, 126.

renunciation. He accepts that sacrifices may be of different types—an offering, worship or self-discipline—but the “principle constant” consists in “abandon[ing] the purely egoistic enjoyment for that diviner delight which comes [...] by self-mastery, by the giving up of one’s lower impulses to a greater [...] aim”¹⁶⁸. Interestingly enough, in *The Synthesis of Yoga*, written around the same time as *Essays on the Gita*, Aurobindo argues that “the Gita discourages any excess of violence done to oneself; for the self within is really the Godhead evolving”¹⁶⁹. Self-immolation belongs to a “vulgar conception of sacrifice”, while “the true essence of sacrifice is not self-immolation, it is self-giving; its object is not self-effacement, but self-fulfilment; its method not self-mortification, but a greater life”¹⁷⁰.

But let us return to Flood’s account. By insisting that sacrifice reveals a world-order, he also interprets it in terms of refusal or transcendence of mortality. According to Flood,

[t]o lay bare the bones of sacrifice, as both naked violence and as metaphor, we need to expose it to the light of a starker existential truth of human life: that we are consumed by death and wish to transcend it. Sacrifice [...] says that death is not final and presents the refusal of death through its embrace. This embracing of death,

¹⁶⁸ Ghose 1997c, 121-22. Aurobindo makes an interesting distinction in his classification of sacrifice. On the one hand, there is a sacrifice as “inferior action”, which is to give and to receive, a “beneficent interchange between his [man’s] life and the world-life” or, as Aurobindo puts it bluntly, “a commerce”. On the other hand, there is a “higher” type of sacrifice, in which the human being “has nothing to gain by action or inaction, depends neither on gods nor men for anything, seeks no profit from any [...], but does works for the sake of the Divine only, as a pure sacrifice, without attachment or desire” (Ghose 1997c, 118).

¹⁶⁹ Ghose 1999, 108.

¹⁷⁰ Ghose 1999, 109.

which is paradoxically the embracing of life, is a refusal of death through renunciation¹⁷¹.

However, the offerer and the victim are not always identical. Flood explains this ambiguity of the vicarious character of the victim vis-à-vis the offerer in the following way: the victim is killed *in vicem* of the patron of sacrifice, so that the offerer might live¹⁷². The sacrifice is therefore a life-affirming ritual. Through the performance of the death, the death itself is symbolically transcended as “not final and all-consuming”, and with it the finitude, the nothingness and the meaninglessness of life¹⁷³.

Unlike Girard’s account, where sacrifice is a representation “as exactly as possible”¹⁷⁴ of the original act of violence in the *past*, or the ‘separation’ approach, on which I will expand in the next section, and where the emphasis is placed on the *present* situation, according to Flood “sacrifice is concerned with the *future*, with piling up merit in heaven [...] and structuring the universe in an ordered way that relates the future to the present and a higher world to the lower world”¹⁷⁵. In this way, “the structure of the cosmos is affirmed and the soteriological hope of a community expressed.”¹⁷⁶.

The last important point is the relationship between sacrifice and war. Drawing on ancient Indian comprehension of war in terms of sacrifice and

¹⁷¹ Flood 2013, 118.

¹⁷² Flood 2013, 125.

¹⁷³ Flood 2013, 130.

¹⁷⁴ Girard 2001, 78.

¹⁷⁵ Flood 2013, 124, emphasis added.

¹⁷⁶ Flood 2013, 125.

Bataille's link between sacrifice and war as two ways in which the excess of wealth and energy gets consumed, Flood argues that "in contemporary western society, it is war that best approximates to any residue of a sacrificial culture geared towards ordering or making sense of the world"¹⁷⁷. This point deserves a special emphasis. In a move, that is parallel to the line of argumentation—which goes from Heraclitus¹⁷⁸ to Carl Schmitt¹⁷⁹—Flood indicates the key role of war in the process of providing meaning and order to the world. In this sense, Flood's account is not at odds with the Girardian understanding described earlier.

Sacrifice as mediation between the sacred and profane

A third approach which, I suggest, can contribute to a better articulation of my argument, conceives of sacrifice as a means of both separating and communicating the profane and the sacred.

In their classical work, *Sacrifice: Its Nature and Function* (1898), Henri Hubert and Marcel Mauss search for some "true realities", behind the

¹⁷⁷ Flood 2013, 117.

¹⁷⁸ "War is the father of all and king of all; and some he has shown as gods, others men; some he has made slaves, others free" (Heraclitus, Fragment LXXXIII (D. 53), in Kahn 1979, 67). Cf. Baracchi 2015. Bartelson, drawing on Heidegger, proposes to conceptualise Heraclitean *polemos* as "a cosmological principle of differentiation" of the world "into recognizable beings placed in ontological opposition to each other" (Bartelson 2018, 17). I would suggest that there is a striking analogy between this way of conceiving *polemos* and Flood's understanding of sacrifice (and war, as part of "sacrificial culture") as something that provides order and structure to the universe.

¹⁷⁹ See chapter 2 *infra*.

sacrificial ritual, which appears to the unbeliever as “vain and costly illusions”¹⁸⁰. The “true realities” are found in the social function of the sacrifice: through it, the individual both recognises the gods of the community and confers upon himself the strength of the community.

Hubert and Mauss define sacrifice as “a religious act which, through the consecration of a victim, modifies the condition of the moral person who accomplishes it or that of certain objects with which he is concerned”¹⁸¹. Sacrifice is a very complex act, which has very different aspects and ends (sacralisation or de-sacralisation, redemption, divination, thanksgiving etc.), but what unites them is the fact that sacrifice provides “communication between the sacred and the profane worlds through the mediation of a victim”¹⁸². The victim serves as a *topos* of both union and separation of the profane and sacred.

Giorgio Agamben goes a bit further in the way that he radically links the sacrifice to the concept of religion and sacred. In *Language and Death*, Agamben argues that the human person is “the ungrounded [being]” (*l'in-fondato*), in the sense that she has no fundament outside her own action¹⁸³.

¹⁸⁰ Hubert and Mauss 1964, 101-03. Cf. Evans-Pritchard 1965, 70ff; Isambert 1976; Allen 2013b; Shilling and Mellor 2013.

¹⁸¹ Hubert and Mauss 1964, 13.

¹⁸² Hubert and Mauss 1964, 97. The victim is needed as a substitute for she who desires to offer a sacrifice, because the sacred is so great and fearful that it would destroy the offerer if she approached it without the mediation of a substituting victim.

¹⁸³ Agamben 1982, 131.

The sacrifice—through which a certain action or thing becomes *sacer*, i.e. separated, excluded from common usage—inaugurates therefore a logic of legislation (rules and prohibitions). In this way, the sacrifice “offers to the society and to its ungrounded legislation the fiction of a beginning: that, which is excluded from the community, is, in fact, that on which the whole life of the community is grounded”¹⁸⁴. What Agamben suggests is that, by providing the fundament for the society and power, the sacrifice conceals their lack of fundament.

A more detailed account on sacrifice can be found in Agamben’s *Profanations*. The key point here is his conception of religion, defined as that which

subtracts things, places, animals or persons from the common use and transfers them into a separate sphere. Not only there is no religion without separation, but each separation contains or preserves within itself a genuinely religious core. [...] *Religio* is not what unites men and gods, but what makes sure they are kept separate¹⁸⁵.

This separation is regulated and realised by the sacrifice. The latter “sanctions [...] the passage of something from the profane to the sacred, from the human to the divine sphere. What is essential here, is the gap that divides the two spheres, the threshold that the victim has to go through”¹⁸⁶. Such a way of conceiving religiosity is contested by Christianity. With its *kerygma* that God himself becomes a victim of sacrifice and is present as such in the Eucharist,

¹⁸⁴ Agamben 1982, 131, my translation.

¹⁸⁵ Agamben 2005a, 84-85, my translation.

¹⁸⁶ Agamben 2005a, 84, my translation.

the distinction between the sacred and profane is challenged and the religious sacrificial machine “seems to reach its limit point or a zone of undecidability”¹⁸⁷. Here Agamben seems to be on the same lines as Girard, since both authors interpret the advent of Christianity as a turning—or, better, ending—point of the sacrificial religiosity.

Sacrifice and nationalism

In what follows, I will reflect on how the three approaches to sacrifice, mentioned above, can help our understanding of nationalism and, more specifically, of the dynamics that lie behind the idea of allegiance to the nation. I will start with the understanding of sacrifice as giving one’s life for the nation, and will then proceed with the ‘bloodless’ acts of worship of and service to the nation.

As I suggested earlier, there is an intimate interconnection between violence and politics, as well as between war and community building¹⁸⁸. The Girardian account of violence, scapegoat mechanism and sacrifice seems to be a suitable place to begin approaching the question of whether we can consider dying for the nation in terms of sacrifice. Girard himself does not elaborate widely on this topic, but is open to such a project. He in fact refers

¹⁸⁷ Agamben 2005a, 91, my translation.

¹⁸⁸ Cf. Kirwan 2008, 16-18.

the term 'scapegoat' not only to the victims of the 'formal' rituals, as it were, but also to "all the phenomena of nonritualized collective transference that we observe or believe we observe around us. [...] [S]capegoats multiply wherever human groups seek to lock themselves into a given identity—communal, local, national, ideological, racial, religious, and so on"¹⁸⁹.

An exciting attempt to explicitly interpret dying for one's nation in terms of sacrifice was made by Carolyn Marvin and David W. Ingle. They offer an interesting critique of Anderson for what they consider to be an overemphasis of the role of culture and literature for community building: "not textual communities but communities of blood unite their members sacrificially. The holiest religious holidays do not celebrate literature but blood symbolically framed as birth or death"¹⁹⁰. One may partially disagree with such a statement arguing that, if some battles are celebrated as sacred sacrifices and others are not, this is mainly due to the interpretation they have received through texts and narratives. The instrumentalisation of the Battle of Kosovo, as a symbol of the struggle against the Muslim 'others' on the eve of the Yugoslavian crisis may serve as good example here. As Radost Ivanova shows, a historical military defeat constitutes only one side of the coin, the other being its selective utilisation by the epic literature and

¹⁸⁹ Girard 2001, 160.

¹⁹⁰ Marvin and Ingle 1996, 773.

narratives¹⁹¹. At the same time, the core of the argument of Marvin and Ingle concerning the role of the blood sacrifice for national unity remains valid, since it is witnessed by a consistent reference to the sacrifice amid national symbols, ceremonies and veneration of the 'The Glorious Dead', to use the inscription on Lutyens' Whitehall Cenotaph¹⁹².

One could conclude that the affairs in civilised modernity seem to be too serious to be resolved by the vicarious slaughter of animals. Nation-states prefer to 'play safe', immolating human beings, who are disposed to self-sacrifice in the name of the nation. "Dying for one's country", says Anderson, "which usually one does not choose, assumes a moral grandeur which dying for the Labour Party, the American Medical Association, or perhaps even Amnesty International cannot rival, for these are all bodies one can join or leave at easy will"¹⁹³.

One can detect a Girardian *meurtre fondateur*, i.e. a moment of violence, inaugurating the birth of a new nation or political society, not only in the mythical accounts of the founding of Rome, but also in the events which have forged the modern world. For example, Jon Pahl and James Wellman show how American "exceptionalist nationalism" was founded on a kind of original murder in the context of the fight between the English

¹⁹¹ See Ivanova 1999.

¹⁹² Cf. Smith 2003a.

¹⁹³ Anderson 2006, 144.

colonisers and Native Americans¹⁹⁴. David Stevens gives a similar interpretation to the killing of monarchs in the course of French and Russian Revolutions, which symbolise the beginning of new societies¹⁹⁵. In more recent times, the executions of Nicolae Ceauşescu, and to a certain degree those of Saddam Hussein and Muammar Gaddafi, could be interpreted as symbolic moments of a new beginning.

A question which arises at this point is how the sacrificial mechanism functions after the founding moment. René Girard reminds us that “there is no ritual without a victim”¹⁹⁶. Who is the new victim of the nationalist ritual?

According to the Girardian concept of scapegoat mechanism, the victim is not necessarily a guilty party, responsible for the community’s crisis¹⁹⁷. The victim can be chosen from within the community, or be a foreigner, or both. Such an approach to the victim is exemplified by Scott Appleby’s account of the Bosnian war: “The Serbs and Croats, twinned tribes mutually scornful and yet imitative of each other, each desiring its own sacred nation with expanded and ‘purified’ borders, found a handy scapegoat in the Muslims of Bosnia”¹⁹⁸. In other words, Bosnian Muslims, not unlike the Jews

¹⁹⁴ Pahl and Wellman 2015.

¹⁹⁵ Stevens 1997, 251-52. On the importance of the regicide during the French Revolution, see Lefort 2006.

¹⁹⁶ Girard 2001, 164.

¹⁹⁷ Girard 2001, 65-66.

¹⁹⁸ Appleby 2000, 79.

throughout European history, occupy the place of an *internal foreigner*, which can then serve as a scapegoat¹⁹⁹.

On a slightly different line, Marvin and Ingle argue that the ideal victim, as it were, is an internal one. Drawing on Girard, they accept that there is always a place for a *surrogate* victim, or an enemy, but what ultimately counts for the group's unity is killing one of its own:

The creation of national or sectarian religious sentiment depends on a common secret, which is that the underlying cost of all society is the violent death of some portion of its members. There is more. Our deepest secret [...] is the knowledge that society depends on the death of this sacrificial group at the hands of the group itself. This is the totem principle concretized²⁰⁰.

For Marvin and Ingle, the war is nothing other than “the large-scale ritual sacrifice”: the victims are the soldiers, whom nation is sending to their death; their military commanders fulfil the role of priests who prepare the victims for sacrifice; and the training—‘purification’—takes place in the context of *separation*, in a context which resembles monastic orders²⁰¹. Why does the community need to sacrifice its own members? The answer to this question, given by Marvin and Ingle, is most important for the argument of this thesis: by sacrificing its own people as victims, the community posits itself as having authority over the lives of each member, thus it acts as a true god. One can clearly see from this to what extent the sacrificial dynamic is responsible for making nationalism what it is: the supreme value of modernity.

¹⁹⁹ Cf. Maccoby 2006, 3, 25ff, 123.

²⁰⁰ Marvin and Ingle 1996, 771.

²⁰¹ Marvin and Ingle 1996, 774-75.

The goals and effects of sacrifice for Girard, and also for Marvin and Ingle, are clear: a successful sacrifice resolves internal conflicts, discharges violence and returns harmony to the community²⁰². But what makes a sacrifice efficacious? As Marvin and Ingle convincingly argue, not every war is an efficient sacrifice which produces social cohesion. To be successful, the sacrifice must be universal (to “touch or seem to touch every member of the group”), unanimous (the reason why the Vietnam war was not a successful sacrifice) and willing (one’s life must be “given” for the nation)²⁰³. These conditions connect with Flood’s understanding of sacrifice as refusal and asceticism. War is important as a *par excellence* occasion of self-sacrifice. As Jean Bethke Elshtain rightly notices, “[i]t is in war that the strength of the state is tested, and only through that test can it be shown whether individuals can overcome selfishness and are prepared to work for the whole and to sacrifice in service to the more inclusive good”²⁰⁴.

I would suggest that reflection of the universal and willing sacrifice of the soldiers might indicate that Girardian emphasis on the *otherness* of the scapegoat, and Flood’s insistence on sacrifice’s ascetic dimension need not

²⁰² Girard 2001, 62-70; Marvin and Ingle 1996, 773.

²⁰³ Marvin and Ingle 1996, 775.

²⁰⁴ Elshtain 1991, 397. She argues that “the young man goes to war not so much to kill as to die” (Elshtain 1991, 395). Elshtain’s comments on the Plutarch’s *Moralia*, where “the Spartan woman [is depicted] as a mother who reared her sons to be sacrificed on the altar of civil necessity” indicate that this approach to the war, as ascetic sacrifice, is a phenomenon we can already encounter in antiquity (Elshtain 1991, 396). See also her account on the death *pro patria* as the work of charity in the Middle Ages (Elshtain 1991, 398). Cf. Rousseau 1979, 40, 366.

be considered as mutually exclusive, but rather as complementary. I propose three images that may help make this idea clearer. The *first* is the Genesis story of the sacrifice of Isaac. Frazier draws our attention to the fact that “the value of Isaac is not that he is a simple vehicle of violence, but rather that he is of immense value to his father, the sacrificer”; hence she proposes that we read the Abraham story primarily as an instance of self-sacrifice²⁰⁵. The *second* is the account in the Epistle to the Hebrews which presents Christ’s free offer of himself for human sins²⁰⁶. Christ appears here both as a victim (and explicitly a scapegoat) *and* the High Priest, or sacrificer. The *third* is Agamemnon’s sacrifice of his daughter Iphigenia, in order to conquest Troy. Consider the way in which Christina Elliott Sorum describes Euripides’ account of this sacrifice: “Iphigenia’s choice is to oppose or to embrace her fate. Clearly she is going to die [...], as either a willing sacrifice or a victim of mob violence [...]. By embracing her death, she could, like a *deus ex machina*, reconcile the dramatic fiction with the tradition”²⁰⁷. I do not see a reason why, from the point of view of the sacrificer, Frazier’s reading of Abraham’s sacrifice as self-sacrifice could not be applied to Agamemnon’s²⁰⁸. I conclude that in all three mentioned accounts we are in the presence of not

²⁰⁵ Frazier 2013, 111. Cf. *Gen.* 22.

²⁰⁶ *Heb.* 9. Cf. Agamben 2012, 19ff.

²⁰⁷ Sorum 1992, 540. I would emphasise a profoundly Girardian way of Sorum’s interpretation of Iphigenia’s sacrifice—though without an explicit mention of the French philosopher. For an explicitly Girardian reading, see Tyrrell 2012, 50-55.

²⁰⁸ Cf. Quinn 1990; Nussbaum 2001, 35.

only Girardian sacrifice, i.e. the sacrifice of the *other* (Isaac, Iphigenia and Jesus are innocent victims killed by somebody else), but also of *self*-sacrifice.

With this in mind, let us return to nationalist sacrifice: soldiers who are sent to die for the nation can be read as scapegoats, i.e. innocent victims sacrificed for the protection and 'salvation' of the rest of the citizens. But, at the same time, as the sons and daughters of the citizens, and as a great value and future of the nation, their deaths are also an act of national self-sacrifice. In a sacrificial reading of the war, the nation thus appears to be both priest and victim. There remains, however, space for some ambiguities concerning the question, to what extent are sacrifices mentioned *self*-sacrifices? The inescapability and *necessity* of Iphigenia's sacrifice raises the question of how free is the soldiers' martyrdom, performed in order to satisfy a compulsory civil duty? On the other hand, the reasons that led the Glorious Dead to give their lives, might be multiple. Özkirimli is right when he argues that "it is not clear what they are killing or dying for—for their country, to protect their immediate locality and their loved ones, or simply out of fear [...]"²⁰⁹

Sometimes we cannot be certain whether somebody is giving their life for national, ideological, or religious reasons. For example, in Greece there is a

²⁰⁹ Özkirimli 2010, 215. Özkirimli, drawing on Thomas Eriksen, suggests that a soldier is sacrificing his life because he is part of a web of social relations, and not because of "some unaccountable feeling of attachment to the 'imagined community' of the nation" (Özkirimli 2010, 215). It would seem that a similar problem might arise when we want to classify violence, and decide whether we are dealing with 'nationalist', 'religious' or 'racial' conflict. I will touch on this issue in chapter 4.

category of saints called *ethnomartyrs*, described, with some contempt, by Dragica Tadić-Papanikolaou as “Greeks in whose martyrdom it was not immediately apparent and clear whether they died (only) for their faith in Christ or (only) for the ideal of the nation”²¹⁰. I would suggest that, in some cases, such distinctions cannot be made at all. Such ambiguities are not easily solved. On the other hand, I would suggest that there is an understanding, that if the nation-state wants to have the right to oblige people to kill and die for it, it must appear to be not only a *state*, but first and primarily, a *nation*—embracing all citizens in a caring and egalitarian manner²¹¹.

Therefore, taking into consideration the profound overlap or intersection between the religious sacrificial narratives and nationalist rhetoric, I find plausible Johannes Zachhuber’s assertion that the modern nationalist demand for “self-submission for the benefit of the greater good” is a secularised version of the final evolution (reached by Catholic and Protestant theologies) of the Judeo-Christian concept of sacrifice as self-sacrifice and annihilation²¹². This statement, however, should be balanced by

²¹⁰ Tadić-Papanikolaou 2013, 398. For a comparison of Greece and Ireland on this issue, see Halikiopoulou 2016, 112ff. On a similar ambiguity, on whether somebody has died for national freedom, anti-communism or religious convictions, in cases of Poland and Romania, see Tarta 2012, 124, 94, 236.

²¹¹ Cf. Colley 2003, 318.

²¹² Zachhuber 2013, 27. Cf. Mosse claims that “[t]he fascist call to sacrifice made use of the Christian dialectic of death and resurrection” (Mosse 1989, 18). Similarly, the festivals of French Revolution and Italian fascists were to a large extent influenced by Christian liturgy.

recalling that self-sacrifice is not an exclusively Judeo-Christian concept.

Another important moment in Flood's hermeneutics of sacrifice is the way he links the latter to the meaning given to life, and particularly to the transcendence of death. Flood's emphasis on sacrifice as an act of symbolic transcendence over death finds an echo in the way in which dying for one's nation is conceived. George Mosse notes this paradox when he asks: "Why this preoccupation with death by revolutions which wanted to usher in a new and dynamic age [...]?"²¹³ In fact, nationalism proposes its own way of immortality. Anthony Smith speaks about "the overcoming of death through fame" as one of the "motifs in the national salvation drama"²¹⁴. In other words, according to the nationalist, narrative provides immortality to its dead, achieved through gratitude and regular commemorations²¹⁵. This idea is powerfully expressed by Zygmunt Bauman:

The inherited immortality of nationhood endows mortal life with meaning, but perpetuation of that immortality gives mortal acts an added value of transcendence. It is nationhood which offers mortal beings their chance of surviving their individual death and entering eternity [...] As a preventive cure for the psychical devastation which the awareness of mortality was bound to perpetrate, nationhood had an important advantage of being available to all and any individual; no special talents, [...] were required [...]. This was, therefore, a popular and populist medicine, for common, repeated and continuous use²¹⁶.

²¹³ Mosse 1989, 18-19.

²¹⁴ Smith 2003a, 219.

²¹⁵ Smith 1999b, 43-44, 154.

²¹⁶ Bauman 1999, 36.

Bauman's idea is important, because it suggests the possibility of what can be called a 'protracted' sacrifice, which is not limited, as it were, to giving one's life, but is stretched to giving a day-by-day life to the nation²¹⁷.

If, as Christos Yannaras puts it, religion is a reaction against the inevitability and absurdity of death²¹⁸, then choosing to die for a nation is an act of eschatological hope, which fills the nation with profound meaning. One could propose a parallel here between, on the one hand, the idea that lies both behind the psalmist's claim about the rejected stone becoming the cornerstone (*Ps.* 118) and Girard's account of the deification of victim, and, on the other hand, the veneration of national heroes and those who give their lives for the motherland. Therefore, I find convincing Benedict Anderson's assertion that "[i]f the nationalist imagining is so concerned [with death and immortality], this suggests a strong affinity with religious imaginings"²¹⁹. But, as Bauman seems to be ironically suggesting in the quote just given, nationalism might win the competition with religion since its ethical requisites are lower and more accessible.

The national victims, therefore, receive their immortality from the nation while, even more importantly, they fill the nation with meaning and sacrality in return. This reciprocal sanctification is well-described by Ninian Smart:

²¹⁷ See chapter 2 *infra*.

²¹⁸ Yannaras 2013.

²¹⁹ Anderson 2006, 10. Anderson, however, emphasises the difference between the nationalist and the conventional religious cult of the 'martyrs' (Anderson 1999).

“mourning enhances the dead. And the dead, solid with us in nationality, thus have a glory they can vouchsafe to us”²²⁰. This exemplifies the relationship between the sacrifice and the sacred, as implied by the Agambenian perspective on sacrifice. As mentioned earlier, Agamben interprets sacrifice in terms of separation/communication between the sacred and the profane. Sacrifice, so the argument goes, exists in order to set apart the profane sphere from the sacred, and eventually to relocate something from one sphere to another. It is a religious act *par excellence*. As James Wellman tellingly argues, “[t]o sacrifice one’s life for this power [of the state] sacralises not only one’s own life but the life of the nation. Violence becomes a *sacrament* by which one wins glory for oneself, one’s family, and the state”²²¹.

Marisol Lopez Menendez, in her essay significantly titled “The Leadership of the Dead”, helps our understanding of the link between bloody sacrifice and legitimacy. Although the essay deals with early Christian martyrdom, I suggest that her conclusion is applicable to the martyrdom of those who give their lives for the nation-state. Two points, which Lopez Menendez makes, are of great importance for our topic. *First*, her claim that “[m]artyrdom is a *sui generis* form of charismatic leadership, because charisma is proven once and for all while suffering and dying”²²². The martyr

²²⁰ Smart 1985, 20.

²²¹ Wellman in Pahl and Wellman 2015, 85.

²²² Lopez Menendez 2008, 235.

(the etymology derives from the Ancient Greek 'witness'), by his act of self-giving, legitimises the ideas he is dying and 'witnessing' for. *Second*, the power of martyrdom is capable of "routinization". Lopez Menendez argues that "[t]he perpetuation of the charismatic leadership of the martyr [...] might also accrue a degree of power and influence on others who are part of the institutional structure that has developed around the martyr"²²³. If applied to dying for the nation, this narrative enables us to grasp the way in which the Glorious Dead provide the nation-state with legitimacy. There is a double legitimation at work here: the nation-state is empowered because it represents the value for which somebody died, and because it institutionally claims the Glorious Dead as its own through state funerals and commemorations. The sacrifice therefore sacralises the value for which it has been made, and stimulates its future perpetuation²²⁴.

To illustrate the power of such sacralisation, allow me to propose an image of the afore-mentioned Iphigenia's sacrifice. After Agamemnon sacrifices his daughter, there is no turning back from the war. Hereafter, the war becomes not a matter of choice, but a *necessity*, a sacred duty. No argument in favour of retreating can stand in the face of the sacrality of something for which such a sacrifice has been offered. As Adam Seligman

²²³ Lopez Menendez 2008, 235.

²²⁴ Cf. Miller 2003, 305.

puts it, “[i]f the sacred means anything, it is that place where negotiation ends”²²⁵.

This particular usage of sacrifice, in order to construct and enhance the sacred, leads Marvin and Ingle to the following conclusion:

what is really true in any community is what its members can agree is worth killing for, or what they can be compelled to sacrifice their lives for. The sacred is thus easily recognized. It is that set of beliefs and persons for which we ought to shed our own blood, if necessary, when there is a serious threat. [...] Sacrificial death thus defines both sectarian and national identity. This is the first sense in which both are species of religion²²⁶.

Where is the difference then between conventional religion and nationalism?

Marvin and Ingle answer by claiming that the difference lies in their historical location:

In the West the power to compel believers to die passed from Christianity to the nation-state, where it largely remains. [...] Though denominations are permitted to exist, they are not permitted to kill, for they are not officially true, which is a way of suggesting they are false. Only the true god, whose agent is the nation-state, may kill²²⁷.

This analysis resonates with Juergensmeyer’s suggestion that the fact that both nationalism and religion claim sanction for murder and martyrdom, indicates a “structural similarity” between nationalism and religion²²⁸. That both claim to be the “ultimate authorit[ies] for social order” naturally leads to rivalry, in which one tries to “reduce the other to a peripheral social role”²²⁹. The

²²⁵ Seligman 2000, 39.

²²⁶ Marvin and Ingle 1996, 769.

²²⁷ Marvin and Ingle 1996, 769. Cf. Schmitt’s observation that “[b]y virtue of th[e] power over the physical life of men, the political community transcends all other associations or societies” (Schmitt 2007, 47).

²²⁸ Juergensmeyer 2008a, 23-24. Cf. Juergensmeyer 2008b.

²²⁹ Juergensmeyer 2008a, 21.

presuppositions and implications of the contention over what is worth sacrificing for, are tellingly pointed out by William Cavanaugh, who argues that “[i]n the West, revulsion toward killing and dying in the name of one’s religion is one of the principal means by which we become convinced that killing and dying in the name of the nation-state is laudable and proper”²³⁰. I shall return to this issue in chapter 4, where I will reflect on the modern nation-state acquiring a monopoly over the use of violence, and point out the importance of this fact for the emergence of a new articulation of the political and the religious. For now, I would like to emphasise the link between the modern nationalist usage of sacrificial discourse and the sacralisation of the nation. To conclude: looking at modern nationalism from three different perspectives on sacrifice sheds light on the nature of modern nationalism. *First*, the death of soldiers in war, and the commemoration of this dying/killing for the nation, contributes to the enhancement of national cohesion. The nation appears to have power over life or death. *Second*, nationalist narratives present the self-sacrifice for the nation as something which both gives meaning to life, and provides immortality through memory and the gratitude of future generations. *Third*, giving one’s life in the name of nation is believed to be a true sacrifice according to its very etymological meaning, *sacrum facere*. As a non-utilitarian—i.e. self-denying—act par excellence, nationalist sacrifice sanctifies

²³⁰ Cavanaugh 2009, 4-5.

the nation, makes it sacred, and relocates it from the sphere of the profane into the sphere of the divine.

Commemoration ritual

The last issue, which needs to be addressed in relation to nationalist sacrifice, is the way of its commemoration. Smart pertinently points out that a nation needs rituals. Belonging to a group with common attributes (people casually sitting in a specific place, or having a handicap, or belonging to a specific race, etc.) does not alone create solidarity. What creates this solidarity, or “us-ness”, as Smart calls it, is “an acknowledgement by the individuals of the importance of the mark that defines the group”, which is realised through a celebration of a symbolic, or, as Smart prefers to call it, a *performative act*²³¹. This has been noticed already by Durkheim, who argues that “social life is only possible thanks to a vast symbolism”²³². Durkheim suggests that there is a special interconnection between sentiments and their symbolic expression, which works both ways. Symbolic actions “keep bringing the feelings to individual minds and keep them perpetually aroused, just as would happen if the cause that first called them forth was still

²³¹ Smart 1985, 17-18.

²³² Durkheim 1995, 233.

acting"²³³. Through performing the same action and pronouncing the same words, people "arrive at and experience agreement"²³⁴.

In a recent essay on state liturgies, Ulf Hedetoft distinguishes several types of nationalistic rituals, among which he cites commemorations of victories or defeats and other "rituals of heroic sacrifice and death in the national cause"²³⁵. Hedetoft argues that the success of nationalism is to a large extent due to the performance of rituals of belonging. They create a sense of unity *firstly* through "forging overlapping 'vertical' and 'horizontal' solidarities, that is, deep-seated sentiments of belonging between state and nation and among different sections of the population"; *secondly* through "creating an imaginary bridge between past, present, and future"; and *thirdly* by combining "the realm of the profane with that of sacrality and faith, and thus the imaginaries of life and death, fatality and eternity"²³⁶.

²³³ Durkheim 1995, 232-33.

²³⁴ Durkheim 1995, 231-32.

²³⁵ Other types of ritual, mentioned by Hedetoft, are: rituals of state (celebrating the greatness of the country and its leaders); sport events, which aim to destroy the opponent non-physically; "ritualism of moral value and national allegiance", performed in the institutions of education; and "everyday rituals of cultural symbolism", as participation in social movements, dressing national clothes, celebrating civil or even religious holidays in a 'national' way (Hedetoft 2008, 503-06). To the rituals, enumerated by Hedetoft, one could also add watching the media. As Marvin and Ingle point out, "[i]n the system of nationalism mass media perform the same functions that sacred and priestly texts perform in other religious systems" (Marvin and Ingle 1996, 777).

²³⁶ Hedetoft 2008, 500. Cavanaugh insists on link between the past, the present and the future, enabled by the secular rituals: "Patriotic liturgies are cyclical, constantly establishing the present reality by reference to past sacrifice that has triumphed over chaos. [...] what is needed is a return to the original sacrifice [...] and new good wars to unite the country" (Cavanaugh 2011, 121). Cavanaugh suggests that a nationalistic commemoration ritual requires the perpetuation of violence. The essential difference between his position and, e.g. that of Girard, is that for the latter a symbolic enactment of a sacrifice is meant to be a

I would argue that there is a striking analogy between Hedetoft's analysis of nationalistic sacrificial ritual, and the way Christian liturgy works. Let me illustrate this by indicating how the interpretation of the Eucharist by Orthodox theology, in particular by Yannaras, resonates with Hedetoft's three points. *Firstly*, Eucharist is understood by Yannaras as the sacrament in which the dispersed people of God is "gathered now in the unity of life of the ecclesial body"²³⁷. This unity, as Zizioulas points out, represents the overlap between community and its leaders and institutions, altogether, as one body²³⁸. *Secondly*, Eucharist is performed in a way that connects the past, present, and future. It is an *anamnesis*, or commemoration of the past events (life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ), celebration of the present (gathering of the local community), and contemplation of the future (Kingdom of God)²³⁹. *Thirdly*, Eucharist is as offering of things material (bread and wine) to God for transformation, and in view of "the grafting of the perishable into imperishability", and of "a crossing of the whole race of men from death to life"²⁴⁰.

I would propose an additional parallel, between the Eucharist and

displacement of violence, not an incentive for its continuation. A more positive reading of the rituals of the sort that we find in A. Smith, who, referring primarily, but not exclusively to the commemorations at *Yad Vashem*, expresses "hope, that such acts of commemoration, repeated the world over, will reveal the futility of national wars and of the martial heroism on which they have fed so long" (Smith 2003a, 253).

²³⁷ Yannaras 1991, 122.

²³⁸ Zizioulas 2001.

²³⁹ Yannaras 1991, 124-25. Cf. Zizioulas 1985a, 20-23.

²⁴⁰ Yannaras 1991, 123-24, 33. Cf. Yannaras 1984, 99. Zizioulas 2011, chapters 2 and 4.

nationalist ritual. Eucharistic ecclesiology sometimes gives impression that church experience is limited to the Eucharist²⁴¹, and has been rightly criticised for this²⁴². One of the risks of the reduction of the Christian life to Eucharist consists in that participation in the sacrament might give an illusion of living Christian life, which is far more holistic and goes well beyond the Eucharist. Something analogous has been argued about 'secular' rituals. In fact, Mosse asserts that during the French Revolution and under fascism, "[p]opular sovereignty was affirmed and controlled through giving the people a means of participation in the political process—not in reality, but through a feeling of participating, of belonging to a true and meaningful community"²⁴³. Mosse seems to suggest that participation in national gatherings and liturgies might serve as a *substitute* for actual political participation, just as participation in the Eucharist might function as the *sublimation* of Christian life in its fullness. Far from arguing that the ritual *always* functions in the way suggested by

²⁴¹ Cf., for instance, Yannaras' statement in the first edition of *The Freedom of Morality*, that "[i]n order for a human being to realise their relation and communion with God, they need no Law, no Ethics and no Religion, no sacrifices nor meritorious actions. The Eucharist is the end of every Religion and every Ethics" (Yannaras 1970, 78, my translation). This is missing from the second edition of the book, where, instead, Yannaras argues that "[t]he moral endeavor of the Christian is a personal extension of the eucharist into every aspect of life" (Yannaras 1984, 93-94). Cf. Yannaras 1979, 119-20.

²⁴² For a critique of the way Yannaras identifies ethics with the Eucharist, see Zouboulakis 2017, 491ff. For a more general critique of Eucharistic ecclesiology for downplaying ethical, social and missionary aspects of Christianity, see Berger 2007; Bloom 2005, 7. Papanikolaou, in his critical engagement with the Eucharistic ecclesiology, convincingly argues that the emphasis on the Eucharist must be supplemented with ascetical endeavour (Papanikolaou 2012, 81-86).

²⁴³ Mosse 1989, 8.

Mosse, it would seem, *pace* Durkheim, Girard *et al.*, necessary to take into account that ritual might not always be efficacious²⁴⁴.

To conclude: I have shown that there is a deep correspondence between the nationalist and Christian concepts of ritual. Nationalist rituals imitate religious rituals, not only in the ways they are performed, but also at a more structural, if not ontological level. The question that arises at this point is: Does following religious patterns make nationalist rituals religious ones?

Does sacrifice make nationalism into religion?

The question with which I ended the previous section can be formulated more widely in order to include what has been said on sacrifice. It may be phrased in the following terms: Does the fact that nationalism has recourse to sacrifice, sacrificial narrative and religiously patterned rituals mean that it is, or wishes to be, a religion?

I will seek to tackle this question in the following chapters. What has been exposed in this chapter, however, allows for three preliminary observations.

²⁴⁴ Ritual can even be *actively inefficacious*, not in Frits Staal's sense of being "meaningless" (Staal 1996, 131-41, 400), but rather in Gellner's sense of "mirror[ing] not the real situation, but the past or a fictitious distribution of social power" (Gellner 1992, 91). The example, which Gellner provides to explain his idea, is that of a constitutional monarchy, "a system which retains the ritual and symbolism of genuine monarchy, whilst transferring most of the real business of running society to a more technical, secular and unsacralized sphere" (Gellner 1992, 91).

My first observation has to do with the relationship between ritual and religion. Does having recourse to liturgy invest the one who performs it with a *religious* meaning? Well, yes and no. The liturgy *per se* is not the 'property' of religion. To limit myself to Christian liturgy, not only did the early Christian community adopt the term *leitourgeia*, which had a pronounced socio-political (rather than cultic) connotation²⁴⁵, but a great deal of its liturgical symbolism²⁴⁶, ceremonial²⁴⁷, iconography²⁴⁸ and even ritual vestments²⁴⁹ were adapted directly from the public life of communities and royal courts. As I will argue in chapter 3, the political Greco-Roman world in the beginnings of the Christian era cannot be considered as purely 'secular'. However, political and cultic connotations/accents are sometimes discernible. Returning to the issue of nationalism, I would suggest that we can certainly speak of the 'recycling' of the religious ritual through nationalist usage, but this does not actually prove the 'religious' character of nationalism, at least from a theological perspective. The liturgy simply does not belong to religion. Having said this,

²⁴⁵ See Agamben 2012, ch. 1. The term *leitourgeia* is also used in the Septuagint. Cf. chapter 3 *infra*.

²⁴⁶ Cf. Mango's observation that "the Byzantines imagined God and the Heavenly Kingdom as a vastly enlarged replica of the imperial court at Constantinople. [...] Whichever of the two was the 'archetype' and whichever the copy, their mutual resemblance was taken for granted and it explains many manifestations of Byzantine religiosity" (Mango 1988, 151).

²⁴⁷ Wybrew argues that after the Peace of the Church, "[s]ome of the features of the public celebration of the Eucharist were borrowed from civil practice. When bishops were given the status of magistrates, they adopted also the practice of having lights and incense carried before them when they entered and left the church" (Wybrew 1978, 433).

²⁴⁸ Grabar 1936, 189f.

²⁴⁹ On the dependence of Christian liturgical vestments upon the dresses, used by the political figures of the Roman Empire, see Duchesne 1903, 379-90; Grisbrooke 1978, 489.

the fact that nationalism decides to explicitly imitate available religious symbolisms is not without significance. Just as for the early church, to have recourse to terms and symbols with stronger political (rather than cultic) accents was not a coincidence, but a statement about its nature, so for the modern nation-state, to imitate religious rituals is also not an accident, but a way of positioning itself.

The second observation concerns the relationship between violence and nation. The emphasis that Marvin and Ingle, and Juergensmeyer, place on the exclusive link between the sacrifice/sacred and modern nationalism causes me to wonder whether they do not overlook the fact that sacrifice makes holy not the modern nation per se, but, paradoxically as it might sound, *anything* for which it is offered. I accept the fact that, today, members of the Oxford Hindu Society cannot be compelled to die for the society, while most nation-states can. Nevertheless, I would suggest that life is being offered for a variety of ideals. It might be religion, or the political as such, or the religio-political, or all sorts of ideologies, cosmopolitanism included, or science, or *anything*²⁵⁰. If people are dying/killing for all kinds of ideals does this make all of them religions? Is any meaningful death 'for' something, as opposed to the unavoidable end of life, necessarily a religious act? Therefore, what does it mean to be 'religious'?

²⁵⁰ I am grateful to Frans Hoppenbrouwers for pointing this out to me.

This leads me to my third observation, concerning the meaning of 'religion' and 'secularisation' in the discussion on the nature and metamorphosis of sacrifice. Marvin and Ingle conclude their exploration by arguing that since the nation-state uses the sacrificial narrative, it is a "species of *religion*"²⁵¹. On the contrary, Zachhuber describes the appropriation, by modernity, of the Judeo-Christian concept of sacrifice as self-sacrifice in terms of *secularisation*. In the essay cited above, he refers to secularisation only implicitly, as he argues that "universalization of the sacrificial logic went hand in glove with a fundamental rejection of that very logic"²⁵². But in another piece, co-authored with Julia T. Meszaros, Zachhuber is more explicit. Here it is argued that "[t]he purpose of [...] *secularized* affirmation of sacrifice in what has been called 'civil religion' is unashamedly the advancement of the ambitions of the modern nation state"²⁵³. Thus we see that, while in one case the nationalist usage of sacrifice is cited as a sign that nationalism is a *religion*, in another case the same phenomenon is interpreted in terms of *secularisation*. While this inconsistency may seem an unimportant detail, I would suggest that what is at stake here is the very understanding of nationalism itself. To put it in the simplest terms possible: is nationalism a *religion*, or a *secularisation* of religion? I will attempt to address

²⁵¹ Marvin and Ingle 1996, 769, emphasis added.

²⁵² Zachhuber 2013, 27.

²⁵³ Zachhuber and Meszaros 2013, 7, emphasis added.

this question in the following chapters.

Chapter 2. Nationalism and the Sacred. Durkheim's contribution to the understanding of nationalism

As I pointed out in chapter 1, a relevant number of scholars emphasise the 'sacred' character of modern nationalism, going so far as to call it a religion of modernity¹. In this chapter, I will engage in dialogue primarily with Emile Durkheim and Anthony Smith to understand what meaning is being given to the sacred in general, and to see how this category is applied within nationalism. Durkheim offers a methodological tool which allows us to identify the 'sacred' within modern nationalism. Engagement with Smith is a good starting point towards the understanding of what is actually meant by the 'sacred' when scholars of nationalism speak of the 'sacred' dimensions of nationalism—assuming that such a usage of the term, both as epithet and noun, is not purely figurative².

While some scholars of nationalism emphasise the contrast between the 'old' religious society and the modern secular one, and link the rise and tenacity of nationalism to the decline of religion³, Smith challenges such a

¹ Besides A. Smith, one may mention Hayes 1960; Bellah 1967; Smart 1985; 1995; Mosse 1989; Llobera 1994; Bell 2001; Gentile 2007.

² Smith has written widely on nationalism and its 'sacred' symbols Smith 1971; 1991; 1998; 1999a; 1999b; 2000; 2003a; 2009; 2015.

³ See Kedourie 1961, 20-31; Gellner 1997, 77-78; Anderson 2006, 9-36.

narrative by pointing out the extent to which nationalism uses the religious or sacred sources and symbols. Nationalism, so Smith's narrative goes, in order to construct itself, draws on religious sources, imitates religious symbolism and discourse, and requires privileged allegiance. This process consists in two parallel movements, described by Smith as the sacralisation of politics, and the politicisation of religion⁴. In other words, Smith's thesis challenges certain interpretations of the secular thesis: he contests the secular character of nationalism, but not necessarily the fact that the rise of nationalism is linked to the decline of conventional religion.

A problem with Smith's account of the sacralisation of nationalism—as also with a number of authors who speak of the 'sacred' aspects of nationalism—is the lack of clarity on what he and they actually mean by the 'sacred'. Troy Paddock, in his review of Smith's *Chosen Peoples*, claims, not without reason, that the author "exhibits such an elastic notion of the sacred that the term almost becomes meaningless"⁵. Smith is by no means the only author to use the notion of the sacred 'elastically'. It has been even argued that the 'sacred', as a modern category, can not only be defined in various ways but is *naturally* ambiguous or, as Giorgio Agamben puts it, "ambiguity

⁴ Smith 2000.

⁵ Paddock 2004.

seems to be inherent to the term 'sacred' as such"⁶. Although such an argument might serve as an explanation of why the 'sacred' is not easily definable even within a coherent narrative, one could nonetheless question to what extent the ambiguous character of a category might justify its ambiguous usage.

Modern scholarship approaches the 'sacred' in two different ways. The *ontological* theory—represented by Friedrich Schleiermacher, Rudolf Otto and Mircea Eliade—approaches the sacred as a fundamental transcendental reality and emphasises the individual and her subjective experience⁷. The *cultural sociological* perspective, represented by the Durkheimian school, establishes the fundamental link between the sacred and the community. Both theories accept the opposition between the sacred and the profane, while at the same time struggling with the definition of this dyad.

'Sacred' derives from Latin *sacer*—a term, which could designate a special place, isolated or set apart from the surrounding space⁸. *Profanare* in this context would mean to bring something outside (*pro*) a sacred place (*fanum*). But the Latin *sacer* has an ambivalent meaning, and can mean not

⁶ Agamben 2005a, 88, my translation. Cf. Agamben 1995, 83-89. On the ambivalence of the sacred, see Caillois 1959, ch. 2; Filoramo 2004, 89-110. For Appleby not only the 'sacred', but also the human experience *per se* is characterised by ambiguity (Appleby 2000, 29).

⁷ Here, I am primarily drawing on: Filoramo 1997; Lynch 2012, 9-30. The classification belongs to the latter.

⁸ For semantic issues connected to the etymology of 'sacred', see Benveniste 1969, 187ff; Agamben 1995, 79ff; Filoramo 2004, 94-99.

only that which is dedicated to the gods, but also what is cursed, as in the formula *homo sacer*, to which I will return later.

I would like to argue that, in order to avoid the category of 'sacred' remaining unintelligible, one must define, or assign a meaning to what sacred is *not*. The etymology of definition—from Latin *de-finire*, to set a limit, boundary—is very illuminating for this purpose: in order to define the sacred, one should draw a line, which would semantically separate it from what is not sacred, i.e. from the profane.

My main interest being the ways in which 'sacred' refers to nation, I will proceed by analysing the *cultural sociological* approach to the sacred. I begin with Durkheim's sacred/profane dichotomy, and will then apply this to nationalism.

(I) Durkheimian Sacred/Profane Dichotomy

Durkheim's First Thesis

Emile Durkheim defines religion in terms of the sacred or, more precisely, as a classification of reality based on "division of the world into two domains, one containing all that is sacred and the other all that is profane"⁹. In *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life*, he presents two conceptions, or 'theses', as Tomoko Masuzawa puts it, of the sacred—as indefinable, and

⁹ Durkheim 1995, 34.

as social—the compatibility of which, as we shall see, poses problems¹⁰.

The first thesis, which one can identify in *The Elementary Forms*, presents *sacred* as an indefinable object, de-limited only by the identically indefinable *profane*. These two categories not only exist in opposition to each other but also cover the whole existent reality: “all known religious beliefs [...] presuppose a classification of the real or ideal things that men conceive of into two classes—two opposite genera—that are widely designated by two distinct terms, which the words *profane* and *sacred* translate fairly well”¹¹. But what is the content of this dyad of categories, that Durkheim has in mind? According to Durkheim,

nothing but their heterogeneity is left to define the relation between the sacred and the profane. But what makes this heterogeneity sufficient [...] to distinguish it from any other is that it has a very particular feature: *It is absolute*. In the history of human thought, there is no other example of two categories of things [...] as radically opposed to one another. [...] [T]he sacred and the profane are always and everywhere conceived [...] as separate genera, as two worlds with nothing in common¹².

The opposition between the two domains is irreducible, not only to any moral distinction¹³, but even to the division of the world into the natural and the supernatural¹⁴. The sacred, according to this conception, is defined solely through its opposition to the profane, and cannot be defined with more

¹⁰ Masuzawa 1988.

¹¹ Durkheim 1995, 34.

¹² Durkheim 1995, 36, emphasis in original.

¹³ As Pals puts it, in Durkheim, the “line of separation [between good and evil] runs *through* the division between the sacred and the profane” (Pals 2006, 96, emphasis in original). Sacred and profane can be both good and evil.

¹⁴ Durkheim 1995, 24-25.

precision; in fact, "anything can be sacred"¹⁵.

Durkheim seems to be aware that such a strict opposition between the two categories is problematic. Already in *The Elementary Forms*, he concedes that, notwithstanding the absolute opposition between the sacred and the profane, there exists the possibility of a passage from the former to the latter. In fact, "[t]he sacred thing is, *par excellence*, that which the profane cannot touch with impunity. This prohibition cannot go so far as to make all communication between the two worlds impossible, for if the profane could in no way enter into relations with the sacred, the sacred would be of no use"¹⁶. Later on, Durkheim acknowledges that, although the categories of the sacred and the profane

have meaning only one in relation to the other [...], if these two terms are distinct only through their reciprocal opposition (*séparation*), it would be impossible to observe them within society, i.e. know which of the two is sacred, and which is profane. Therefore, it is necessary for the sacred to have a specific character¹⁷.

Durkheim ends by claiming that the sacred could be compared to the "focus (*siège*) of power, of energy that affects the profane"¹⁸, while the profane can only act in order to discharge this energy. Durkheim is thus well aware that to define one category *only* through the other does not lead us far. At the same time, his solution is not very satisfactory: what he finally suggests is that we

¹⁵ Durkheim 1995, 35.

¹⁶ Durkheim 1995, 38. According to Isambert, Durkheim's account of the movement between the two categories implicitly alludes to the "sacrificial schema", where the opposition between the sacred and profane actually finds its source (Isambert 1982, 236).

¹⁷ Durkheim 1975, 64, my translation.

¹⁸ Durkheim 1975, 64, my translation.

can distinguish the sacred and profane *only* when we observe their encounter—the exchange of energy; an encounter which, as Durkheim seems to suggest, should be avoided because the sacred must not touch the profane¹⁹.

Another important dichotomy proposed by Durkheim is that between *pure* and *impure*, both of which represent different types of the sacred: certain religious forces are “benevolent, guardians of physical and moral order”, others are “evil and impure powers, bringers of disorder, causes of death and sickness, instigators of sacrilege”²⁰. Durkheim insists that the pure and impure are “varieties of the same genus”²¹; both belong to the domain of the sacred and do not constitute separate genera.

The problem evident from the account of the first of Durkheim’s theses is the difficulty in defining with precision the content of the sacred and the profane. The same problem has been reported by other scholars of the ‘sacred’ post-Durkheim, such as Roger Caillois, a member of the Durkheimian school²², and Mircea Eliade²³. I would argue that Durkheim’s first thesis is vulnerable to critique, which should be addressed not so much to the categories of sacred and profane *per se*—they continue to be analytically

¹⁹ Durkheim 1995, 38.

²⁰ Durkheim 1995, 412-13.

²¹ Durkheim 1995, 415.

²² Caillois 1959, 13.

²³ Eliade 1958, 1.

useful—as to the particular way in which Durkheim articulates them. I will concentrate on four points: (a) the semantic ‘emptiness’ of the categories of sacred and profane, (b) the rigidity of the opposition, (c) the question as to whether they are sufficient to cover all existing reality, and (d) the asymmetry of the categories.

Firstly, I agree with Masuzawa’s comments that the definition of the sacred in terms of its heterogeneity to the profane is “purely formal” and “semantically empty”, each of the two categories being “nothing but ‘the other of the other’”²⁴. Can this particular indefinability, or the impossibility of “substantive determination”, as Masuzawa would put it, be considered as something which defines the two categories²⁵? Such a solution would be reminiscent of what Slavoj Žižek calls “the shift of the predicate itself into the position of subject”, which he illustrates with the Soviet joke about Rabinovitch²⁶. Adapted to Durkheim’s sacred, the joke would sound as follows: “I found the essence of the sacred”. “But one cannot find it; the sacred is indefinable”. “Well, this indefinability *is* the essence of the sacred”.

A *second* critique which could be addressed to Durkheim’s dichotomy

²⁴ Masuzawa 1988, 27.

²⁵ Masuzawa 1988, 27.

²⁶ Žižek 2012, 585. Here is the joke, as told by Žižek: “Rabinovitch wants to emigrate from the Soviet Union for two reasons: ‘First, I fear that, if the socialist order disintegrates, all the blame for the communist crimes will be put on us, the Jews’. To the state bureaucrat’s objection: ‘But nothing will ever change in the Soviet Union! Socialism is here to stay forever!’ Rabinovitch calmly answers: ‘This is my second reason’” (Žižek 2012, 242).

is that it is too strict. It is true that Durkheim admits the contact and even the passage between the two categories, without which the sacred would be “of no use”²⁷. However, the very possibility of such contact suggests that the absolute and radical opposition between the sacred and the profane, as of “worlds with nothing in common”²⁸, might be an exaggeration. As E. E. Evans-Pritchard puts it, the sacred and profane are situated “on the same level of experience”, being “so closely intermingled as to be inseparable”²⁹. N. J. Allen provides an attractive alternative to Durkheim’s “unnecessarily rigid” opposition between the domains of sacred and profane³⁰. He proposes to approach the dyad as “the poles of a continuum”³¹. Such an articulation would allow into Durkheim’s scheme inclusion of the moments in between the sacred and the profane.

Thirdly, a critique, put forward by William Stanner, argues that the classification of existing reality *only* into the sacred and the profane is too narrow. Stanner claims that certain objects cannot be described as sacred or profane, but rather as “ordinary, common, or mundane things that happen to be useful”³². Stanner therefore proposes to enlarge Durkheim’s schema with

²⁷ Durkheim 1995, 38.

²⁸ Durkheim 1995, 36.

²⁹ Evans-Pritchard 1965, 65.

³⁰ Allen 2013a, 109.

³¹ Allen 2013a, 110.

³² Stanner 1967, 230.

a third category of the *mundane*—“implicitly admitted by Durkheim”³³.

Stanner is making an important point here, but I wonder whether his triple-barrelled classification is but a reformulation of Durkheim’s dyad of the sacred (pure and impure) and profane³⁴. I will expand on this later.

Fourthly, an important strand of criticism is addressed to the asymmetry of the sacred/profane categories in Durkheim. The category of the profane is criticised by W. S. F. Pickering as a “rag-bag term”, problematic due to its weakness vis-à-vis the all-powerful sacred³⁵. A similar critique is developed by Stanner, who argues that the category of the profane is weak and ambiguous, as far as it sums up a range of very different things—“commonness”, “minor sacredness”, “non-sacredness” and “anti-sacredness”. He concludes that “things so disparate cannot form a class unless a class can be marked by a property, its absence, and its contrary”³⁶.

The criticism by Pickering and Stanner, mentioned above, is justified in pointing out that sacred/profane categories are asymmetrical, and constitute canopies to semantically distinguishable concepts. I would argue, however, that asymmetry *per se* does not invalidate two categories. A vast number of

³³ Stanner 1967, 230.

³⁴ See a recent study by Dmitry Kurakin, who emphasises how important it is not to confuse the impure sacred with the profane in Durkheim’s thought—a danger which much of the scholarship on the subject has not succeeded in avoiding (Kurakin 2015). Cf. Jeffrey Alexander who suggests the utility of developing from Durkheim’s dyad “the threefold classification of pure-sacred/impure-sacred/profane” (Alexander 1988, 217).

³⁵ Pickering 2009, 147-49. For a similar critique of Durkheimian ‘sacred’, see Isambert 1982, 250.

³⁶ Stanner 1967, 232.

important dichotomies present themselves as asymmetrical and often hierarchical. “What resemblance more perfect than that between our two hands! And yet what a striking inequality there is!” exclaims Robert Hertz, who links the right hand to the sacred, male, powerful principle, while linking the left hand to the profane, female and passive³⁷. A fundamental dichotomy of good and evil has been for centuries interpreted in ‘asymmetrical’ terms, presenting the evil as insubstantial and absence of good (*privatio boni*)³⁸. One could therefore ask Durkheim’s critics, in terms used by Serge Tcherkézoff, why the categories of the sacred and the profane *must* find themselves necessarily in a symmetrical relationship, and why they might not be hierarchically asymmetrical—the asymmetry or discrepancy being responsible for the tension which exists between the two categories³⁹.

Durkheim’s Second Thesis

Durkheim proposes yet another way to conceptualise the sacred. His second thesis consists in the identification of the sacred with the society as such. At the beginning of *The Elementary Forms*, Durkheim defines religion as “a unified system of beliefs and practices relative to sacred things, that is to say, things set apart and forbidden—beliefs and practices which unite into

³⁷ Hertz 2013, 335.

³⁸ See Calder 2015.

³⁹ Tcherkézoff 1987, 8-13.

one single moral community called a Church, all those who adhere to them"⁴⁰. Religion is conceived by Durkheim as a means by which people "imagine" the society to which they belong⁴¹.

Essential for social cohesion is what Durkheim calls "effervescence"—an excitement and unity produced by a common action. Society cannot exist without regularly performing common actions, described by Durkheim in terms of liturgy—participating in rituals, saying the same words, etc.—which produces "a fusion of all the individual feelings into a common one"⁴². These liturgical actions, "[b]y the very act of serving the manifest purpose of strengthening the ties between the faithful and their god—the god being only a figurative representation of the society—[...] at the same time strengthen the ties between the individual and the society"⁴³. Durkheim's society could recognise itself in the phrase of Frank Underwood, the protagonist of the American TV series *House of Cards*: "I pray to myself, for myself"⁴⁴. The particular ways in which collective feelings are strengthened might change throughout history: Christian worship, Jewish assemblies, or the cult of Fatherland and Reason during the French Revolution are for Durkheim different in shape, but identical in essence⁴⁵. Notwithstanding this

⁴⁰ Durkheim 1995, 44.

⁴¹ Durkheim 1995, 227.

⁴² Durkheim 1995, 231-32.

⁴³ Durkheim 1995, 227.

⁴⁴ Michels 2016, 137.

⁴⁵ Durkheim 1995, 215-16, 429.

changing character of symbols and performative actions, their very necessity is eternal⁴⁶. Wars and large popular disturbances also strengthen collective feelings and patriotism, contributing to more profound integration within society⁴⁷.

But if religion is the society in its symbolic appearance, what does sacred/profane dichotomy stand for? In his essay *On the Definition of the Religious Phenomena*, Durkheim provides a description of his sacred/profane dyad with reference to society, according to which the sacred is identified with the social, while the profane is identified with what is individual:

The sacred things are those, of which the society itself has developed a representation; to them belong all kinds of collective states, traditions and common emotions [...]. The profane things, on the contrary, are those constructed by each of us drawing on our own feelings and experience⁴⁸.

The identification of the sacred/profane dyad with the social/individual dichotomy is clearly visible in the way that Durkheim treats magic—as something essentially different from religion: while the core characteristic of religion is to unite the community, magic is an individual affair, and therefore has nothing to do with the sacred⁴⁹. What Durkheim tellingly suggests is that the sacred is constructed by the community in order to affirm social cohesion

⁴⁶ Durkheim 1995, 429.

⁴⁷ Durkheim 2002, 166. On the evolution of Durkheim's views on war, see Malešević 2010, 20-22.

⁴⁸ Durkheim 1897-1898, 25-26, my translation.

⁴⁹ According to Durkheim, "[t]he magician has a clientele, not a Church" (Durkheim 1995, 42). Durkheim does not reject the evidence that magic deals with what is sacred to religion—gods, souls, religious objects etc. He even points out that "[m]agic takes a kind of professional pleasure in profaning holy things" (Durkheim 1995, 40). Cf. Belier 1995.

but, the moment this sacred ends up in the hands of a magician, and serves the individual, rather than social needs, it ceases to be sacred.

The picture in which the sacred is identified with the social, and the profane with the individual, becomes even more complicated when Durkheim postulates that for the modern world-view the individual is sacred. In *The Division of Labour in Society*, Durkheim claims that, with the decrease in traditional religious practice and beliefs, the “individual becomes the object of a sort of religion”, whilst human dignity becomes the thing worshipped. Paradoxically, while the “common faith” of modernity “impels every will towards the same end, that end is not a social one”⁵⁰.

But how is this ‘individual’ sacrality reconciled with the conception, outlined above, of the profane as individual? The solution, proposed by Durkheim, emphasises that the sacral character of the individual is actually *derived* from society. The individual is sacred not intrinsically, but because she *enjoys* the same respect by modern society as traditional religions pay to the things they consider sacred⁵¹. Her sacrality is granted by society (“the cult of the individual is in fact the product of society itself. It is society that instituted it and made of man the god whose servant it is”)⁵². If one of the implications of sacrality is the prohibition to violate it, then the person is

⁵⁰ Durkheim 1984, 122.

⁵¹ Durkheim 2010, 29-37.

⁵² Durkheim 2010, 29.

sacred only because society protects her from such a violation. As Jean-Claude Filloux puts it, Durkheim's emphasis on the sacrality of the person is due to the fact that it constitutes "the only moral conviction, capable of uniting people within a modern society"⁵³.

I would like to make three observations, slightly aporetic in character, regarding Durkheim's second thesis. The first concerns the phenomenon of sacralisation. In his treatment of individualism, Durkheim clearly suggests that in modernity the individual is, as it were, *contingently* sacred. What is *inherently* sacred is the society, which can sacralise whatever it pleases. The society does not recognise the existence of the sacred and the profane. Rather, it constructs the sacred and sets it apart from the profane. As Karen E. Fields observes, the sacred things "are made sacred by groups of people [...] [and] remain sacred only so long as groups continue to do this"⁵⁴. While according to Durkheim's first thesis, "anything, can be sacred"⁵⁵, in the context of his second thesis, this expression can be paraphrased as "anything can be *made* sacred". One could thus wonder whether in modern individualistic society even 'magic', reinterpreted in terms of the satisfaction of personal needs, could not be made to belong to the category of the sacred instead. An important conclusion to be drawn from what has just been

⁵³ Filloux 1990, 45, my translation.

⁵⁴ Durkheim 1995, xlvi.

⁵⁵ Durkheim 1995, 35.

said consists in the fact that the sacred is a dynamic, not a static, category. While the sacred/profane classification of the first thesis has been criticised for its rigidity, the second thesis is conducive to the articulation of the fluidity of the border between the two categories. In fact, the border shifts according to social evolution: if there is a decline in traditional religious practice, then another system of ideas becomes sacred; if the collectivism of the 'primitive society' weakens, then even 'magic' can be invested with sacrality.

My second observation is directed towards the logic of Durkheim's argumentation. Building on Pals, Mellor and Malešević, I argue that Durkheim's identification of the sacred with the society is reductionist vis-à-vis religion. Daniel Pals critiques Durkheim for his "aggressively reductionist functionalism", which aims at reducing religion to "the expression of social needs"⁵⁶. As Philip Mellor elaborates, for Durkheim neither religion nor belief is anything real, but purely a symbolic representation of the real, which is society⁵⁷. Pals rightly wonders why in the Durkheimian narrative "society powerfully shapes religious ritual and belief, while religious beliefs never seem able to do the reverse"⁵⁸. One could suggest that Durkheim's social approach to religion would benefit from recognition of the ability of religion—no matter whether conventional or civil, inherited or imposed—to

⁵⁶ Pals 2006, 112-14.

⁵⁷ See Mellor 2004, 73.

⁵⁸ Pals 2006, 113.

impact the life and convictions of believers and transform societies. The problem, however, is that for Durkheim religion *is* the society, or at least its 'symbolic expression'. In fact, the Durkheimian theory of religion is criticised for "tautological reasoning", which uses "a circular form of argumentation"⁵⁹. Malešević and Pals argue that for Durkheim the sacred, the religious and the social in the final analysis mean the same thing—one being explained by another in a circular manner⁶⁰. It is hard to disagree with such an argument, since, on the one hand, society is constructed and imagined through sacred assemblies and symbols, i.e. through religion, while, on the other hand, it is society that possesses the power of sacralisation, and is constructing the sacred and religion. In other words, Durkheim deduces the society from the sacred, and the sacred from the society. Moreover, one could ask, together with Isambert, whether the domain of sacred, which includes everything connected with the society, should not also include the law, ethics, and our *a priori* categories⁶¹, or, to ask with Linda Woodhead, "what would *not* count as religion"⁶²? One should therefore question the *explanatory* usefulness of Durkheim's second thesis. I would suggest, however, that this circular argumentation does not necessarily invalidate its *descriptive* value. An argument could be made that a circular argumentation, similar to that

⁵⁹ Malešević 2004, 586-87.

⁶⁰ Malešević 2004, 586-87; Pals 2006, 112-14.

⁶¹ Isambert 1976, 40.

⁶² Woodhead 2011, 128.

proposed by the French sociologist, is in fact used within Christian ecclesiology to describe the relationship between the Eucharist and the church: the believers receive the body of Christ through the community in order to become the body of Christ as a community, or in John Zizioulas' words, the Eucharist makes the church, while the church makes the Eucharist⁶³. A further argument in defence of Durkheim's circular argumentation can be borrowed from certain critiques of the secularisation thesis. I argue that some of Durkheim's critics, mentioned above, are dissatisfied with what they call a 'tautological' articulation of religion and society, because they treat religion and society as clearly distinct categories. This in itself is problematic. What if the reality—both pre-modern, and perhaps even post-enlightened—can be better described in terms of a "single socio-religious whole", to use Aurobindo's phrase⁶⁴? Such a hypothesis should not be prematurely dismissed. I will discuss this topic in chapter 4.

My *third* observation is concerned with the question of whether two Durkheimian theses can be reconciled. The first thesis argues that the sacred and the profane are indefinable or definable only through an opposition of

⁶³ Zizioulas 2001. Cf. McPartlan 1993. Another example of circular reasoning in Zizioulas—comparable with Durkheim's argumentation—would be the idea of Christ as a "corporate personality": the church worships Christ, and at the same time the church is (the body of) Christ (Zizioulas 1987). On Christian ecclesiology and Durkheim, see Rogers 2005, 157.

⁶⁴ Ghose 1997a, 421.

one to another. Conversely, in the second thesis the sacred/profane dyad is clearly outlined: the sacred is identified with the *social*, and the profane with the *individual* life. According to Masuzawa, the paradox is resolved by “the triumph of the second thesis over the first; it is therefore not surprising if such a tendentious authorial attitude dictated how the ‘Durkheimian theory of religion’ was to be understood by posterity”⁶⁵.

Before starting to apply the Durkheimian scheme to the wider problematics of this thesis, I will draw a brief and preliminary conclusion. Durkheim’s articulation of the sacred and profane not only has the benefit of presenting religion as a profoundly social phenomenon, but also allows one to grasp the continuity between religion as it was lived, both in the pre-Enlightenment age and in its modern modality. It therefore qualifies as a viable approach to nationalism—which has clearly expressed ‘religious’ dimensions, and proposes itself as a link between the nation’s past, present and future.

⁶⁵ Masuzawa 1988, 28.

(II) Approaching Nationalism through the Durkheimian dichotomy

In what follows, I will present the way in which the nationalist 'sacred' is read through the lens of Durkheim's theory, especially through his second thesis. There are good reasons for doing so. First of all, I would like to suggest that, although Durkheim's *The Elementary Forms* has been dedicated to the study of Australian totemism, what he actually had in mind was not a 'conventional' religion, but something rather different⁶⁶. James Dingley argues that, when Durkheim wrote about society, what he in fact (though perhaps sub-consciously) had in mind was the modern French nation-state⁶⁷. On the other hand, Massimo Rosati suggests that Durkheim, an atheist Jew, was influenced by the context of French Judaism which, while going through the process of secularisation of belief, was determined to conserve its sense of moral community through traditional practices⁶⁸. I suggest there are good reasons to question whether Durkheim's prototype of religion—through which he was looking at French (and Jewish) nationalism—was really Australian tribal religion, and not rather the other way around.

⁶⁶ The original French subtitle to the book, *Le système totémique en Australie* (The totemic system in Australia) does not appear in any of the three book's existing English translations. This *felix culpa* might well indicate that the book is being received as a study of religion in general—in the Durkheimian sense of the term, i.e. including its post-Enlightenment variations—rather than as being referred to the pre-secular context. The original: Durkheim 1912. Consulted English translations: Durkheim 1915; 1995; 2001.

⁶⁷ Dingley 2008, 1. Cf. Tarot 1999, 228; Smith 2003a, 266, n. 9.

⁶⁸ Rosati 2009, 13.

Secondly, Durkheimian classification of reality into sacred and profane is not limited to the domain of a conventional religion, but extends to every moment in which a community's identity is constructed and sustained. In particular, Durkheim's theory of religion challenges a thesis of secularisation theory, which proclaims the decline of the cultural significance of belief and a passage from the religious to the secular. Stjepan Meštrović rightly suggests that approaching modern ideologies through a Durkheimian lens raises doubts about "the Enlightenment-based dogma" that modern attitudes and practices are independent of religion⁶⁹. An illustrative example of this is Durkheim's approach to the French Revolution in terms of religion and sacrality:

Nowhere has society's ability to make itself a god or to create gods been more in evidence than during [...] the Revolution. [...] [T]hings that were by nature purely secular were transformed by public opinion into sacred things: Fatherland, Liberty, Reason. A religion tended to establish itself spontaneously, with its own dogma, symbols, altars, and feast days. It was to these spontaneous hopes that the Cult of Reason and the Supreme Being tried to give a kind of authoritative fulfilment. [...] In a specific case, we saw society and its fundamental ideas becoming the object of a genuine cult directly—and without transfiguration of any kind⁷⁰.

As A. Smith tellingly points out, for Durkheim difference between conventional religion and nationalism is only secondary; the essential is that both are founded on a common "effervescence", cult and faith⁷¹. Smith is

⁶⁹ Meštrović 1994, 157-58.

⁷⁰ Durkheim 1995, 215-16. Cf. Durkheim 1995, 429. On Durkheim's reading of the French Revolution, and nationalism more generally, in terms of religion, see Mitchell 1931; Llobera 1994, 143-46; Guibernau 2007, 21-31, 83-84.

⁷¹ Smith 2003a, 28.

right in his observation that “[i]n many ways, Durkheim’s analysis fits the case of nations and nationalism rather better than the often supernatural religions he sought to encompass”⁷². This homogeneity has been well grasped by William Cavanaugh, who rightly observes that Durkheim does not distinguish between religion and civil religion⁷³. As suggested earlier, a theologian may criticise Durkheim’s reductionist approach to religion—which does not take into any consideration the reference to a transcendental ultimate reality; but once one keeps this and other shortcomings in mind, one sees very well the analytical potential of Durkheim’s theory of religion for the study of ideologies, and especially nationalism.

The ‘Other’ as Profane

In the remaining part of the chapter, I would like to show how the Durkheimian perspective on religion can be used as an analytical tool in approaching nationalism. The author with whom I will engage principally is Anthony Smith, who articulates the sacred/profane dyad within the domain of nationalism. Smith understands the sacred in terms of ‘us-ness’—in its ‘authentic’, i.e. idealised, form—while he identifies the profane with the ‘other’. I will suggest that Smith’s application of the sacred/profane dyad to

⁷² Smith 1983, 30.

⁷³ Cavanaugh 2011, 96.

nationalism can be helped by Malešević's approach, which identifies the profane with the mundane. Finally, drawing on both Smith and Malešević, I will argue that there exists a better option, which consists in considering the authentic 'us-ness' in terms of *sacred pure*, the community and symbols of the 'other' as *sacred impure*, and the mundane bureaucratic activity as *profane*. I shall claim that such articulation, which is more faithful to Durkheim's thought, has the benefit of being more suitable in approaching the self-understanding and narratives of nationalism.

I argue that Smith's method of analysing nationalism is essentially identical to Durkheim's functional approach. However, the latter is treated by Smith as "an heuristic device"⁷⁴, without acceptance of Durkheim's theoretical background in its entirety. In what can be considered as a very Durkheimian move, Smith (a) argues that 'religious', i.e. liturgical, symbolical, mythical foundations of modern nationalism, more than any other factor, should be considered responsible for its persistence, (b) articulates the sacred/profane distinction within nationalism, (c) suggests that modern nationalism tends to substitute the need for the transcendental salvation into an inner-worldly one⁷⁵.

One can observe a 'linguistic' shift in Smith's attitude toward the

⁷⁴ Smith 1971, 54. Cf. critique by Malešević: Malešević 2004; 2006, ch. 5. Smith's response: Smith 2009, 122ff.

⁷⁵ Smith 2003a, 3-5, 28-30, 40.

usage of the term 'political religion': while in his early scholarship he argues that the term 'political religion' only confuses the complex relationship between conventional religion and nationalism⁷⁶, he later describes nationalism as a form of 'political religion'⁷⁷. What remains constant in Smith's work, however, is his rejection of both Durkheim's reduction of the sacred to the social⁷⁸, and of his tautology between conventional and civil religion:

to blur the distinction [between religion and ideology] is to accept a *simpliste* and misleading view. It is one thing to demonstrate an analogy between religion, and, say, communism and nationalism, even to use 'religion' as a partial model for understanding some aspects of 'ideology'; quite another to equate them [...]. The real criterion of the 'religious' is substantive: its goal and sanction is a *supra-empirical* referent, extrinsic to nature and society. [...] Metaphor and explanation should not be confused⁷⁹.

Put it another way: for Smith the defining characteristic of religion is its concern with the transcendental, "supraempirical cosmos"—a dimension, absent from the horizon of nationalism, which is treated as inner-worldly⁸⁰.

Although Smith is not much interested in the 'ontology' of the nationalist sacred⁸¹ and, to my knowledge, never defines it, the way he describes the role of the national symbols is related to the Durkheimian articulation of the opposition between the sacred and the profane.

⁷⁶ Smith 1971, 57.

⁷⁷ Smith 2000, 792; 2001; 2003a, 7, 32.

⁷⁸ See Smith 2000, 798; 2009, 129-30.

⁷⁹ Smith 1971, 55. Cf. Smith 2003a, 28ff; 2009, 129-30.

⁸⁰ Smith 2003a, 27-28.

⁸¹ As Smith himself confesses, he is "more interested in public rites and ceremonies, as well as in traditions and memories [...], than in ideas or beliefs as such" (Smith 2009, 129).

In a way redolent of the Durkheimian approach, Smith describes the nationalist sacred as something which sets apart, *separates* 'us' from the 'other'. Smith, commenting on Durkheim, points out that the ceremonies aimed at creating social cohesion, "unite the members and separate them from other communities"⁸². Whilst Durkheim (especially in his first thesis) insists that sacred is essentially the non-profane, and what matters in the sacred/profane dyad is actually their absolute opposition, in Smith's application of this dichotomy to nationalism, the sacred corresponds to a given nation and its symbols, while the profane to the other nations and their symbols. As Malešević rightly observes,

[t]o Durkheim's concept of sacredness as more inward looking and centered on demonstrating how the group and its totem are truly one, Smith adds an outward-looking concept of sacredness where the group's divinity is also premised on mutual denial of such status to other groups. Hence sacredness is [...] in the constant process of categorizing others as impure, morally inferior, mundane, or in a word—profane⁸³.

The articulation of the sacred/profane dyad is clearly visible in Smith's treatment of the myths of ethnic election. They occupy a privileged place among his 'sacred foundations', nationalism being described as the "secular, modern equivalent of the pre-modern, sacred myth of ethnic election"⁸⁴.

Smith emphasises that both in antiquity⁸⁵ and in modernity, the idea of ethnic

⁸² Smith 2003a, 27.

⁸³ Malešević 2004, 580. Malešević here categorises 'impure' as belonging to the sphere of the 'profane'. Later in the chapter it will become clear how this differs from Durkheim's position, and why it is important.

⁸⁴ Smith 1991, 84.

⁸⁵ Smith 2003a, 59-64. Smith elaborates on the case of ancient Israel, emphasising that the

election helps to establish community boundaries and “confers on the members of the nation a sense of their own inward [moral] superiority *vis-à-vis* outsiders”, even if the latter are economically or technologically stronger⁸⁶. This argument, when pushed further, would lead to the conclusion that the election of a nation implies that such a status is rejected for the other nations, and their claim to be elected is perceived as threatening⁸⁷. Smith further argues that election myths, sacred memories and ceremonies enable us to distinguish “between *sacred national* and *profane foreign* objects and symbols”⁸⁸. They “draw and reinforce a strict boundary against outsiders” and “help to segregate the chosen community from a profane and alien world, thereby turning the elect in upon themselves and forcing them to rely even more fully on their own spiritual resources”⁸⁹. At the same time, the segregation, enhanced by myths and symbols, works not only on an external level (against the other nations), but also internally. In a manner which

idea of chosenness distinguished the people of God from other peoples and protected it from acculturation and assimilation with them. Smith points out that “[t]he idea of holiness as separation from the world, as setting Israel apart from the nations, is essential to the fulfilment of the statutes and rituals of the covenant” (Smith 2003a, 59). The Jewish election paradigm is of great importance because, as Smith argues, modern nationalist beliefs in ethnic election are direct descendants of ancient myths, such as those present in the Old Testament (Smith 1999a).

⁸⁶ Smith 1999a, 337. In chapters 3 and 5, I will reflect on whether such a return to the ‘glorious past’ as a sublimation of economical inferiority does not explain certain types of anti-Westernism, manifested in the act of embracing the ancient traditions (real or imagined) and rejection of the values of the more ‘progressive’ and wealthier other, the West.

⁸⁷ Cf. Malešević 2004, 580.

⁸⁸ Smith 2009, 77, emphasis added.

⁸⁹ Smith 1999a, 336.

resonates with Girardian scapegoat mechanism⁹⁰, Smith emphasises that nationalism “requires considerable purification of the indigenous culture [...] against external and internal corruption”, which often implies “expelling all those who have no share in the nation’s [...] ethnic heritage on the grounds that they are likely to contaminate its pristine culture and pervert its true mission”⁹¹.

The need to set apart the nationalist sacred from contamination is further described by Smith in terms of the search for authenticity⁹². The sacred is not a factual, empirical and real-time ‘us-ness’ of a given society but rather its ‘authentic’, or idealised, face. How is this authenticity to be found? To be ‘authentic’ a nation needs to rediscover its roots, “uncontaminated by later accretions and unimpaired by corruption and decline”⁹³. This ‘rooted’ and ‘purified’ ‘authenticity’ is believed to make a nation unique and sacred⁹⁴.

The attempt by Smith to re-interpret the sacred/profane dyad within nationalism is very insightful. It makes two important points: the first is that the *sacred* stands for an idealised, ‘authentic’ community and its symbols, which are set apart from the *profane* world of the other communities; the

⁹⁰ See Girard 1977, 49, 258-59; 2001, 160. As I pointed out in chapter 1, Girard argues that a scapegoat, capable of fostering a group’s unity and identity, is actually a surrogate of an external enemy. For examples of the application of the Girardian approach to nationalism, see Appleby 2000, 78-79; Forker 2011.

⁹¹ Smith 1999a, 338.

⁹² Smith argues that national authenticity is a secular adaptation of the religious idea of the sacred (Smith 2003a, 38ff).

⁹³ Smith 2003a, 215.

⁹⁴ Smith 2003a, 40.

second emphasises that the profanity of the other can be felt also within the community, as a corruption to be expelled and purified.

This leads us to the question of the importance of a nation's relationship with the 'other'. Drawing on the existing scholarship, I argue that the categorisation of the world into 'us' and 'other' is a significant moment for the construction and maintenance of national identity. I would also argue that this categorisation should not be conceived as static and heterogeneous, as its interpretation in terms of sacred/profane by Smith may suggest. The 'us' and the 'other' are in fact categories which are dynamic, imitative and, I would say, *con-stitutive* of each other. Michael Billig convincingly argues that an ideology, which defines national identity *ipso facto* defines the 'other' of this nation: "There can be no 'us' without a 'them'"⁹⁵. Identity is constructed and articulated in constant reference to the 'other', or, to use Stuart Hall's phrase, "[o]nly when there is an Other can you know who you are"⁹⁶.

The problematic of the 'other' as constitutive of social identity has been debated, among other reasons, as a consequence of increasing interest in the works of Carl Schmitt⁹⁷. In *The Concept of the Political*, he argues that

⁹⁵ Billig 1995, 78. Karolewski and Suszycki make a similar point. Through word-play, they insist that a nation is both 'bonding' and 'bounding': it bonds the fellow nationals into one community, at the same time drawing boundaries to exclude those who do not belong (Karolewski and Suszycki 2011, 39).

⁹⁶ Hall 1996, 345.

⁹⁷ The literature on Schmitt is extensive. For more recent engagements, see Meierhenrich

the friend/enemy distinction constitutes the basis of “the political”, and in fact “underlies every political idea”⁹⁸. In this sense, the political means “antithesis”⁹⁹. Schmitt compares the friend/enemy dyad with other important dichotomies, such as good/evil within morality, and beautiful/ugly in aesthetics¹⁰⁰. In a manner similar to Durkheim, who insists on the irreducibility of a sacred/profane dichotomy, Schmitt claims that the friend/enemy dyad cannot be traced back to any other duality. Just as in the Durkheimian dyad the sacred is asymmetrical with respect to the profane, so it is in Schmitt; one can speak about an “ontological primacy of enemy over friend”, as Aryeh Botwinick puts it¹⁰¹. What matters for Schmitt is not so much a real threat—be it political, moral or economical—coming from outside the community, but rather the mere existence of the enemy, “so that in the extreme case conflicts with him are possible”¹⁰². This means that the distinction between friend and enemy entails the prospect of the physical killing of the latter, thus of war, understood as “the existential negation of the enemy”¹⁰³.

An interesting critique of Schmitt’s thesis has been offered by Mary

and Simons 2016.

⁹⁸ Schmitt 2007, 35. Arendt points out that the importance of (the idea of) an enemy for social cohesion and political unity, was already present in Rousseau (Arendt 1990, 77).

⁹⁹ “Every religious, moral, economic, ethical, or other *antithesis* transforms into a political one if it is sufficiently strong to group human beings effectively according to friend and enemy” (Schmitt 2007, 37, emphasis added).

¹⁰⁰ Schmitt 2007, 26-27.

¹⁰¹ Botwinick 2016, 350.

¹⁰² Schmitt 2007, 27.

¹⁰³ Schmitt 2007, 33.

Kaldor, who argues that politics and sovereignty can be based not only on the fear of an enemy, but on “mutual agreement” and “perpetual discussion” within civil society¹⁰⁴. Kaldor persuasively argues that the friend/enemy binary, as the very presupposition of the political, transforms the enmity, and consequently the war, into necessity, and thus renders it legitimate¹⁰⁵. I suggest however that Kaldor’s arguments, while attenuating the bellicose implications of friend/enemy opposition, do not invalidate Schmitt’s point on the importance of the ‘other’ for the articulation of the social cohesion of a group.

Schmitt makes another interesting point, concerning the friend/enemy distinction, when he reflects on the possibility of a world state and on the concept of *depoliticisation*. When a community “no longer possesses the capacity or the will to make this distinction, it ceases to exist politically”¹⁰⁶. It follows that “[t]he political entity cannot by its very nature be universal”¹⁰⁷. In

¹⁰⁴ Kaldor 2013, 343.

¹⁰⁵ Kaldor’s argument can be exemplified by what Charles Taylor argues about enemy construction. Taylor observes that often the enemy construction is gratuitous and purely imitative. He contends that “[e]ach community has the sense that the other united first against its unsuspecting members and that its own mobilization is secondary and defensive in nature. The tragedy is that often neither is right” (Taylor 1997, 48). The question that arises, of course, is: Does nationalism—among all sorts of identities and ideologies—have a monopoly, as it were, on enemy construction? Cf. Margalit 1997, 78.

¹⁰⁶ Schmitt 2007, 49. Nicholson, drawing on Schmitt, argues that a “modern theological project” (i.e. pluralism), which consists of “freeing religious conviction from the manifestations of social antagonism” should be understood as “a ramification of the larger cultural processes of neutralization and depoliticization”, leading to “the displacement of religion as the controlling domain of culture” (Nicholson 2011, 50).

¹⁰⁷ Schmitt 2007, 53.

fact, humanity, since it embraces all human beings, cannot have or fight an enemy. In this sense, it would constitute a moment of “complete and final depoliticalization”¹⁰⁸. Once a particular state claims it is waging a war in the name of humanity, this state thereby “usurp[s] a universal concept against its military opponent”, “den[ies] the enemy the quality of being human and declar[es] him to be an outlaw of humanity”¹⁰⁹. By identifying itself with humanity, such a state, in fact, proclaims its monopoly on justice and civilisation, while denying the same to its enemies. Schmitt concludes that “[t]he concept of humanity is an especially useful ideological instrument of imperialist expansion”¹¹⁰.

There are many instances in which the figure of the enemy becomes dehumanised¹¹¹. An example of an “usurpation” of humanity, and *de facto* qualification of the other as non-human, has been pointed out in relation to the so-called war on terrorism¹¹². Emilio Gentile points out how the American administration, in the aftermath of 9/11, “countered the demonization of the terrorist enemy with the sacralization of an ‘innocent’ America, working for the good [...] of all humanity”¹¹³. What we have here is the classic Schmittian

¹⁰⁸ Schmitt 2007, 54.

¹⁰⁹ Schmitt 2007, 54.

¹¹⁰ Schmitt 2007, 54.

¹¹¹ See Juergensmeyer 2008b. Juergensmeyer also speaks of the “satanization” of the enemy.

¹¹² On some earlier cases, see Mosse 1989.

¹¹³ Gentile 2008, 85.

situation in which a particular nation claims to represent the moral order in its totality, while the enemy is clearly left outside such an order. Billig, referring to George W. Bush's contraposition between Saddam Hussein and 'the world' (represented by the USA and its allies) concludes that Saddam thereby had been rhetorically placed outside the moral order of the nations¹¹⁴. The "bare life" of the detainees of Guantanamo Bay—who, as Giorgio Agamben rightly observes, are deprived of the legal status of the individual—represent a radical form of the denial of the status of the human being to the 'other'¹¹⁵.

I suggest that the otherness has yet another important aspect, which could be described as internal and mimetic. The other is significant not only because it represents something different from what 'we' are, but also because 'we' are to a certain degree conditioned, and even constituted, by the 'other': "[the] national is determined not on the basis of its own intrinsic properties but as a function of what it (presumably) is not. [...] [A] nation is ineluctably 'shaped by what it opposes'"¹¹⁶. Or, as Hall puts it, "[t]he Other is not outside, but also inside the Self"¹¹⁷.

I argue that this constitutive relationship between a community and its 'other' can be found already in Durkheim. In *The Elementary Forms*, the French sociologist speaks about the antagonistic and hostile *phratries* of the

¹¹⁴ Billig 1995, 91.

¹¹⁵ Agamben 2005b, 3-4. Cf. Gorski and Türkmen-Derivoğlu 2013, 199.

¹¹⁶ Parker et al. 1992, 5.

¹¹⁷ Hall 1996, 345.

same tribe¹¹⁸. Their antagonism is expressed through totems with opposite signs: if one group's totem is black, the antagonistic phratry would have it white; if one group represents itself through the symbol of water, another will be represented through the sign of earth. The opposition of the symbols goes hand-in-hand with the antagonism between the groups. This suggests that one group's symbolic identity is constructed, at least to a certain extent, as a mirror opposite of the other.

A similar dynamic can also be established within modern nationalism. As I pointed out in chapter 1, one of the most universal ideas of nationalism is that the world is formed of a family of nations. This suggests that a nation imagines itself to be *like other* nations. A nation may well conceive itself as particular and distinctive, as Smith points out¹¹⁹, but I suggest that this particularity is, at the end of the day, a particularity *within* a common paradigm. Billig emphasises this feature of nationalism he calls "mimetic" in the following way:

the new nation has to resemble other nations to gain their recognition. It must adopt conventional symbols of particularity, which, because of their conventionality, are simultaneously symbols of the universality of nationhood. [...] The hoisting of the newly designed flag indicates that another nation has joined the club of nations: 'we' have become like 'you'¹²⁰.

Some valuable insights on the mimetic character of the 'us'/'other'

¹¹⁸ Durkheim 1995, 146-47.

¹¹⁹ Cf. Smith 2003a, 39.

¹²⁰ Billig 1995, 85-86. The author's argument is well exemplified by the case of Britain which, Billig argues, "developed many of its modern symbols of nationhood in conscious contradistinction to French styles of nation-making" (Billig 1995, 81).

opposition are provided by recent scholarship on terrorism and violence. Schmitt's argument that the enemy is constitutive of a community's political identity is developed further; by suggesting that in waging a war 'we' not only construct 'us' by creating cohesion within 'our' society, we can actually construct the 'other', by giving her the legitimacy she did not have before. This is what Louise Richardson suggests when she argues that the declaration of war on terrorists by the US, "elevate[s] their stature in a way they could only have imagined [and] [...] encourages potential recruits, which in turn wins them more followers"¹²¹.

I conclude by arguing that Smith's categorisation of 'us' as sacred and the 'other' as profane is useful for understanding national identity formation and maintenance. 'Us-ness' and 'otherness', however, exist not in absolute opposition or heterogeneity, as Smith's approach might suggest, but rather as interdependent and even constitutive one of another.

I would argue that there is yet another reason why Smith's dichotomy of sacredness as us-ness *versus* profanity as otherness is problematic while approaching nationalism. Earlier in this chapter, I mentioned Stanner's critique of Durkheim, which points out that the latter's division of existent

¹²¹ Richardson 2006, 11. The mirroring and correlation between the 'us' and the 'other' is also emphasised by Faisal Devji, who argues that "al-Qaida's rhetoric and practices had always depended upon those of its enemies. The movement's strength [...] came from the West itself". Because of such an ambiguous relationship between 'our' identity and that of the 'other', Devji proposes that the category of otherness "needs finally to be laid to rest" (Devji 2013, 802).

reality into the sacred and profane *only*, does not take into account the presence of the “mundane”, i.e. things that do not qualify either as sacred or as profane. I suggest that, in applying the Durkheimian dyad to nationalism, one should consider the evidence provided by many national conflicts, which indicates that the ‘profanity’ of the symbols of the ‘other’ is clearly distinguished from the non-sacredness of everyday life. The symbols of the ‘other’ are not regarded as mere utilitarian objects—like bicycles or coffee makers—they are instead recognised in their quality of having a particular intensive value or ‘charge’¹²².

In what follows I argue that there is clear evidence of a deliberate intent to symbolically destroy the ‘others’, desecrate their national monuments, memory places, flags and symbols, or contaminate their ethnic purity through rape. When national symbols are profaned, it seems as if we are confronting a phenomenon, where the theological analogy would be termed ‘sacrilege’.

Marc Gaborieau¹²³ and Peter van der Veer¹²⁴ convincingly point out the symbolic and ritual character of inter-ethnic violence. Both use the example of communal riots in India. Gaborieau illustrates his point by referring to one of the oldest accounts of Muslim-Hindu violent disturbances in India, in which

¹²² Cf. Smart 1985, 23.

¹²³ Gaborieau 1985.

¹²⁴ Veer 1996, 156-57.

a riot was begun by a Hindu performing a *holi* (spring ritual considered offensive by Muslims) in front of a Muslim's house. The subsequent response by the Muslim consisted of slaughtering a cow in front of his neighbour. What is significant for the development of my argument is that the profanation of Hindu symbols, such as a temple, an idol or a cow, or provocation of Muslims by desecrating their mosques or disturbing worship is done purposefully, with a clear understanding of the significance that the symbols, meant for profanation, have for the 'other'. Van der Veer, who also interprets Indian violent riots in terms of rituals, emphasises their role in constructing and perpetuating the antagonistic opposition between the sacred 'us-ness' and impure 'otherness' (the latter can be both internal and external to the community). He argues that

violent antagonism may be an important mechanism of integration. It is through the construction and maintenance of boundaries between 'us' and 'them' that group identities are shaped. While the ritual process integrates individuals in a community of worshippers, it sets it apart from those who do not worship. Moreover, in a number of cases, it tends to portray 'the other' as 'demonic', 'threatening' and 'impure'¹²⁵.

An argument could be made that the targets of terrorist attack on 11 September 2001 were beyond any instrumental or 'rational' utility, and were chosen for their symbolical value. According to Steven Nouriani, the World Trade Center "symbolized the international, multicultural success of Western materialism and modernity, which place greater value on money than on

¹²⁵ Veer 1996, 156-57.

spiritual attainment and literally dwarfed church towers and minarets, symbols of spiritual ascent”¹²⁶. Drawing on Nouriani’s observation, one could suggest that the terrorists targeted the symbolic significance of the Twin Towers, which in their turn were perceived (or even conceived) as sacrilegiously mimetic of spiritual values that the terrorists claimed to represent.

Even a rape during a conflict can be considered in terms of symbolical action, and not purely as an act of sexual aggression: a woman, personifying fertility and innocence, symbolically represents a nation, and sexual violence against her is perceived as desecration of a nation’s purity and integrity¹²⁷.

It can be said that the nation-states ‘worship’ their national symbols and legally protect them against eventual ‘desecration’¹²⁸. At the same time, the ‘sacrality’ of the enemy’s symbols, for example flags, is also clearly recognised; they are treated not as a neutral piece of cloth, but according to their symbolic value. Such an attitude is exemplified both by the banning of a particular flag in situations where a nation, represented by such a flag, is considered as threatening, and by the public profanation of the enemy’s flags following victory in war¹²⁹.

¹²⁶ Nouriani 2011, 26.

¹²⁷ See Harris 1993, 170; Allen 1996, 89-101; Hansen 2000, 60; Brubaker 2004, 112.

¹²⁸ Cf. Welch and Bryan 1996; Jha 2016.

¹²⁹ Cf. e.g. Marshal Georgy Zhukov’s description of the “incomparable moment” when 200 Nazi flags, brought on purpose from Berlin, were thrown at the foot of Lenin’s Mausoleum in the Red Square during the Victory Parade in Moscow on 24th June 1945 (Zhukov 1969, 689,

I would argue that such an attitude to the 'other' and their symbols can be defined, in Agambenian terms, as *profanation*, i.e. "neutralisation of what is being desecrated [*ciò che profana*]", its rendering to the "common use"¹³⁰. Smith claims that the symbols of the 'other' are considered by 'us' as profane. But would somebody want to desecrate, *profanare*, what is already profane? The intent to desecrate the 'other's' sacred symbols, but also movement in the completely opposite direction such as the re-appropriation of the sacred places of the 'other'¹³¹—suggests that the symbols of the 'other' are considered as mirror correspondents of 'our' symbols. I would argue that in such cases we are dealing not only with violence against the non-sacred, but with a phenomenon Braud terms *violence symbolique*, a manifestation of the iconoclastic conflict between various symbolic universes: "To desecrate the sacred, the holy places are being violated, in order to render them profane; the effigies of gods are being broken, in order to prove their insignificance or helplessness"¹³².

This means that the symbols of the other, instead of being conceived of as 'profane', as proposed by Smith, are better envisaged as 'sacred', albeit of a particular sort. One of the viable alternatives would be to express this

92).

¹³⁰ Agamben 2005a, 88, my translation.

¹³¹ On the Hindu-Muslim conflict over Ayodhya, see Veer 1994. On the transformation of churches into mosques and vice-versa, see Emmett 2009. Cf. Brubaker 2004, 113.

¹³² Braud 2003, 45, my translation.

through the Agambenian ambivalent sacrality of the excluded, as one of the *homo sacer*, one who can be killed without the perpetrator being accused of committing homicide, but is unsuitable for use in sacrifice¹³³. In the domain of nationalism this would mean that the sacrality of the symbols of the 'other' is recognised; however, this sacrality is not protected, and in some cases the destruction of those symbols is considered desirable. Cases of women raped during conflicts, soldiers (or civilians as 'collateral damage') whose murder is not considered criminal during wartime, or terrorists detained in Guantanamo, illustrate well this particular kind of sacrality¹³⁴.

An insight in line with this argument can be found in Durkheim's treatment of mirror-opposite symbols, used by antagonistic phratries, to which I referred earlier in this chapter. In a footnote to *The Elementary Forms*, which to my knowledge has been neglected by scholars of nationalism, Durkheim contends: "Still, I do not think it necessary to relate that opposition [between phratries and their symbols] to the opposition between the profane and the sacred [...]. The things that belong to one phratry are not profane for the other; both are part of the same religious

¹³³ Agamben 1995, particularly 3-16 and 79-96. On *homo sacer*, see also Caillois 1959, 35ff; DeCaroli 2011.

¹³⁴ Cf. Kaldor, who points out the paradoxical legal distinction between an individual homicide and murder "in the collective interest" during a military conflict. Very illuminating of such logic is the objection held by IRA prisoners, namely, to be treated as individual criminals, rather than as political prisoners (Kaldor 2013, 341).

system"¹³⁵. Durkheim seems to suggest that recourse to the mirror-opposite symbols means that the groups well understand that others' symbols belong to the same type of things as their own, and therefore are not profane, but sacred, albeit in different ways. I would thus argue that they could be described as 'impurely sacred'. Durkheim's observation on the nature of the antagonism between the phratries, when combined with the pure/impure dichotomy, leads to a conclusion that within the domain of nationalism the opposition between a nation and its 'others' would stand not for the opposition between the sacred and profane, but for an opposition between the sacred pure and sacred impure.

The above arguments expose the difficulties which arise when we follow Smith's categorisation of 'otherness' in terms of profanity, and I have suggested a further possible solution, which consists in treating the symbols of the 'other' as impurely sacred. But what then shall we do with the category of the profane? We have just said that for the nationalists the symbols of the 'other' are clearly recognised in their symbolic value and distinguished from everyday objects. How can we then categorise the latter? I argue that Siniša Malešević's suggestion to consider everyday objects as profane can help us to find a solution from the impasse to which Smith's categorisation brings us. Malešević's approach allows us to keep both 'our' symbols and those of the

¹³⁵ Durkheim 1995, 147, n. 23.

'other' within the domain of sacrality, while relegating everyday objects into the domain of the profane.

Profane and Mundane

As mentioned earlier in this chapter, Malešević criticises Durkheim for a "tautological" and "circular" articulation of the sacred and the social¹³⁶. At the same time, he tries to make sense of what we have called the two Durkheimian theses. The key criterion, which Malešević introduces in order to both distinguish the sacred and the profane and to reconcile the first and the second thesis, is the concept of utility or the *mundane*¹³⁷. Malešević draws on the suggestion, which Durkheim makes rather *en passant* in *The Elementary Forms*, that what is sacred and religious is different from what is utilitarian and based on physical needs¹³⁸. I would add that another instance, in which sacrality and utility seem to be in radical opposition, is when Durkheim discusses the rights of the individual person. In the individualistic religion of modernity, so the argument goes, the dignity of the individual, being "placed in the ranks of sacrosanct objects", cannot be compromised with any "doctrine of utility" or reasons of political or state convenience¹³⁹.

¹³⁶ Malešević 2004, 586-87.

¹³⁷ Unlike Malešević, William Stanner—on whom I commented earlier in this chapter—introduces the *mundane* as a third category, alongside the Durkheimian sacred/profane dyad (Stanner 1967, 230).

¹³⁸ Durkheim 1995, 311-12, 52-53, 83-84.

¹³⁹ Durkheim 1973, 46.

The criterion of utility, to discern what is sacred and what is not, is reminiscent of Aurobindo's distinction between the "higher" and "inferior" types of sacrifice, as mentioned in chapter 1. Aurobindo contrasts sacrifice carried out as "beneficent interchange", or as "a commerce" between the human being and the divine, with a sacrifice, from which the human being "has nothing to gain"¹⁴⁰. But let us return to Malešević. Building on the distinction just mentioned, Malešević attempts the following definition of the sacred/profane dyad:

The realm of the profane is characterized by routine, secular, and mundane experience of everyday life governed by principles of utility, instrumental rationality, and practicality. The realm of sacred is its exact opposite—it is a sphere of moral absolute which goes beyond the mundane, and which evokes veneration, awe, and reverence. The sacred is non-utilitarian, non-empirical, and can never be based on human knowledge¹⁴¹.

As a following step, Malešević applies this distinction to nationalism, ascribing it to A. Smith:

A strong sense of attachment to the nation helps individuals keep separate the everyday reality of instrumental rationality [...] from the sphere where one's emotional, ideational, and non-instrumental needs are expressed [...]. [Nationalism]

¹⁴⁰ Ghose 1997c, 118. I suggest that a similar logic, this time applied in order to define the sacred, lies behind Adam Seligman's emphasis on the non-utility of sacrality. Seligman formulates his idea by referring to the Jewish tradition, in which "connection of the sacred and the realm beyond interests is found in the obligations to marry off the orphan and to bury the dead who have no one to bury them. [...] Here, then, are obligations performed without an eye to any remuneration, what anthropologists term generalized reciprocity, or what economists term generalized exchange" (Seligman 2000, 39).

¹⁴¹ Malešević 2004, 579. Cf. Malešević 2006, 125-26. Similarly, Filoramo, for whom the essence of the Durkheimian sacred "is not related to anything natural or utilitarian, but rather to what is cultural and social" (Filoramo 2004, 100-01, my translation). Durkheim's articulation of sacred/profane represents, according to Filoramo, a synthesis and overcoming of the tension between the sacred understood as the "mysterious totality" of Schleiermacher and Otto, and the sacred defined sociologically of Comte and de Coulanges (Filoramo 2004, 89-94; 1997).

maintains and preserves the duality and mutual incompatibility of the sacred and profane realms by conceiving of nations as the ultimate domains of sacredness¹⁴².

I am not convinced that this account is a faithful reconstruction of Smith's position. It would rather seem as if we were dealing here with Malešević's own reading of Durkheim. Be that as it may, Malešević offers an insightful perspective on sacred/profane articulation as applied to nationalism.

Roughly speaking, Malešević identifies the sacred not with the social in its totality *versus* the individual profane, nor with the 'us-ness' *versus* the profane 'otherness', but with what could be called the 'doxological' *versus* utilitarian definition, which, to my knowledge, is absent from Smith's work. It is true that Smith speaks of the "profanities" of the world, but for him the "profane" world means the world *outside* the borders of a given sacred community, not its mundane and bureaucratic dimension, as in Malešević's interpretation.

I would also argue that Malešević is right in pointing out the distinction between the doxological, celebratory or, as Durkheim would put it "effervescent" dimension of nationalism and the everyday life. In his essay on state liturgies, mentioned in chapter 1, Ulf Hedetoft explains the success of the rituals of belonging for developing national identity through their capacity to unite people, institutions and beliefs on various levels¹⁴³. Along

¹⁴² Malešević 2004, 579-80.

¹⁴³ Hedetoft 2008, 500.

the same lines, George Mosse points out how parades, especially in the context of totalitarian regimes, create an illusion of actual political participation¹⁴⁴. I argue however, that the rigidity of Malešević's categorisation of the sacred as doxological, and the profane as everyday or bureaucratic, can be balanced if one takes into account the interconnectedness of the doxological and everyday dimensions of nationalism.

I find the concept of *banal nationalism* very helpful at this point. Earlier, in my discussion on sacrifice, I referred to Zygmunt Bauman's idea, which I called a 'protracted' sacrifice. According to Bauman, one can draw from the "immortality of nationhood" not only, and not so much, by dying for the nation, but through "conformity", "abiding by standards" and "observing the limits"¹⁴⁵. In other words, nationalism lives by routine, not only by doxologies. Michael Billig has become very influential regarding the issue of everyday nationalism¹⁴⁶. In his acclaimed study *Banal Nationalism*, Billig claims that "it seems strange to suppose that occasional events, bracketed off from ordinary life, are sufficient to sustain a continually remembered national identity. It would seem more likely that the identity is part of a more

¹⁴⁴ Mosse 1989, 8.

¹⁴⁵ Bauman 1999, 36.

¹⁴⁶ Billig 1995. Cf. Skey and Antonsich 2017. This recent collection develops Billig's insights and suggests some new directions.

banal way of life in the nation-state"¹⁴⁷. Billig persuasively argues also that nationalism lives outside the moments of Durkheimian effervescence: an unnoticed and taken-for-granted waving of a flag; a weather forecast (for 'our' and 'other' countries); a media talk on 'we', 'us' and 'ours'; these are expressions of a banal, everyday nationalism. National identity and ideology exist in the modern world in routine, unnoticeable ways, as "*the context*" of social life¹⁴⁸, or, to use John Gillis' phrase, not as something "we think *about*, but [as something] we think *with*"¹⁴⁹.

Billig points out a dimension which Smith and Malešević—concentrated on the symbolic and doxological character of nationalism—have neglected. His argument does not invalidate the significance of national symbols, celebrations, ritual riots and wars for the enhancing of the sense of national belonging, but it shows that 'mundane', everyday activity is saturated by the nationalist 'sacred'.

I conclude that, if we want to interpret nationalism in Durkheimian terms, thus approaching it with the sacred/profane distinction, the best way to do this is to consider the symbols and myths of a national community as purely sacred, and (a) in opposition to, but also constituted by the other communities and their symbols, which are impurely sacred, and (b) set apart

¹⁴⁷ Billig 1995, 46.

¹⁴⁸ Billig 1995, 109.

¹⁴⁹ John Gillis, cited in Özkirimli 2005, 55.

from the profanity of everyday life which is, nevertheless, permeated by the nationalist sacred.

Two major conclusions can be drawn from the arguments developed in chapters 1 and 2. First, that research provided by the social sciences allows for an interpretation of nationalism in terms of religion. Far from limiting itself to the secular domain of bureaucracy, nationalism draws highly on symbols and narratives of sacrality, starting from the narrative on belief of belonging and ending with the transcendence of death through sacrifice in the name of the nation.

Second is that the scholarship, while pointing to the 'religious' dimensions of nationalism, seems to be far from unanimous in its understanding of 'religion'. In fact, while Smart and A. Smith develop their arguments about the religious dimension of nationalism, implicitly reducing religion (and sacrality) to symbolism, Durkheim's, and later Billig's, approaches tend rather to extend religiosity (and sacrality) to social life in its totality. I do not want to argue that this difference involves a radical contradiction between the approaches. In fact, Smart extends nationalism's sacrality to all kinds of domains, e.g. to education, whilst Durkheim emphasises the importance of 'effervescence', which is an explosion of concentrated sacrality. However, the two conceptions of religion remain distinct: on the one hand, religion appears as a doxological domain of

symbolism and mythology; on the other hand, religion is (to a lesser or smaller degree) tautological with society. In what follows I will approach this from a theological perspective.

Chapter 3. Salvific life

In the previous chapters of the thesis I indicated the ways modern nationalism uses and imitates religious symbols and narratives, and has recourse to what can be called the sacralisation of the profane. I also pointed out that the modern nation-state has its own ambivalent way to approach the religious/secular divide. On the one hand, the state tends to expel or separate the religious from its midst. On the other hand, it does not have a problem with appropriating the elements, which—even according to a secularist logic—could be considered religious. The modern nation-state has its own ‘sacred’ and ‘profane’. This leads us to a series of questions.

Why does nationalism happen to be inspired by *religion*? Perhaps religion possesses elements which modern nationalism might find attractive; if so, what are those elements? Is nationalism interested in influencing individuals and society in a way analogous to religion? When we say that nationalism imitates religion, what exactly is being imitated? In chapter 1, I argued that nationalism uses religious sources in order to legitimise itself. Even more importantly, I argued that nationalism has recourse to sacrificial rhetoric, very charged with religious overtones, also for the sake of

legitimacy. In this chapter I will continue to address these questions, focusing on the theological perspective.

Many scholars of nationalism, especially Anthony Smith and Ninian Smart, read nationalism through the lens of religion. In other words, in looking at nationalism they try to find resemblances to conventional religions in order to prove that nationalism is a *neo-religion*. I will reverse this perspective, and examine religion through the lens of nationalism: Does religion represent something nationalism aspires to be? Or, to put the question even more radically: Is religion not a *proto-nationalism*? And, if such a reading is permissible: Can a critique of nationalism by religion become a *self-critique*?

I propose that an answer to these questions requires an exploration of what religion is, what are the ideals that it pursues, and what are the temptations by which it is being chased. In brief, How do religious communities see themselves, theologically?

This chapter will be comparative in its method. Building on Yannaras and Aurobindo, I will explore the possibility of a new articulation of the sacred and profane, according to which the line of separation between the sacred and the profane lies not where the Enlightenment paradigm has drawn it, i.e. between the religious and secular spheres, but *within* each of

these spheres. In order to do this, I will focus on the presence of the sacred and profane within salvific life, understood *holistically*¹.

Before I explain in more detail what I attempt to do in this chapter, I will introduce my concept of *salvific life*, and elucidate why I use this term. Since Aurobindo is ambiguous about 'religion', while Yannaras is explicitly critical of it, I will use the term *salvific life*, rather than simply 'religion'. *Salvific life* can serve as a comparative concept, which denotes the respective ideals of both thinkers: Aurobindo's idea of true religion or spirituality, and Yannaras' ideal of the event-church. The term resonates with the description, by both thinkers, of their ideals as a particular mode of life. It also seems suitable because it is sufficiently inclusive of Yannaras' emphasis on community and Aurobindo's rather individualist tendencies². *Salvific life*, as a term, will help to avoid confusion, especially when comparing Aurobindo to Yannaras, since the meaning or the content given to the term 'religion' by both authors, is not identical.

In this chapter I will start with Yannaras' argument that, from a theological point of view, *salvific life*, manifested as the event-church, is a

¹ 'Holistic' is the term I use to express an idea present in both Aurobindo and Yannaras. It reflects Aurobindo's "integral human existence", or the "whole man" (Ghose 1997d, 80, 100). It also refers to Yannaras' emphasis on catholicity as "wholeness and fullness of a *mode of existence*" (Yannaras 2013, 152, emphasis in original).

² John Thatamanil, in his comparison of Shankara and Tillich, instead of "salvation" or "liberation", prefers to use "ultimate transformation", as a comparative category (Thatamanil 2006, 16). I find 'salvation' and 'salvific' suitable for a comparative work engaging Aurobindo, since it is widely used both by Aurobindo himself and by Indologists. See Ghose 1997d, 266; 2005, 230, 696, 723. Cf. Klostermaier 1984.

political rather than a religious entity, and with his critique of the concept of religion. I will then proceed to examine *how* political and *how* holistic is this salvific life. I will enquire about the *other* against which salvific life is defined. Is it the other (religious) traditions, or rather the non-religious political world? I will then ask the question as to whether a non-‘religious’ salvific life is possible at all. Finally, I will explore whether Yannaras’ articulation of the continuity of church and *polis* might benefit from being pushed further towards the recognition of *semina verbi*, seeds of truth³, outside the Hellenic ethos. Toward the end of the chapter, and drawing on the engagement with Yannaras and Aurobindo, I will propose a theologically articulated distinction between the sacred and profane.

Throughout this chapter, I will compare Yannaras to Aurobindo who, drawing on a completely different tradition, attempts to address some very similar questions. This comparison is aimed at both a better understanding of Yannaras’ holistic articulation of the salvific life, and at looking the moments where Aurobindonian thought might provide some answers, or even correctives, to the problems Yannaras is facing.

(I) The ‘how’ of salvific life

The challenge of the post-Enlightenment narrative on the separation

³ Literally, ‘seeds of the Word’.

of the sacred and secular comes from various perspectives. In the initial chapters of the thesis I suggested a critique of such a separation, based on the study of nationalism. The secularist narrative imagines the sacred as private and bound within the sphere of religion, while the secular is thought of as mundane, public, and pertaining to the domain of political life⁴. But nationalism draws heavily upon religious sources, imitates religious symbolism and discourse, and requires privileged allegiance, i.e., positioning itself as a religion of modernity; in other words, as belonging to the domain of the sacred.

Yannaras against religion

Yannaras enters the debate on the relationship between the correlation of the theological and political, sharply and abruptly. The theological is the political. If the theological is not political, neither is it theological. For this reason, Dionysios Skliris speaks about the *redundancy* of 'political' in Yannaras' political theology⁵.

Yannaras often contrasts the *biological* existence of man (defined by nature, and individualistic), and his *personal* being (which springs out of man's freedom)⁶. On the level of religious life, biological existence is

⁴ I will go into more detail on what I call 'secularist logic' in the first part of the next chapter.

⁵ See Skliris 2018.

⁶ Yannaras 1984, 22-38. In this regard, there is an interesting parallel with Giorgio Agamben and his notions of 'bare life' (*nuda vita*) and 'political life', drawn from the Ancient Greek

represented by what Yannaras calls natural (innate or instinctive) religiosity, or simply *religion*, and personal being by way of the church.

In *Against Religion*, a study entirely dedicated by Yannaras to the difference between church and 'religion', religiosity is presented as an innate and egoistic need of human beings, who feel weak and unprotected in a world they cannot fully understand, nor control⁷. In an act of imagination and autosuggestion, the human being is inclined to believe that nature is controlled by a supernatural power, and attempts to enter into a relationship with it, in order to obtain protection in weakness and fears. Yannaras quotes a famous aphorism: "when a plane enters a zone of violent turbulence, nobody on board is an atheist"⁸. Religiosity is thus a response to the instinct of *self-preservation*. To feel protected, man needs, in a certain sense, to control and tame the supernatural. Human beings naturally believe that this control can be gained through worship and morality, which reassure and liberate from the fear of punishment, and guarantee salvation. Sacrifice—both exterior, as the offering of food, or interior, e.g. fasting or celibacy—is the means to obtain the Divinity's benevolence. This benevolence could also

distinction between *zoē*—natural, biological existence—, and *bios*—politically qualified life within the community (Agamben 1995, 3-15).

⁷ Yannaras 2007a. English translation: Yannaras 2013. The problem of church *versus* religion was partly approached by the Greek theologian in some earlier works: Yannaras 1977; 1991.

⁸ Yannaras 2013, 2.

be secured through ethics: the deity in this case would be “bound by the merits of human beings, obliged to guarantee them protection”⁹.

At the same time, religion answers the innate need of man to *understand and interpret* the natural world: with religious dogmas, man is freed from ignorance and doubt. The faithfulness to the letter of a dogmatic formulation provides “the psychological security of possessing the truth”¹⁰. The fact that dogmas offer security explains why religion may use censorship and even violence to protect ‘orthodoxy’ from ‘heresy’—in this way, human beings protect their conceptual order of the world. The more uncertain the knowledge that is postulated, the more infallible and strong the authority is needed in order for this knowledge to be protected. The submission to such an authority “relieves the individual of responsibility, risk and freedom—it relieves him from the fear of growing up”¹¹. This process is otherwise described by Yannaras as “ideological accepta[nce] of faith”¹². It takes place when human beings attempt to find truth in a set of propositions, rather than in relationship with others, based on trust¹³. In what is reminiscent of Michael Oakeshott’s critique of ideology, Yannaras insists that knowledge should be

⁹ Yannaras 2013, 6.

¹⁰ Yannaras 2013, 3-4.

¹¹ Yannaras 2013, 17.

¹² Yannaras 2007a, 86, my translation. By ideology, Yannaras means a complex of theoretical propositions “that aim at guiding human conduct” and are “judged by their practical effectiveness” (Yannaras 2013, 50).

¹³ Yannaras 2013, 50. Cf. Yannaras 2006, 101.

based not on a set of rules, but on experience¹⁴. It is in this sense that the tradition is understood by Yannaras—as “transmission of the experience of the eucharistic body from one person to another and from one generation to another”¹⁵.

For Yannaras, Christianity constitutes not one of the world religions, not even the most perfect one, but the very “reversal of religious terms”¹⁶, something qualitatively different from what above has been described as natural and instinctive religion. At the moment of its origins, Christianity presented itself as *ekklēsia*, a term chosen to express “an event of communion and union of men”¹⁷. This is a new mode (*tropos*) of relations, not a new religion¹⁸. The dynamical and relational nature of this entity is expressed by Yannaras with the concept of the event-church, or ecclesial event (*ekklēsiastiko gegonos*).

The way the argument in *Against Religion* is developed suggests that when Yannaras refuses to describe Christianity as a religion, his intent is to stress the priority of love and freedom over dogma, worship and individual ethics. Yannaras’ identification of love with freedom follows his Trinitarian

¹⁴ Oakeshott describes ideology as “living by the book”, or by a “crib”, in a situation when a group has lost the tradition and *habitus* of political action (Oakeshott 1962, 31). On Oakeshott’s concept of ideology, see Corey 2006, 8, 136, 82-83.

¹⁵ Yannaras 2013, 51.

¹⁶ Yannaras 2013, 21.

¹⁷ Yannaras 1977, 25, my translation.

¹⁸ Yannaras 2013, 21. Cf. Yannaras 2007a, 43.

theology, according to which the love within the Trinity is an “existence as a freedom of communion”¹⁹. This freedom is considered to be something infinitely greater than a simple opportunity of choice; freedom is an absolute non-predetermination. In practice this means that God exists as Trinity not because such a way of existence is a necessity of his nature, but because the Father freely realises His being as relation, by generation of the Son and procession of the Spirit²⁰. In this way, God the Father defines his essence rather than being defined by it, while freedom from necessity is translated into the love from which the Father “constitutes the principle and mode of his Existence as [...] personal freedom and love”²¹. Even the death and resurrection of Christ are interpreted in terms of freedom²². Jesus is free from the necessity of both divine and human natures: His death is a sign of freedom from eternity, which is an attribute of *divine* nature; his resurrection is freedom from death, “the most burdensome and unbearably irrational existential limitation of human nature”²³. This freedom is also described by Yannaras in terms of “ecstasy” (*ek-stasē*), standing out of the natural bonds²⁴.

¹⁹ Yannaras 2013, 26.

²⁰ Yannaras 2013, 28. On the Trinitarian theology of Yannaras and the essence/person articulation, see Yannaras 1991, 20-36.

²¹ Yannaras 1991, 35.

²² Yannaras 2013, 29-30.

²³ Yannaras 2013, 32-33.

²⁴ Yannaras refers to “[t]he ecstasy of God, his power of ‘standing out of’ his nature, of offering himself [...] for total personal communion” (Yannaras 2007b, 258). Analogically, human nature has this ‘ecstatic’ capacity to “‘stand outside’ itself, as personal otherness and freedom”, to transcend nature through relationality (Yannaras 2007b, 262).

Yannaras identifies a prototype of the new mode of relationship, which is the church, in the ancient Greek *polis*, and not in the religious institutions of Judaism. The *polis* is considered a precursor of the *ekklēsia*, insofar as the former denoted a communal endeavour (rather than a place or settlement) to live according to the truth, understood as a “mode of existence and coexistence that knew nothing of alteration, change, decay, or death”²⁵. In this regard, the kerygma of the victory over death is considered by Yannaras to be a major criterion for empirically distinguishing the church from its imitations²⁶. He goes so far as to affirm the “historical transformation of the ancient Greek political event into a Eucharistic body of the Christian Church”²⁷. He places huge emphasis on the fact of the adoption by Christianity of the Greek term *ekklēsia*. And he claims that since, in the ancient world, *ekklēsia* referred to the assembly of a *polis*, and thus belonged to the domain of politics, not religion, the term was meant to point to the difference of Christianity from every religion and indicate it as being way of life:

Greek citizens did not assemble primarily to discuss [...] and take decisions, but mainly to constitute [...] and reveal the city (the way of life ‘according to the truth’). In the same way, Christians would not assemble primarily to [...] worship, and be catechized but mainly to constitute [...] reveal, in the Eucharistic dinner, the way of life ‘according to the truth’, incorruptibility and immortality: not the imitation of the secular ‘logic’, but of the Trinitarian Society of Persons²⁸.

²⁵ Yannaras 2013, 22.

²⁶ Yannaras 2003, 32.

²⁷ Yannaras 2011b, 47.

²⁸ Yannaras 2011b, 46.

The Eucharist, thus, as the passage from the limitations of nature and death to the freedom of love and relationship, was a privileged expression of the church.

The articulation of true ecclesial being by Yannaras gives an impression that he rejects the classical Christian articulations of the church and the political. He seems to radically depart from those theological approaches which, to a greater or lesser degree, distinguish between the two spheres²⁹. In particular, he seems to distance himself from any distinction between *ecclesiology* (a discipline engaged with how the church, the sacramental city of God, should exist) and what could be termed *social doctrine* (how society, or the city of men, should work according to the gospel's principles).

In Yannaras, the community of salvific life and the ideal political community follow the same rules: live the same life, according to the truth, transcend nature in freedom and self-giving. While Daniel Payne argues that for Yannaras, "political theology is simply a description of true ecclesial being"³⁰, I would go even further and suggest that, in reality, they are coterminous. Accordingly, the following paraphrase of Payne's assertion would be equally true for Yannaras: ecclesial being is simply a description of

²⁹ Cf. e.g. Cavanaugh and Scott 2004; Kirwan 2008. All three authors enumerate various theological approaches to the political, always keeping the two spheres distinguishable, if not completely distinct.

³⁰ Payne 2006, 462.

the true politics. It is for its radical assertion of the political and non-religious nature of the church that, I suggest, Yannaras' theology allows us to view issues of political theology from a new perspective.

What is 'political'?

When Yannaras says that theology is necessarily "political", or that the church's nature is necessarily "political", what does he actually mean by this? An unqualified description of religion as political leads us nowhere: there are various ways of being political. A theocracy could be one of the ways in which church can be political. Cavanaugh also presents his vision of the church as *polis*, an alternative to the secular way of doing politics³¹. In brief, what is 'political'?

As a matter of fact, Yannaras never produced a systematic theology, and his thoughts on this issue are not always clear. To tackle this, I will ask a series of questions, and engage in comparison with Aurobindo on a variety of issues, in order to elucidate Yannaras' thought, and arrive at a better theological articulation of the sacred and profane.

So, how is Yannaras's 'political' defined? In chapter 2, based on the etymology of 'definition', *de-finire*, to set a boundary, I approached the sacred through its opposition to the profane. I also argued that a nation

³¹ Cavanaugh 2011.

defines itself against the (series of) *other(s)*, and understands its identity through constant comparison with, and opposition to, the other nations. Here, I would like to use a similar method, to understand the concept of salvific life. In order to define the 'political', I will attempt to draw a line, which would semantically separate it from what it is not. From this perspective, the questions to Yannaras would be: What is 'political' *not*? *Against* what is Christianity being defined as political? Who is the *other*, against which the ideal mode of life is being defined? *What* is being denied in affirming the 'political' of theology? I would suggest several possible interpretations. In what follows, I will delineate the 'political' over against both the 'religious' and the 'pre-political'.

Yannaras: Political vs. religious

The first possibility would be to interpret the political nature of the church, as described by Yannaras, as an attempt to define Christianity against the (other) religions. Is Christianity political because it is different from the (other) religions, in their being religions? Or, to ask this question from a historical perspective, is the choice of term *ekklēsia* rather than *synagōgē*, made by the early church, really a choice between the political and the religious, as Yannaras tries to convince his readers?

Now, Christianity did not appear in a vacuum. If the church has

conceived of itself as a negation of religion, did it imagine itself as the *other* of the two religious traditions it had in front of its eyes, i.e. Judaism and the Greco-Roman cult? Let us begin by asking: Did Christianity construct itself against Judaism *qua* religion? Yannaras seems to be inconsistent on this point. In his *Elements of Faith* (1983), his judgment on Israel is rather generous. He speaks of a “certain analogous self-consciousness” of the people of Israel and the church³². His basic presupposition here is that Judaism “did not represent a ‘religion’”, as far as its mode of life was grounded “[n]ot [on] theoretical confidence or religious beliefs, but [on] God’s call”³³. But in *Against Religion* (2006), the continuity between the two communities is put aside and, instead, the argument that Christianity imagined itself in continuation with the “semantic content” of the Greek *ekklēsia tou dēmou* (popular assembly)³⁴, rather than a “creative transformation of the Jewish religion” is put forward³⁵. This, together with Yannaras’ description of the Christian Judaizers of the New Testament in Acts 15—who demanded law and circumcision—as the first temptation to religionise the church³⁶, suggests that, for Yannaras, the mode of life of Israel has in fact the characteristics of a ‘religion’.

³² Yannaras 1991, 121-22.

³³ Yannaras 1991, 121-22.

³⁴ Yannaras 2013, 22.

³⁵ Yannaras 2013, 130.

³⁶ Yannaras 2013, 135.

Besides this ambiguity of Yannaras' treatment of Judaism, some other aspects of the history of the early church complicate the picture he draws. Regarding the Judaizers, it should be noticed that research on so-called Judeo-Christianity indicates that a reference to the issue of the Judaizers of Acts 15 would not cover all the followers of Jesus, who considered themselves to be simultaneously Christians *and* Jews³⁷.

Regarding the preference of the early church to be called *ekklēsia* rather than *synagōgē*, I would like to argue drawing on James Dunn and Paul Trebilco that the link between the terms *ekklēsia* and *polis* is not as straightforward and uncontested as Yannaras tends to present it³⁸. First of all, the term is often used (together with *synagōgē*) in the Septuagint to translate *qahal*, the assembly [of Israel]. Secondly, since the Christian usage of the term originated in Jerusalem, where there was no 'secular' *ekklēsia*, it would be more probable that Biblical connotations were more relevant than political ones. Both Dunn and Trebilco suggest that the rationale behind the choice of the ancient church lies in the fact that the term *synagōgē* had already been 'taken', while *ekklēsia* was 'free'. What I find indicative,

³⁷ See Daniélou 1974; Boyarin 2004. It is indicative that in dealing with the paleo-Christian period, a scholar of Judeo-Christian relations, Daniel Boyarin, often makes a distinction between "Christian Jews" and "Jews who would not be Christians", rather than between Jews and Christians, thus suggesting that the difference between *synagōgē* and *ekklēsia* took some time to develop (Boyarin 2004, xi, 26).

³⁸ Dunn 1998, 537-48; Trebilco 2011. Similarly, Orthodox theologian Georges Florovsky argues that the usage of the term *ekklēsia*, a rendering of Hebrew *qahal*, emphasised "the organic continuity of the two Covenants", and implied that its Hellenistic meaning, linked to the concept of *polis*, was secondary (Florovsky 1972, 58-59).

however, is that in fact *both* terms were ‘taken’ (one by Jewish communities, another by Greco-Roman assemblies), and the Christians still decided to take on a term with a more pronounced political connotation. This might not be sufficient proof of semantic similarity between the church and the *polis*, but it is an important sign that in their identity construction, over against the neighbouring communities, it was more important for Christians to differentiate themselves from the non-Christian Jews, than from the mode of life of the *polis*. Furthermore, as Dunn contends—in line with Yannaras’ argument—a non-cultic *ekklēsia* of Christians “was deliberately breaking with the typical understanding of a religious community dependent on cult centre, office of priest, and act of ritual sacrifice”; therefore, such a “religious association [...] must have seemed a plain contradiction in terms, even an absurdity”³⁹. But does the denial of being a cult community necessarily put Christianity in semantic continuity with *polis* vs. *synagōgē*?

As a matter of fact, the adoption of a primarily political (rather than cultic) terminology was not an exclusively Christian novelty, but was also practiced by the Jewish translators of the Septuagint. The usage of *ekklēsia* in the Septuagint, to translate *qahal*, has already been mentioned. Similarly, as Giorgio Agamben observes, the Septuagint has translated the Hebrew term *sheret* (which describes priestly service) with the Greek *leitourgeō*,

³⁹ Dunn 1998, 547-48.

pertinent to socio-political life, rather than available cultic terms, such as *latreuō* or *douleuō*⁴⁰. This would suggest that Yannaras' argument about the 'political' rather than the 'religious' nature of Christianity might still be correct, but would also need to be extended to Judaism, as is the case in Yannaras' work in the 1980s.

The question however remains whether this Christian semantic continuity with *polis* is sufficient proof of the church's option of a political vs. religious identity⁴¹. Scholars such as Alston, Rives, Beard, Castelli, and Sourvinou-Inwood insist on the fact that the religious, social and political structures of the Greco-Roman world were linked in such a way that the modern distinction between the religious and the political is inadequate when trying to describe the classical *polis*⁴². Christiane Sourvinou-Inwood convincingly argues that "[e]ach *polis* was a religious system", while "direct and full participation in religion was reserved for citizens, that is, those who made up the community which articulated the religion", with the consequence that "disrespect towards religion [wa]s a sign of disloyalty

⁴⁰ Agamben 2012, ch. 1.

⁴¹ See Agamben's reflection on the various terms the early church has borrowed from the political domain (Agamben 2012).

⁴² Sourvinou-Inwood 1990, 295; Alston 1998, 307; Beard, North, and Price 1998, 359; Castelli 2004, ch. 2; Rives 2007, 128. Cf. Soloviev's well-aimed observation on this issue: "As water when taken separately in its specific properties resembles neither hydrogen nor oxygen in the least, so the religious police regime of ancient life recalled neither religion nor the police in our sense of these terms" (Soloviev 2000, 217). Soloviev uses 'police' and 'politics' interchangeably.

towards the *polis* and the *politeia*"⁴³. Ironically enough, Sourvinou-Inwood compares the role of *polis* within Greek religion to the role of the church within Christianity⁴⁴. I would like to suggest that the idea implied behind this analogy is exactly the opposite of the assertion made by Yannaras: while the latter insists on the contrast between the *polis* and 'religion', Sourvinou-Inwood points to their interconnectedness, if not to their identity. How to make sense of this discrepancy?

An interesting perspective in this regard, from a theological point of view, is offered by Erik Peterson, who insists on both the interconnection between the Christian *ekklēsia* and the ancient *polis* (as does Yannaras), but is conscious of both the political *and* cultic features of the latter. Peterson draws an analogy between the "secular *ekklēsia* of antiquity", which is the assembly of citizens of the *polis*, and the Christian *ekklēsia*, constituted by citizens of the heavenly Jerusalem, which is celebrating a *leitourgia*, public worship⁴⁵. In a way reminiscent of Yannaras' argument, Peterson concludes that "the Church stands much closer to political entities like kingdom and polis, rather than voluntary associations and unions"⁴⁶, and that it constitutes "the successor of the ancient *dēmos*"⁴⁷.

⁴³ Sourvinou-Inwood 1990, 295, 305.

⁴⁴ Sourvinou-Inwood 1990, 302.

⁴⁵ Peterson 2011b, 38.

⁴⁶ Peterson 2011b, 38.

⁴⁷ Peterson 2011b, 197, n. 24.

Here, I would like to point out two issues pertinent to the general argument of this thesis. *First* of all, Peterson is nuanced in his argument about the political nature of the church, balancing it with what could be called an eschatological “remainder”. While for Yannaras the church’s political nature is a reference to a realizable mode of existence or, as it were, an *immanent* city, in Peterson we are dealing with the political, which is radically eschatological. While claiming that *ekklēsia* is political and belongs to the city he, at the same time, emphasises that this reference-city is the *heavenly* city, rather than the historical *polis*, implicitly suggesting that the political nature of the church is not yet fully realised⁴⁸. In fact, although for Peterson both Kingdom and the church are contemporarily political and cultic, the church is not the Kingdom⁴⁹. This fact is the basis of an “ambiguity”, which consists in the fact that the church

is not in a univocal sense a religious-political entity such as was the messianic Kingdom of the Jews. But she is not a purely spiritual entity, in which such concepts as politics and sovereignty may not, as such, appear [...]. The ambiguity that attaches to the Church must be explained in terms of the blend of Kingdom and Church⁵⁰.

In other words, the tension between the church and the Kingdom of God should not be too easily dismissed. It should be emphasised, however, that

⁴⁸ Peterson 2011a, 108; 2011b, 38. This observation, undoubtedly of great significance, reveals, at the same time the crucial problem with the theological language as such. At the end of the day, any reference to the *heavenly city* cannot possibly be disassociated from the *city* on earth, since it is the latter which provides us with the concept of the city as such. The same, I would argue, is true of expressions such as *Kingdom* or *Kingship* of God.

⁴⁹ Peterson 2011b, 38. Cf. Peterson 2011a, 108.

⁵⁰ Peterson 2011b, 38-39.

an eschatological emphasis is not completely lacking in Yannaras. For instance, already in his essay "Orthodoxy and the West" (1972), he argues that what Orthodox theology needed, in order to "transcend the dialectical character of Orthodox theology with respect to the West", was an "exodus" from the framework of "the broader stance of Western man in face of the world and history"⁵¹. The solution, proposed by Yannaras, consists in the following:

[s]uch an exodus, even for us Orthodox who are today linked definitely and integrally to the cultural milieu of the West, can occur in only one direction: that of the *eschaton*. And the *eschaton* for Orthodoxy is the continuous building-up of the Church, the fulfilment of the perspectives of history by the reality of the 'little leaven'⁵².

As is already visible from the final phrase of the citation, Yannaras tends to identify the *eschaton* with the edification of the church, in a way reducing eschatology to ecclesiology. In fact, from what follows in the essay, the only concrete detail about Yannaras' conceptualisation of the *eschaton* is an emphasis on the parish. As I suggested earlier, the ecclesiological model *par excellence* for Yannaras is the Hellenic *polis*. Consequently, what we have, at the end of the day, is the reduction of eschatology—via ecclesiology—to Hellenism. Therefore, I suggest, that Pantelis Kalaitzidis makes a good point, when he indicates that one of the reasons for Yannaras' "ethnocultural sliding" is a penchant towards history, at the detriment of eschatology⁵³. It

⁵¹ Yannaras 1972a, 129.

⁵² Yannaras 1972a, 129.

⁵³ Kalaitzidis 2017, 427-28.

would seem that Yannaras does not realise this 'eschatological exodus' in his later theological work. Perhaps one of the reasons is that the field has been robustly explored in the same years, by another Greek—the Orthodox theologian, John Zizioulas⁵⁴.

My *second* point, concerning a possible engagement of Yannaras with Peterson, concerns the church's *ecstatic* nature. While for Yannaras, to affirm Christianity's otherness vis-à-vis 'religion', entails an emphasis on freedom from natural egoism, and a possibility of an ecstatic relation, Peterson uses the contraposition of the *ekklēsia* to the synagogue as a means to connect freedom from nature and the church's mission. In Peterson, while Israel's synagogue belongs to a natural order, and is constituted as a "fleshly descent from Abraham", *ekklēsia* is a free and open community⁵⁵. The church, therefore, truly begins only with Pentecost, when the Christian community, as it were, reconfigures its mission from building the Messianic Kingdom of the Jews (abandoning the Judaic natural order, and Hebrew as the sacred language) to the stepping-out to the nations equipped with the gift of languages⁵⁶. "*There is a 'Church'*", Peterson argues, "*only under the assumption that the twelve Apostles have been called [...] to go to the Gentiles*"⁵⁷. This missionary stepping-out is not inconsistent with Yannaras'

⁵⁴ See Zizioulas 1985b; 2010, 126-46.

⁵⁵ Peterson 2011c, 39.

⁵⁶ Peterson 2011b, 34.

⁵⁷ Peterson 2011b, 35, emphasis in original.

insistence on the ecstatic nature of the church. Such *ekstasis*, however—and this is of crucial importance—should be not only a standing outside of racial and ethnic bonds, admitted by Yannaras, but also a standing outside of a cultural and historical obsession with Hellenism.

I conclude that Yannaras' emphasis on the continuity between the Christian *ekklēsia* and the *polis* does not necessarily prove his point about the 'non-religious' character of the church, insofar as *ekklēsia* of the *polis* was no less religious than the Jewish *synagōgē*. I would further argue that Yannaras projects into antiquity the categorisations of religious and political which, in such a rigid form, appear only in modernity, and therefore are inadequate in dealing with the religio-political context of the ancient world, including early Christianity⁵⁸. The last point, however, does not invalidate his more general argument, that Christianity conceived and should conceive of itself as a socio-political, non-cultic, racially and ethnically inclusive community, an alternative to those that existed in its milieu⁵⁹. Finally, Yannaras' articulation of *ekklēsia* would benefit from an eschatologically conditioned approach, which places the political model of the church in the

⁵⁸ See, for instance, Dumont 1971; Cavanaugh 2009. I will focus on this issue in chapter 4.

⁵⁹ See also Georgi 1995, 41; Horsley 2000, 74. Both authors insist on the *political* dimension of the Christian *ekklēsia* as standing over against, and in competition with, the *ekklēsia tou dēμου*. On the contrary, Blumenfeld argues that St Paul, the authors of the gospels, and early apologists are far from being revolutionaries, but rather attempt to reconcile *ekklēsia* and the existing political framework, to insert the latter into the plan of the divine providence, and render *ekklēsia* not-threatening to the political authorities (Blumenfeld 2001, ch. 6). Cf. Riordan 2009.

heavenly Jerusalem, rather than in the ancient Greek *polis*.

The fact that Yannaras denies 'religious' status to Christianity, and actually creates a binary opposition between the event-church, as a *topos* of salvific mode of life, on the one hand, and 'religion', which absorbs all the negative dimensions of human nature, on the other hand, is very revealing in itself. My hypothesis would be that such a direction is symptomatic of the development which has taken place in the concept of religion, and which, in the eyes of a theologian, renders it suspicious and unappealing. Other classical examples from within Christian theology, with whom Yannaras has been compared, are Barth and Boenhoffer⁶⁰. Curiously enough, this tendency to dissociate one's tradition from being classified as 'religion' is not limited to the Christian tradition. In what follows, I will introduce Aurobindo's way of articulating traditional Hindu thought and his own particular Neo-Hinduism in partial opposition to religion.

Aurobindo: religion, religionism and spirituality

In Aurobindo, we find ideas which profoundly resonate with Yannaras' critique. However, unlike Yannaras, who is very explicit in the content he

⁶⁰ For a critical engagement with both authors on religion, see Thils 1968, 13-36 and 107-27. For a recent comparison of Yannaras with Barth and Boenhoffer, see Makrides 2017. Curiously, Yannaras mentions neither Barth nor Bonhoeffer in his *Against Religion*.

gives to the concept of 'religion', Aurobindo's attitude towards religion as category is rather more complex.

I will begin with a relatively vague, as it were, notion of religion, to develop a more precise and useful conceptualisation. In chapter 13 of *The Human Cycle*, Aurobindo offers the following, positive description, which I use in order to begin my engagement:

the inmost essence of religion, apart from its outward machinery of creed, cult [...] and symbol, is the search for God [...]. Its work is a sincere living out of the true and intimate relations between man and God, relations of unity, relations of difference [...], an ecstatic love and delight, an absolute surrender and service, a casting of every part of our existence [...] towards the Divine and a descent of the Divine into man⁶¹.

Several things deserve to be pointed out in relation to this citation. Apart from a description of religion in terms of relation or bond, rather than tradition⁶², and its pronounced theistic component⁶³, I would like to point out the holistic nature of Aurobindo's religion and his predilection of "essence" vs. the "outward" aspects.

⁶¹ Ghose 1997d, 131.

⁶² One immediately sees a parallel with Lactantius' interpretation of *religio* as related to *religare*. The understanding of religion in terms of a bond with the transcendental, rather than the one conceived in terms of tradition—as Ciceronian etymology suggests (*relegere*, re-read)—is a constant tendency in the Aurobindonian *opus*. Cf. chapter 4 *infra*.

⁶³ A comparison with other passages in Aurobindo suggests that to interpret "God" in purely theistic terms is not the only possible option. Aurobindo accepts non-theistic ways of speaking of the transcendental, and also occasionally seems to use "Nature" and "Humanity" interchangeably with "God". See Ghose 1997f, 280; 2003, 493. On Aurobindo's theism and his relationship to Indian theistic traditions, see Phillips 1986. On the interchangeability of "God" and "Nature" in Aurobindo, see Chattopadhyaya 1988, 196-200.

One of the most important points in Aurobindo's understanding of religion is its *holistic* nature. Religion is conceived not as an autonomous part of human life dealing with worship and belief, but as a force which has as its aim the transformation of "every part of our existence". The holistic dimension of religion is expressed by Aurobindo through a variety of concepts. I would like to mention two, which are of major importance to my argument: spirituality and *sanatana dharma*. Understood in a holistic sense, i.e. as the totality of life guided by the spirit, religion appears to be synonymous with the concept of spirituality. Later in the chapter, I will point out that, paradoxically, spirituality can not only be coterminous with religion, but also its opposite. At the same time, Aurobindo mentions holism as a particular feature of Hindu tradition. The model of religion holistically understood is to be found in the "original Vedic society", in which "people formed a single socio-religious whole with no separation into religious and secular"⁶⁴, and *Rishis* (spiritual seers) represented the unity of a fully incarnated life and the spiritual truth⁶⁵. Later in the chapter, I will show how Aurobindo uses his concept of *sanatana dharma* to draw a line of semantic identity between Indian tradition and "eternal religion".

⁶⁴ Ghose 1997a, 421.

⁶⁵ Ghose 1997d, 180. Cf. Ghose 1997j, 39.

Another point worth mentioning is Aurobindo's scepticism towards what he calls the "outward machinery of creed, cult, ceremony and symbol". In fact, the definition provided above, focuses on the "essence" of religion. On the contrary, Aurobindo is constantly critical towards what is not the "essence". However, I argue that it would be wrong to depict Aurobindo as an unconditional iconoclastic critic of what he calls the "outward" aspects of religion. In fact, he does not reject them altogether. Instead, he claims that they are legitimate and useful at some stages of human development⁶⁶. Moreover, he persistently criticises the tendency of the Protestant Reformers to get rid of them⁶⁷. At the same time, Aurobindo is worried that the "outward" aspects, instead of being seen as "aids" and "supports" of religious life, might be taken as its "essence" and arrival point⁶⁸. In *A Defence of Indian Culture*, Aurobindo uses a beautiful image of human spiritual development as the constructing of a temple. Here, the cultic, symbolic and dogmatic aspects are used as the building's "scaffoldings", losing their importance once the temple is completed⁶⁹. What is important, therefore, is the consciousness of the auxiliary and transitory value of the "outward" aspects of religion within human evolutionary development.

⁶⁶ Aurobindo argues that "[religious] forms [...] are needed by man because the lower members have to be exalted [...] before they can directly feel the spirit" (Ghose 1997d, 178). Cf. Ghose 2012, 420.

⁶⁷ Ghose 1997a, 148; 1997d, 134; 2005, 904.

⁶⁸ Ghose 1997d, 178.

⁶⁹ Ghose 1997a, 179.

The two final aspects of Aurobindonian conception of 'religion' mentioned above, namely, its relation to the cultic and dogmatic features, and to the holistic approach, represent a ground on which Aurobindo articulates a series of binaries, which clarify his concept. These binaries are: true religion vs. religionism, and religion vs. spirituality.

Religion and Religionism

Let me briefly introduce the first binary. "There are two aspects of religion", writes Aurobindo, "true religion and religionism"⁷⁰. The former is religion in its "inner nature" or religion "as it should be", while the latter seems to be identified by Aurobindo with the "outward" expressions of this religious "inner nature". "Religionism" is the identification of religion "only with a creed, a cult, a Church, a system of ceremonial forms", and "exclusive stress on intellectual dogmas, forms and ceremonies, on some fixed and rigid moral code, on some religio-political or religio-social system"⁷¹. The last point, important to mention regarding religion vs. religionism binary, is Aurobindo's conviction that the tension between 'true religion' and 'religionism', is a historical inescapability⁷². The latter is applicable not only to Christianity, but also to Hinduism.

⁷⁰ Ghose 1997d, 177.

⁷¹ Ghose 1997d, 177-78.

⁷² Cf. Ghose 1997d, 263.

At this point, I suggest two preliminary conclusions. The first is that true religion and religionism empirically coexist in a complicated tension, since what is “outward” finds its place and legitimacy in the whole picture, just as Aristotelian accidents belong to the essence. The fact that Aurobindo conceives both true religion and religionism as “two aspects of religion” further suggests coexistence and tension, rather than an interpretation of religionism as a denial of religion. The second conclusion, which derives directly from the first, is that ‘religion’—taken as the totality of both essence and accidents—is much wider than ‘true religion’. From this perspective, even ‘religionism’, in its turn, still belongs to the category ‘religion’, as a deviated exterior might be related to the inner core.

Religion and Spirituality

The second Aurobindonian binary, which is more important to my argument, is religion vs. spirituality. Unlike the previous binary opposition, which does not appear outside *The Human Cycle*, religion vs. spirituality permeates the entire Aurobindonian opus. In what follows, I will argue that Aurobindo’s thought appears to be somewhat ambiguous with regard to spirituality. On the one hand, as I suggested earlier, religion (or its ‘essence’) appears to be synonymous with spirituality; on the other hand, spirituality

appears to be preferred to religion, implying a difference between the two concepts.

In the *Renaissance of India*, Aurobindo argues that in order to become “an efficient and a well-organised nation able to survive in the shocks of the modern world”, India should undertake the process of “a renaissance governed by the principle of spirituality”⁷³. Spirituality, Aurobindo argues in the same essay, is “much wider than any particular religion”, and the two relate as a whole to a portion of the whole⁷⁴. Similarly, in *The Human Cycle*, he suggests that the two categories are not identical, when he claims that “[i]n spirituality [...] we must seek for the directing light [...], and in religion only in proportion as it identifies itself with this spirituality”⁷⁵. What then is spirituality? To my knowledge, nowhere in his social trilogy does Aurobindo clearly define what he means by spirituality. I would suggest, however, that by following hints from *The Human Cycle*, we may grasp essential aspects of this concept.

First of all, as has already been mentioned, spirituality indicates a holistic mode of existence, in which spirit guides the totality of life. Curiously, apart from pointing out the link between spirituality and the (S)pirit⁷⁶, the major emphasis is on what we would describe as worldly. Aurobindo

⁷³ Ghose 1997j, 33.

⁷⁴ Ghose 1997j, 33.

⁷⁵ Ghose 1997d, 181.

⁷⁶ Cf. Ghose 1997d, 224, 27.

tirelessly insists that spirituality does not mean something divorced from earthly preoccupations and natural instincts. As Jan Feys succinctly puts it, spirituality is “a blend of world-alooofness and world-involvement”⁷⁷. The two must be harmonised in view of relationship with the Divine⁷⁸. Separation between the spiritual and the mundane is to be avoided at all costs: “[w]hen there is that division between life and the spirit, [the] sentence of condemnation is passed upon human life”⁷⁹. Essential, in Aurobindonian thought, is the harmony between “life” and “spirit”, which is achieved when the latter governs the former. This envisaged domination of the “spirit” over “life” is called by Aurobindo “the true *inner* theocracy”, different from various historical theo-political models⁸⁰. In brief, spirituality implies a theocracy, but one that is individualistic. The harmony, brought about by spirituality, Aurobindo argues,

will hold sacred all the different parts of man’s life [...], all his physical [...], aesthetic, ethical, intellectual, psychic evolution, and see in them instruments for a growth towards a diviner living. It will regard every human society, nation, people or other organic aggregate from the same standpoint, [...] [as a] means of a complex manifestation and self-fulfilment of the Spirit⁸¹.

One clearly notices the unwillingness of Aurobindo to exclude any dimension

⁷⁷ Feys 1977, 26.

⁷⁸ Ghose 1997d, 178-81.

⁷⁹ Ghose 1997d, 226. It should be noted that “life” and “spirit” are complex and polyvalent terms in Aurobindo. “Life” usually denotes materiality and corporality, while “spirit” may indicate a reference to the divine or human, or to both; it can be individual, but also social.

⁸⁰ Ghose 1997d, 231, emphasis added.

⁸¹ Ghose 1997d, 227. The task of spirituality is to “reveal” to all the dimensions of human life “their divine sense”, and “reconcile them all to each other” (Ghose 1997d, 183).

of human life from the control of spirituality.

Second, apart from the holistic accent, another constant in Aurobindo's dealing with "spirituality" is the emphasis on human *freedom*⁸². "Spirituality respects the freedom of the human soul, because it is itself fulfilled by freedom", and therefore requires giving people freedom to act, and even to err, for this is how experience is accumulated⁸³. Aurobindo appears to be highly optimistic about the human being's possibility to develop "from within": since "each has in itself a divine principle", the encounter of God at the end of the pilgrimage—however turbulent—is deemed as "inevitable"⁸⁴. However, while in Yannaras freedom means freedom from nature, in Aurobindo it means exactly the opposite. In fact, Aurobindo argues that freedom is about "grow[ing] towards perfection by the law of one's own nature, *dharma*"⁸⁵. The reason behind this difference, I suggest, lies in two different conceptualisations of nature. While in Yannaras, as I pointed out earlier in this chapter, the 'greatness' of God consists in His being free from the necessity of nature, and, in a very specific way, from His own nature, in Aurobindo Nature and God can be read interchangeably. To put it more schematically: in Yannaras freedom is divine, in Aurobindo nature

⁸² For a critical approach, see Susai 1993, 226ff.

⁸³ Ghose 1997d, 181.

⁸⁴ Ghose 1997d, 181, 228. The freedom to err should also be extended to science, philosophy, and politics, which "must be left free even to deny God and good and beauty if they will, if their sincere observation of things so points them" (Ghose 1997d, 229).

⁸⁵ Ghose 1997d, 181.

is divine. What unites the two positions on freedom and nature—however incompatible they appear—is that each is conceived as having reference to the divine.

A *third* aspect of spirituality, linked to the previous one, is the emphasis on individual endeavour⁸⁶. The latter renders spirituality both semantically different from religion (a more social concept), and at odds with Yannaras' conception of salvific life. Aurobindo insists that spirituality "can only be brought about by an individual change in each human life"⁸⁷. The society will follow. As I mentioned earlier, Yannaras approaches the question of individualism through the binary opposites 'individual' vs. 'person' (the latter etymologically indicates a relation to others), and 'individual' vs. *polis*. On the contrary, for Aurobindo nation or even humanity seem to be but extensions of the individual. Although community is not irrelevant for Aurobindo, and the aim of spirituality is the transformation of humanity as such, he often gives the impression of prioritising individual vis-à-vis any possible social units. I would also argue that the fact that Aurobindo decided to spend the last period of his life from 1926 till his death in 1950 in complete retirement, suggests that for him an individual spiritual effort had taken pre-eminence over a life shared in a community⁸⁸. But again, the

⁸⁶ Feys notes that in Aurobindo, "for all its social wideness, spirituality is primarily incumbent on the individual yogi" (Feys 1977, 27).

⁸⁷ Ghose 1997d, 263.

⁸⁸ Cf. Heehs 2008.

individualistic overtones are not exclusive to spirituality as a category, for there are instances in Aurobindo where 'religion' is also described as "personal and intimate", or as "worship of the Supreme in the heart"⁸⁹. This individualistic tendency of Aurobindo has been emphasised by Amalraj Susai and Jérôme Ballet. The latter describes Aurobindonian philosophy as "profoundly individualistic"⁹⁰, while the former criticises Aurobindo for neglecting the communal dimension in his articulation of spirituality⁹¹.

An individualistic component of spirituality as a 20th century concept has been studied by Jeremy Carrette and Richard King in their *Selling Spirituality: The Silent Takeover of Religion*. They argue that the concept of 'spirituality' "has been shaped in the modern period by an initial process of individualisation (linked to the privatisation of religion in modern liberal democracies)"⁹². Is this what Aurobindo's project is about? I will address the link between spirituality and religious/secular division in the next chapter. For now, I would suggest that, although Susai and Ballet are, to a large extent, correct on Aurobindonian individualism, this should not be exaggerated, or, better, should not be taken as his ideal of a definitive apex of human development. In fact, Aurobindo is explicit that the individualistic age is but a transitory step towards the subjective age, which he believes to be just

⁸⁹ Ghose 1997b, 115.

⁹⁰ Ballet 2010, 63, my translation.

⁹¹ Susai 1993, 235.

⁹² Carrette and King 2005, 26.

beginning. Aurobindo does recognise the role individualism has played in history—in getting rid of practices and customs which had lost their meaning, and in empowering the role of the human being “in himself” and “not merely [as] a social unit”⁹³. However, Aurobindo also argues that both “unrestrained use of individual illumination” and a “stark assertion of individual rights”, without a shared conception of truth, are dangerous and divisive⁹⁴. On this, as I will point out later in the chapter, there is a striking analogy between the Hindu thinker and Yannaras. Aurobindo thus attends the overcoming of the Western-dominated “age of individualism”, and the advent of what he calls the “subjective age”. It is not clear, however, what exactly is the content given to this subjective age in *The Human Cycle*, and in what sense it departs from and supersedes the age of individualism. The truth, in which the age of individualism was lacking, seems to be found “within” the individual herself, rather than in society. At the same time, the subjective age is described as a process, moving “from the individual to the universal”⁹⁵. It is also most indicative that Aurobindo ends chapter 3 of *The Human Cycle*, dedicated to the subjective age, by making reference to the nation, described as “the new collective self-consciousness of man”⁹⁶. I would thus argue that a critique of Aurobindonian individualism, though partly deserved, must not detract from

⁹³ Ghose 1997d, 15, 24.

⁹⁴ Ghose 1997d, 19.

⁹⁵ Ghose 1997d, 32. Cf. Halbfass 1988, 250-51.

⁹⁶ Ghose 1997d, 33-34.

his attempt—perhaps not very articulate, but that is another matter—to transcend individualism with subjectivism.

To conclude, Yannaras and Aurobindo understand 'religion' differently. For Yannaras it is clearly a negative concept, with a precise semantic content: 'religion' is presented—in a way which resonates with the Marxist *opiate of the people*—as a way of 'calming' human anxieties⁹⁷. Moreover, 'religion' is a profoundly individualistic endeavour, not unlike Durkheimian magic. To paraphrase Durkheim's expression, cited in the previous chapter, 'religion' has a clientele, not a church⁹⁸. On the contrary, Aurobindo is not so explicitly negative about religion and, more often than not, for him it does have a pronounced Durkheimian meaning of being coterminous with society. At the same time, he finds it necessary to constantly specify whether he is speaking of the "true" and "eternal" religion, or the one that is "ignorant" and "customary". Then, when compared to spirituality, religion becomes an ugly twin brother. Despite the contrast in Aurobindo's and Yannaras' precise conceptualisations of religion, it would be safe to conclude that both authors share a similar unease with this category. I suggest that this is an interesting discovery, which merits an

⁹⁷ Marx 2002, 171. One could draw a parallel between Yannaras' usage of the arguments from the 19th/20th century critics of religion, such as Marx, and how the early Christian theologians employed the anti-religious critique of classical scepticism against the Greco-Roman religion of their time. Cf. Garnsey and Humfress 2001, 133.

⁹⁸ Cf. Durkheim 1995, 42.

exploration into the category of 'religion', as conventionally understood. I will explore this in the following chapter. Another aspect to the conformity between both authors is their insistence on the holistic nature of the salvific life. The latter cannot be divorced from worldly preoccupations. However, the ways in which Aurobindo and Yannaras develop their respective holistic frameworks differ significantly, at least with regard towards the emphasis placed on the individualistic or communal aspects. In this regard, there is a sense in which 'religion', as criticised by Yannaras, semantically coincides with Aurobindonian individualistic 'spirituality'. The question, therefore, remains as to the exact significance of this holism. I will begin to address this question from more philosophical and anthropological viewpoints.

Anthropological holism: instincts and reason

One of the major critiques raised by Yannaras against political theology as it is approached in the West, consists of the claim that it is overly concentrated on matters of social utility, and does not give due consideration to anthropology. A "true political theology", according to the Greek theologian, consists in "serving man according to his nature and his truth"⁹⁹.

Throughout his work, Yannaras insists on the Christian commitment as

⁹⁹ Yannaras 2011c, 149-50. Curiously, in Yannaras' other writings man's truth of human life is to *transcend*, rather than follow, the nature (Yannaras 1977).

a unity, which involves the whole human being in all its dimensions, both private and public. The aim of ethics, as understood by him, is bringing human life into harmony with the truth of the world, and transforming the human person into "the celebrant of life in its totality, in the universal oneness of existence beyond any division or separation between transcendent and mundane, between material and spiritual"¹⁰⁰.

The question, which should be tackled in this regard, would be as follows: Is the church, as a mode of life, church as *polis*, so holistic as to embrace everything? Does it include the 'religious' dimension of human beings? Does every dimension of a life belong to the holistic *mode of existence*, delineated by Yannaras?

Although the distinctive way in which the Greek theologian develops his argument may suggest an affirmative answer to the question, I would like to argue that in fact Yannaras' articulation of holism does not include the totality of reality. In order to make my argument clear, I will compare Yannaras' thought with that of Aurobindo on the issues concerning human nature in its relation to religion and *polis*. In what follows, I will compare Yannaras and Aurobindo regarding their approaches to human instincts and rationality.

¹⁰⁰ Yannaras 1984, 85-86. I will develop this aspect of Yannaras' theology in chapter 4.

Aurobindo's anthropology distinguishes within the human person three dimensions: infrarational (instincts), rational (intellect), suprarational (spirit)¹⁰¹. These dimensions are in a relationship which could be described as hierarchical; each inferior dimension is illuminated, purified and, in this way, included in a superior dimension. In other words, human instincts are purified by reason, while reason, in turn, is illuminated by spirit. Such a hierarchy allows Aurobindo's religion to cover the totality of a human being.

I begin the comparison with the issue of the *instincts*. Both Yannaras and Aurobindo describe religiosity as the human need and response to human instincts. As I mentioned earlier, for Yannaras, religion is a response to the human need for self-preservation, a way of addressing ignorance and fear¹⁰². Similarly, one of the approaches, used by Aurobindo to tackle religion, consists in describing it in terms of an instinct: "religious instinct" is "an overtopping of all the other instincts"; it corresponds to the "great need [...] of our natural being", which makes of religion a universal phenomenon¹⁰³. But, while in Yannaras' thought, 'religion' is a negative category, and is criticised *for being* natural, and its basis—the natural human

¹⁰¹ The infrarational, rational and suprarational principles are described by Aurobindo not only as permanent dimensions of the human person, but also chronologically, as conditioning the mentality of certain ages of human development (Ghose 1997d, 182-86).

¹⁰² Yannaras 2013, ch. 1.

¹⁰³ Ghose 1997d, 173-74. Interestingly, Aurobindo also makes an affirmation—pertinent to the question of the religious dimensions of nationalism, and more specifically to what Cavanaugh calls 'migrations of the holy'—that "the religious instinct in man is most of all the one instinct in him that cannot be killed, it only *changes its form*" (Ghose 1997d, 174, emphasis added). Cf. Cavanaugh 2011.

need to understand and to be protected—is described as egoistic and egocentric, Aurobindo has a much more positive view of nature and human instincts. The *infrarational* sphere (where Aurobindo situates human instincts) has its place and its dignity within religion: “the instincts [and] impulses [...] [also] feel the touch of the religious sense in man, share its needs and experience, desire its satisfactions. Religion includes this satisfaction also in its scope”¹⁰⁴. This infrarational religiosity reveals “some great [...] truth of our natural being”¹⁰⁵. The aim of religious life therefore consists not in rejecting the natural needs of human beings—or liberating oneself from the necessity of nature, as with Yannaras—but rather in purifying and realising them. What happens to the human instincts under the process of purification? Aurobindo stresses that human instincts and the forms in which they express themselves within the religious sphere need not be put aside, but instead “sublimated”¹⁰⁶ and “lifted up into the illuminations of the spirit”¹⁰⁷. At the same time, Aurobindo considers the satisfaction of those legitimate needs as a provisory moment of spiritual development. To cite an example mentioned earlier in the chapter: although he is critical of ritual and ceremonial

¹⁰⁴ Ghose 1997d, 133.

¹⁰⁵ Ghose 1997d, 173-74.

¹⁰⁶ Ghose 1997d, 134.

¹⁰⁷ Ghose 1997d, 134. Cf. Ghose 1997d, 180.

religiosity, he accepts that at a certain stage of personal development human beings may need a ceremony in order to satisfy their aesthetic needs¹⁰⁸.

Let us proceed now with a comparison of Yannaras and Aurobindo on the issue of human *rationality*, to discover to what extent they include this in their respective modes of salvific life. While Yannaras criticizes the rationalism—defined as “idol[atry] of the individual’s mental capacity”¹⁰⁹—of natural religion and of Western Christianity, Aurobindo does not wish to deny reason a role within the domain of ideal religion. Firstly, a human being, *qua* rational, needs an intellectual formulation or proposition, however provisional this formulation may be¹¹⁰. *Credo quia absurdum*¹¹¹ should not be a principle, according to which religion functions¹¹². Secondly, reason should help human beings interpret their own religious life, by explaining “to the rational and intellectual parts of man, the truths, the experiences, the laws of our suprarational and spiritual existence”¹¹³. Thirdly, reason may play an important role in order to “enlighten, purify, rationalise” the religious life at the level of “infrarational life of the instincts, impulses, sensations, crude emotions”, which are the principal causes of religious crimes throughout

¹⁰⁸ Ghose 2012, 420.

¹⁰⁹ Yannaras 2013, 10. I shall return to the Yannaras’ critique of rationalism in chapter 5.

¹¹⁰ Ghose 1997d, 178.

¹¹¹ Latin for “I believe because it is absurd”, a paraphrase of Tertullian’s expression.

¹¹² Ghose 1997d, 135.

¹¹³ Ghose 1997d, 132.

history, and cleanse religion of ignorance and superstition¹¹⁴. At the same time, Aurobindo insists that religiosity does not limit itself to what is rational, and that the competence of reason in the religious domain is limited¹¹⁵. Reason, in its turn, needs to be illuminated by the spirit.

I would suggest that there exists a certain ambiguity in Aurobindo's thought regarding the role of reason. Although reason is assigned the task of illuminating the domain of the infrarational, the latter "has behind it a secret Truth", which does not belong to the rational domain with the consequence that the forms of religiosity, produced by the instincts, however "defective or obscure", remain inscrutable to the eyes of reason. Reason, therefore, is not only subject to the spirit, but also, as it were, suffers from a limited visibility in the 'obscurities' of infrarational religiosity¹¹⁶. If, according to Aurobindo, reason should purify the infrarational sphere from its errors, but is incompetent in religious matters, how could it possibly accomplish its task? Such an ambiguous articulation of human rationality makes the above-mentioned hierarchy of infrarational-rational-spiritual imperfect, if not confusing and, as Amalraj Susai rightly points out, "goes against his [Aurobindo's] own fundamental vision of perceiving reality as a harmony"¹¹⁷.

How can this inconsistency be explained? It seems plausible that

¹¹⁴ Ghose 1997d, 133.

¹¹⁵ Ghose 1997d, 129-35, 78.

¹¹⁶ Ghose 1997d, 135.

¹¹⁷ Susai 1993, 230.

Aurobindo's suspicion towards reason may be due to his critical attitude towards the Western Reformation endeavours. As I mentioned earlier, Aurobindo is very critical of Protestant attempts to use reason to purify religious life from its liturgical component. According to Aurobindo's diagnosis, as a result of such rationalisation of religion, "the patient has fallen a victim to the treatment"¹¹⁸. If my hypothesis were correct, and Aurobindo's reticence to give to reason a major role in 'supervising' the infrarational sphere originates in his scepticism towards Western attempts at religious reformation, then we would be confronted by an example of Aurobindo's construction of his ideal religion as against the Western rationalist articulations of religiosity. I will develop this argument in chapters 4 and 5.

My critical engagement with Yannaras and Aurobindo on human instincts and rationality suggests that Yannaras' articulation of the 'catholic' mode of existence is, in fact, much less comprehensive and holistic than Aurobindo's thought which, as K. D. Sethna puts it, "leaves out no side of reality and [...] endeavours to establish the Infinite [...] in every part of our composite being, including the outer physical"¹¹⁹. A hypothesis could be advanced that the reason Yannaras' thought is less holistic than Aurobindo's lies in the theological background of their respective traditions: Orthodox

¹¹⁸ Ghose 1997a, 148.

¹¹⁹ Sethna 1981, 279.

theology tends to stress the differences between created vs. uncreated and nature vs. personhood, while Aurobindo is attracted to some features of Advaitic Hinduism, which postulate all-unity¹²⁰. Paradoxically, however, Yannaras' transcendence/rejection of nature may be somewhat closer to the classical Hindu tradition of conceiving liberation as freedom from nature than Aurobindo's attempt to take nature on board in his soteriology¹²¹.

Perhaps an analogy with the Hegelian category of *Aufhebung* and Nietzschean *sublimieren*, as articulated by Stephen Houlgate, could be useful in order to point out the specific difference between Aurobindo and Yannaras on human instincts and rationality¹²². Yannaras' emphasis on freedom from the necessity of nature can be more likened to the Nietzschean *sublimieren*, understood as a redirection of a drive (e.g. a sexual one) which, although preserving the drive's energy, eliminates its particular orientation. On the contrary, Aurobindo's 'sublimation' of the instincts would be more reminiscent of the Hegelian dialectic *Aufhebung*, in which the instinct's or reason's natural orientation would be preserved, yet transcended or "reconciled with whatever it is opposed to"¹²³.

¹²⁰ Cf., for instance, Ghose 2005, 38. On Aurobindo's complex attitude toward Advaita Vedanta and Shankara, see Ghose 1980, 12; 1997a, 128; 2013, 391ff. Cf. Zaehner 1971, 10ff; Phillips 1986; Minor 1988, 455; Gupta 1999, 534; Heehs 2008, 268-69, 72-73.

¹²¹ Cf. Pandey 1987, 116-20. Pandey claims that Aurobindo's idea of integral liberation, which consists of the freedom *of* nature, rather than freedom *from* nature, constitutes a departure from the philosophy of liberation as articulated by Shankara and Ramanuja.

¹²² Houlgate 1986.

¹²³ Houlgate 1986, 14.

(II) On the political being

Political vs. pre-political

Earlier in this chapter, I examined the meaning of the 'political' through its opposition to the 'religious'. Through a comparison with Aurobindo, I also attempted to make sense of Yannaras' articulation of holism at the anthropological level. In what follows, I will propose a further possible interpretation of the 'political', based on Yannaras' negative treatment of the category of individual human rights and, more specifically, the distinction he draws between political and pre-political within this context.

Yannaras' stance towards the category of individual human rights is rather complex, and my intention at this point is to engage with the category only inasmuch as it can provide material for the interpretation of his concept of the political¹²⁴. In the essay "Human Rights and the Orthodox Church", the Greek theologian rejects the modern concept of rights as inherently linked to the Western ideology of individualism¹²⁵. Yannaras implies that his rejection of rights is due not to the fact that he considers them to be inherently bad,

¹²⁴ On Yannaras' position on human rights, see Papanikolaou 2012, ch. 3; Stoeckl 2014, 15-18.

¹²⁵ Yannaras 2011b.

but rather because this concept is, as it were, too primitive or, as he says,

'pre-political'. Let me illustrate this with the following quotation:

We Orthodox acknowledge that the historical existence of such experiences as the western Middle Ages proves that the protection of individual rights is [...] a precious achievement. Nevertheless, we would be doing violence to the historical memory and critical thought if, simultaneously, we did not recognize that, compared to the ancient Greek city or the Byzantine (and post-Byzantine) community, the protection of human rights is a pre-political achievement. It is [...] an achievement that has not yet attained (perhaps not even understood) the primordial and fundamental meaning of politics: politics as a common exercise of life 'according to the truth': politics constituted around the axis of ontology (and not self-interested objectives)¹²⁶.

I propose that we can derive from this passage an important distinction, inherent to Yannaras' argument, namely the dichotomy between political and pre-political. This distinction reveals to us a further aspect of what Yannaras means by the *political*. The latter does not consist in *any* life, which we would conventionally describe as political life or community existence, but in a very specific being "according to the truth". What Yannaras suggests is not that we should abandon human rights, but rather that we should consider them as a transitory step in the process, keeping in mind that the goal is "life 'according to the truth'". In fact, Yannaras' observation that in ancient Greece there was no physical punishment suggests that he claims that ancient Greece protected citizens in a manner not dissimilar to that which is effectuated through the principle of individual human rights.

It is not my intention to defend Yannaras on the historical accuracy of his claims. My point is rather to show that his rejection of human rights is

¹²⁶ Yannaras 2011b, 49.

based on the presupposition that these are of a low standard for a truly political life. Yannaras' rejection of individual human rights as a pre-political category can be perhaps better illuminated by comparison with the Russian Orthodox theologian, Nicholas Afanassieff, and in particular with the latter's ecclesiology and reflection on the place of law in the church. According to Afanassieff, law is foreign to church life, which is built on love and lives of grace. Afanassieff acknowledges the importance of law in what he calls "empirical social life", admires it as "humanity's supreme achievement", and recognizes the role it plays in protecting persons from each other and from the state¹²⁷. The law, however, belongs to the "former age", while the church marks "the beginning of the 'last days'"¹²⁸. For the church—a reality built on love and kenotic self-giving—"[t]o give up the law is to transcend it. One transcends an imperfect reality in order to seek perfection"¹²⁹. Applying the logic of Afanassieff's argument to Yannaras' treatment of human rights, I suggest that Yannaras rejects the category of human rights, not as something inherently evil, but insofar as they are part of an individualistic approach, which is transcended, raised to perfection, by true politics. Or, put another way, human rights are rejected as superfluous in a truly political community again, not because they are bad, but because within the political life, which is

¹²⁷ Afanassieff 2007, 261.

¹²⁸ Afanassieff 2007, 257.

¹²⁹ Afanassieff 2007, 265.

a life according to truth, there would be no place for violation of human dignity, which modernity tries to protect through the concept of human rights. There is, however, an important difference between Yannaras and Afanassieff. According to the Russian theologian, “[l]aw makes its appearance when reciprocal love among people has been weakened”¹³⁰. Afanassieff, rather idealistically, does not seem to explicitly contemplate the possibility of the weakening of love within the church—although implicitly he does this by acknowledging the presence of the law in the church, a consequence of the lack of love. However, his theology does allow for those who do not wish to live the Christian life of charismatic renunciation. Comparing Yannaras’ theology with that of Afanassieff—one is led to the conclusion that the former not only does not distinguish between ecclesiology and the political, but neither does he seem to contemplate ‘a solution’ for those who refuse, or feel it too demanding, to live “according to the truth”. Jean Daniélou, for example, faced with a similar problem, is much more realistic in his understanding that if Christianity wants to be a social endeavour or a civilisation, it must include “at the same time good and bad fish, leaving the discernment to the angels”¹³¹. Papanikolaou, who approaches the issue from a different perspective, convincingly argues that “[i]f the church relates to the

¹³⁰ Afanassieff 2007, 264.

¹³¹ Daniélou 2012, 10, my translation.

world through persuasion, then in order to be consistent with itself, the church must accept a community distinct from its own"¹³². Yannaras is not as clear as that. The question therefore remains: What to do with those who refuse to live "according to the truth"? Or, to express this in terms more directly linked to the issue of holism, how inclusive is Yannaras' *political*?

To conclude, the salvific life or Christian ethos in Yannaras is described as political. The latter is defined against the 'religious' and the 'pre-political'. Both latter categories are conceptualised as strongly determined by individualism. In fact, 'religion' protects human beings from their fears, while the 'pre-political' defends them from the other people.

Polis vs. civil religion

From approaching the question of holism from an anthropological perspective, I will look in more detail at how Yannaras interprets various historical modes of holistic life, on a social scale. If not every (conventionally understood) political is *political*, in the true meaning of the term as Yannaras understands it, do we have any hints as to how to discern these two kinds of the political in practice? A possible answer is suggested by the way the Greek theologian deals with civil religion¹³³. To a mode of life of the *polis*,

¹³² Papanikolaou 2012, 77.

¹³³ Here by 'civil religion' I mean the role played by Christianity in the Byzantine empire. It is important to make this clarification, since 'civil religion' is a polyvalent term. It can refer to the Greco-Roman theologico-political machinery (see Riedl 2012). Rousseau uses this term to

Yannaras contraposes Christianity as *religio imperii*. According to him, the truly political mode of existence of the church—which constitutes a reversal of the terms of religion—can itself become a religion. The temptation to reconcile the event-church with natural human instincts has accompanied Christianity throughout its history, beginning with the Judaizers of the Apostolic age¹³⁴.

In *Against Religion*, the key *topos* of the ‘religionisation’ (*thrēskeiopoīēsē*), is identified by Yannaras in the Constantinian period. The reception of Christianity by the Byzantine state as *religio imperii* constituted the replacement of the Roman civil religion by the church. This replacement was logical for the Empire and its “political realism”, but alienating for the mission of the church¹³⁵. The establishment of Christianity as the official religion was, according to Yannaras, due to two factors: the innate human need for religion and an external imperial imposition for reasons of social utility. The civil religion of the Romans served two main purposes. Firstly—in a certain continuity with the Ancient Greek religion—it “functioned chiefly

articulate the necessity of a state-imposed ideology (Rousseau 2002, 245-53). Cf. Durkheim 1965, 132-34; Cristi and Dawson 2007, 269ff. Bellah has recourse the term of ‘civil religion’ to describe the reference to God and God’s mission in the American public discourse, and defines it as “public religious dimension [of politics] [...] expressed in a set of beliefs, symbols, and rituals” (Bellah 1967, 4). Cf. Demerath III 2003, 354ff; Gentile 2007. Finally, the term is used to describe such a functioning of a conventional religion, e.g., in the modern nation-state, which leads to “a political control of the consciences” (Filoramo 2009, xiii, my translation).

¹³⁴ Yannaras 2013, 130ff.

¹³⁵ Yannaras 2013, 135ff.

symbolically and iconologically as a hermeneutic key to understanding the world and human history"¹³⁶. Secondly, civil religion was a symbol of, and a means for, the political unity of peoples and individuals in one state, under a holy but human emperor¹³⁷.

What is important for the sake of my argument is the tension, stressed by Yannaras, between the self-comprehension of the Christian community and the secular patterns projected onto it. As *religio imperii*, Christianity "imposes itself on people's consciences as an institution of social utility that improves morals, ameliorates behaviour, and strengthens social cohesion"¹³⁸. Furthermore, it both appropriates the methods and tactics of secular authority, and adopts "the external symbols of power [...], of strict hierarchical organization and codified discipline"¹³⁹. Here Yannaras' analysis resonates, to a large degree, with Arend van Leeuwen, when he argues that "[t]hat same Church which rescues the world from being dominated by pagan sacral powers is itself tempted to domination, this time in a 'Christian' form"¹⁴⁰.

¹³⁶ Yannaras 2013, 136. Here one would recognise Geertz's famous definition of religion as a symbolic system "formulating conceptions of a general order of existence" (Geertz 1973, 90).

¹³⁷ Yannaras 2013, 136.

¹³⁸ Yannaras 2013, 140.

¹³⁹ Yannaras 2013, 140-41.

¹⁴⁰ Leeuwen 1964, 332.

According to Yannaras, this logic has had different developments in various parts of Christendom. In the West it has led, among other things, to the transformation of the Roman local *ekklēsia* into a state, *civitas vaticana*. In the East, however, among the Orthodox churches, the consequences of this logic were tightly linked to nationalism.

As *religio imperii*, the church “assumed the ‘flesh’ of the religiosity of the world, sometimes transforming what she assumed and sometimes being subordinated to what she had assumed”¹⁴¹. Since the Constantinian age, therefore, Christianity has been in a constant internal struggle for the preservation of her genuine identity vis-à-vis the temptation of natural religiosity and the persistent secular interest to render the church socially useful.

My exposition of the process of religionisation of the church, has been based on Yannaras’ *Against Religion*. However, in an earlier work, *The Truth and Unity of the Church* (1977) Yannaras provides a much more favourable description of the post-Constantinian age in the East: “The Church did not yield to the assumed elements (*proslēmma*) of the political articulation of *imperium*, but has transfigured them according to its own truth and revelation”¹⁴². At the same time, here Yannaras tends to blame the West for

¹⁴¹ Yannaras 1991, 145.

¹⁴² Yannaras 1977, 108. Greek *proslēmma* can mean the *upper garment*—thus suggesting that the secular element is more of an external supplement, or an *addition*, an *assumption* (e.g. used in patristic Christological documents to describe the assumption of the human

what he later refers to as 'religionisation'. I will try to make sense of this ambiguous identification of the religionisation—once as a constant temptation of the church, and at other times as an exclusive disease of the West—in chapter 5, where I will engage with Yannaras' attitude toward the West.

Yannaras' observation that Christianity becomes a 'religion' the moment it becomes a civil religion is rich in possible consequences, as this statement makes two phenomena overlap and coincide. Firstly, this would give a theological basis to the interpretation of the phenomena of civil religion and nationalism in terms of 'religion'. Actually, what Yannaras says regarding *religio imperii* could in many cases apply to the general category of civil religion, e.g. as articulated by Robert Bellah or Emilio Gentile¹⁴³. In fact, two main functions of pagan, and later the Christian civil religion of the Roman empire—as suggested by Yannaras—to socially unify a variety of people and to provide a "hermeneutic key to understanding the world and human history"¹⁴⁴ as an answer to human ignorance and anxiety—are also the functions which modern nationalist ideologies, based both on religion and anti-religious tenets, seek to accomplish¹⁴⁵. Yannaras' category of 'religion' is

nature by the Divine Logos in Christ). The latter meaning would suggest a more radical unity of the church with the secular elements. Cf. Liddell *et al.* 1994, 1519.

¹⁴³ Cf. *supra*.

¹⁴⁴ Yannaras 2013, 136.

¹⁴⁵ Billig 1995, 137; Greenfeld 2006a, 94-96; Juergensmeyer 2008a, 21-24.

therefore a useful instrument for theologically approaching modern nationalism. Even more importantly, by contemplating nationalism, the church can discover something of its own predicament.

Secondly, an engagement with Yannaras' argument on the religionisation of the event-church, which leads to Christianity becoming a civil religion, can contribute to a re-evaluation of Carl Schmitt's thesis that "[a]ll significant concepts of the modern theory of the state are secularized theological concepts"¹⁴⁶. Yannaras does draw a connection between modern democracy and Christianity, taken in its alienated version: in modernity

the aim of the individual metaphysical salvation was replaced by the aim of a secularized (legal) protection. [...] [T]hus was born the political system of so-called 'representative democracy': which lies at the antipodes of ancient Greek democracy (in the same way that the *religionized* individualized Christianity lies at the antipodes of the Orthodox Church)¹⁴⁷.

I would suggest that Yannaras' identification of 'religion' with civil religion, and his critique of both Christianity *qua* 'religion' and modern democracy along the same lines, opens a way to interpret modern political theory as a secularised version of the 'religious' and egocentric betrayal of the event-church. Modern political theory, like the human rights category, mentioned earlier, would correspond to the 'pre-political' mode of existence, inherent to innate religiosity and civil religion, rather than to the 'political' mode of life of the gospel¹⁴⁸.

¹⁴⁶ Schmitt 2005, 36.

¹⁴⁷ Yannaras 2011b, 47.

¹⁴⁸ Cf. Yannaras 2005b, 38-41.

At this point, I will return to the initial question of this section: the relationship of the event-church and its 'religionised' version. If we emphasise the political nature of Christianity, how do we avoid the transformation of the *church-as-polis* into the *church-as-civil religion*?¹⁴⁹ In fact, both are social and holistic. What are the conditions under which *polis* does *not* become civil religion? Yannaras suggests an answer to these questions, by emphasising the three following points. Firstly, the *church-as-polis* is about a constant and communal search for the truth and its verification, while the *church-as-civil religion* is often grounded in dogmatic ideologies. Secondly, the *church-as-polis* is about ecstatic self-giving, while the *church-as-civil religion* is capable of ambiguously promoting the egoistic interests of a nation through appeals to God's will or ethical principles. Thirdly, the *church-as-polis* is about the transcendence of nature, while the *church-as-civil religion* often evaluates the sacred only insofar as it has been naturally appropriated by a nation. All three points can be brought back to Yannaras' rejection of 'religion'.

Is a 'non-religious' church at all possible?

James Dunn, to whom I referred earlier, concludes his analysis of St Paul's conception of *ekklēsia* as follows: "Whether a community without cult

¹⁴⁹ I developed the categories *church-as-polis* and *church-as-civil religion* based on my readings of Yannaras.

was practical and sustainable, given not least that the eschatological community was itself caught in the overlap of the ages and the resulting eschatological tension, is another question”¹⁵⁰. I would like to re-formulate his question even more radically: Is a ‘non-religious’ church at all possible?

I am very sympathetic to Yannaras’ critique of ‘religion’, moralism and dogmatism, but I wonder whether a rejection of ethics and dogmas does not necessarily become, sooner or later, dogma and ethics in and of itself. Are not rites, dogmas, prohibitions etc. the very condition of the possibility of a community?¹⁵¹ I am also very sympathetic to the idea of a constant search for and discovery of truth, and to the apophatic approach in theology, as articulated by Yannaras¹⁵², but I find convincing Stathis Gourgouris’ argument, that “the mysticism that might produce a [...] language in which no idols remain standing can never be, by definition, socially effective [...]. Mystical practice configures instead a social unbinding, a rejection of society, and aims, at its most extreme, at the incapacity of worldly assembly”¹⁵³.

Is a church without rituals, dogmas and ethics ever possible? Is a ‘non-religious’ religion possible? I suggest that engagement with Aurobindo could be helpful at this point.

¹⁵⁰ Dunn 1998, 547-48.

¹⁵¹ Durkheimian tradition within the sociology of religion suggests that at this point we may be in ‘a chicken or egg’ scenario: society—religion—society. See Durkheim 2001. Cf. chapter 2 of this thesis.

¹⁵² Yannaras 2005a; 2012, ch. A.

¹⁵³ Gourgouris 2013, 107-08.

The Aurobindonian approach to religion is, to a certain degree, similar to that of Yannaras. Aurobindo criticises organised religion as incapable of converting a human being and, through his own spiritual struggle, attempts to overcome religion, as it is conventionally understood. At the same time, I would argue, Aurobindo shows more realism regarding the success of an alternative (to the 'religious') ways of salvific life.

In what follows, I would like to reflect on Aurobindo's articulation of religion and spirituality, mentioned earlier in this chapter, and to see how it can help us to address the question provoked by Yannaras' narrative, i.e., Can we think of a salvific mode of life as something realisable in this world?

As I pointed out earlier, in Aurobindo, 'spirituality' appears to be preferred to 'religion'. As a matter of fact, his followers, especially the Mother (Mirra Alfassa), have moved further in the direction of 'spirituality', considered a supersession of 'religion'¹⁵⁴. The nuances of the tension between religion and spirituality in Aurobindonian thought will be further analysed in chapters 4 and 5 of this thesis. For now, my interest in Aurobindo is limited to the extent to which his treatment of this tension illuminates the question provoked by Yannaras' narrative.

¹⁵⁴ On Mirra Alfassa, see Heehs 2008, 230ff. The question remains as to what extent the spirituality of Aurobindo's followers (and the 'cult' of the Mother) is distinguishable from what is conventionally understood as religion.

In *The Life Divine*, Aurobindo argues that, although organised religion is not cut off from spiritual experience, it could not improve human life because "it had to compromise [...] and could not insist on the inner change of the whole being"; the only thing it managed was to impose a creed, ethics and institutional conformity¹⁵⁵. Different solutions have been attempted, in order to give a "total spiritual direction" to human life, such as "guidance of society by men of spiritual attainment" or inventions of new types of communities. However, those attempts have proven to be unsuccessful because "human ego and vital nature were too strong for a religious idea". Aurobindo concludes that "only [...] the full descent of the native light and power of the Spirit and the consequent replacement [...] of our insufficient [...] nature by a spiritual [...] supernature [...] can effect this evolutionary miracle"¹⁵⁶.

I would like to argue that in this passage Aurobindo suggests that any *historical* attempt of salvific life is, in a certain sense, a failure¹⁵⁷. Now, scholars of Aurobindo disagree on the extent to which he rejects conventional religion as a more or less valid, though transitory, means of reaching the Divine. While Peter Heehs, a scholar associated with the Sri Aurobindo Ashram in Pondicherry, argues that Aurobindo proposes

¹⁵⁵ Ghose 2005, 1095-96.

¹⁵⁶ Ghose 2005, 1095-96.

¹⁵⁷ By 'historical' I mean period antecedent the descent of the Spirit.

'spirituality' as a viable alternative to religion¹⁵⁸, R. C. Zaehner and Robert Minor suggest that Aurobindo's 'spirituality'—as a category, and in its content—is not immune to the 'religious' features, of which he is often critical¹⁵⁹. What the cited scholars have in common is that they sustain that for Aurobindo, the introduction of 'spirituality' resolves the problem of the incapacity of religion to realise salvific life. I would argue that a different reading is also possible.

Firstly, the inability of organised religion to transform humanity is considered to be largely the fault of "our insufficient mental and vital nature", and its resistance to transformation, rather than of religion as such. Secondly, Aurobindo suggests the almost unavoidable failure of both religion *and* its alternatives or reforms. Thirdly, Aurobindo seems to postulate the impossibility of a perfectly organised way of attaining the Divine, before the moment of "the full descent of the native light and power of the Spirit"¹⁶⁰,

¹⁵⁸ Heehs argues that "[a]ccording to Aurobindo, [...] [i]t was necessary [...] to leave traditional religion behind and to find another approach to suprarational wisdom. Aurobindo took a step in this direction by distinguishing between ordinary religion or 'religionism', and spiritual religion or 'spirituality'" (Heehs 2008, 292). Cf. Heehs 2005a, 35.

¹⁵⁹ According to Zaehner, Aurobindo was "wrong to imagine that his vision [...] could be realized except in the framework of a religious organization capable of transforming itself into a living organism" (Zaehner 1971, 24-25). Minor points out that Aurobindo's own 'spiritual religion' is defined "in terms that are propositional and, one might say, creedal, affirming his own ontological stance" (Minor 1999, 33). The distinction between the categories of 'religion' and 'spirituality' in the writings of Aurobindo and Mirra Alfassa leads Minor to the conclusion that those ideas that are consonant with their teaching, are defined as 'spiritual', and those that are not, are considered as 'religious' (Minor 1999, 45).

¹⁶⁰ Ghose 2005, 1096.

when the “evolutionary miracle”¹⁶¹ will finally achieve desired perfection. This would suggest that ‘spirituality’ cannot be viewed as a viable alternative to religion, insofar as the former would also need to be healed by the “evolutionary miracle”¹⁶².

Some interesting points emerge while reading Yannaras and Aurobindo in parallel. My *first* point, is that both authors are critical of the process, which we could describe as a historical fading of an ideal. Yannaras calls this process religionisation, and traces it back to the Constantinian epoch (or to the Western re-articulation of Christianity)¹⁶³. Something similar is described by Aurobindo in relation to both Christianity and Hinduism¹⁶⁴. While both Yannaras and Aurobindo rightly deplore this process, and call for the return to the ideal, the latter considers the decline to be an inevitable fate of any religion¹⁶⁵.

My *second* point has to do with eschatology. Earlier in the chapter, drawing on Peterson and Kalaitzidis, I suggested that Yannaras’ thought

¹⁶¹ Ghose 2005, 1096.

¹⁶² A possible objection to this conclusion would be that ‘spirituality’ is already partaking in this “full descent”. I would argue, however, that even accepting this argument would not prove that ‘spirituality’ is an alternative to ‘religion’, since the latter too is associated, in a certain way, with the descent of the Divine. Cf. Ghose 1997d, 131, 263.

¹⁶³ I will focus on this ambiguity in chapter 5.

¹⁶⁴ Contemporary Hinduism is described as a “temple half in ruins” (Ghose 2012, 412). Christianity “had to compromise with the demands of the occidental temperament and [...] lost its own inner kingdom. The [...] West [...] rationalised, secularised and almost annihilated the religious spirit. Religion became [...] [a] shadow pushed aside into a small corner [...] awaiting sentence of death” (Ghose 1997a, 139-40).

¹⁶⁵ Ghose 1997d, 263. Cf. Ghose 1997d, 38.

would benefit from a stronger eschatological foundation. Paradoxically, a Neo-Hindu thinker seems to be led by a more pronounced ethos of expectation than Orthodox Yannaras. The dissatisfaction with organised religion instigates Aurobindo to look forward, to the descent of the Spirit, while Yannaras seems to be looking backwards, to an idealised Hellenic past. I am not sure whether an Aurobindonian descent of the Spirit, especially in its interpretation as an “evolutionary miracle”, can be read in terms of the eschatological reserve or “remainder” of Christian theology (which implies that the church is an image, or sacrament, of the Kingdom of God, rather than its realisation, and expects that the ascent to perfection will occur only in the eschatological moment)¹⁶⁶. Aurobindo may simply have a more optimistic approach to history, which is interpreted as a progressive taking over of religion by spirituality, while Yannaras is obsessed with antiquated Hellenism as a way of nostalgic longing for the best available option, which predates the religionisation of the church¹⁶⁷. I do suggest however, that Aurobindo’s realism can contribute to a better articulation of salvific life within a Christian theological framework. Such an articulation would imply the recognition that no organised religion has managed to bring humans to perfection. However, this does not mean to point to equality between

¹⁶⁶ For a discussion on eschatological reserve/“remainder”, see Ward 2009, 166ff.

¹⁶⁷ I am grateful to Tay Wei Leong for pointing out this possibility to me.

existing religions, or to claim that each is *equally* unable to improve human beings. It can serve, however, as an invitation to modesty and non-absolutising—especially in the case where the representatives of one *imperfect* religion criticise all the others. In this sense, even Yannaras' and Aurobindo's criticism of Western traditions presents not a futile criticism of 'religion', but rather what an eschatologically conditioned Christian theology could easily concede.

Third, drawing on Aurobindo's insistence on "insufficient mental and vital nature", I would like to suggest that the inability of organised religion to lead humanity to fullness of salvific life, could largely be the fault of postlapsarian human nature, and its resistance to transformation, rather than of 'religion' as such. My analysis of both Yannaras and Aurobindo suggests that anti-'religious' attempts of reform tend to acquire 'religious' traits. This intuition is supported by Paul Tillich, with whom I very much agree. He argues that "[a]n existential protest against myth and cult is possible only in the power of myth and cult [...] You cannot escape them, however you demythologize and deritualize. [...] In the fight of God against religion the fighter for God is in the paradoxical situation that he has to use religion in order to fight religion"¹⁶⁸. What I would suggest is that, ultimately, both the 'event-church' and 'religion', both *church-as-polis* and *church-as-civil religion*,

¹⁶⁸ Tillich 1961, 93.

coexist, as it were, within the same territory, and compete within the hearts of the same people. Perhaps they simply cannot be disentangled, as wheat cannot be separated from weeds before the eschaton (Mt. 13)¹⁶⁹. Can they be discerned in any way now? This leads to the question of the possibility of discernment.

(III) *Semina verbi*. The sacred/profane in other religions and the secular

Although Greek *polis* occupies an exceptional place in the thought of Yannaras, he never asserts that this *polis* and the church are substantially identical. I suggest that an important question could be this: If the ancient Greek *polis* is a prototype of the church, then can we look for similar prototypes outside the Hellenistic context, which could be said to exist in 'semantic', rather than historical, continuity with the church? Can we see this continuity in other social or religious traditions? Or, to use a classical concept of Christian theology, can we detect *semina verbi* in the other traditions? Another way of formulating this question could be through Yannaras' tension between church vs. 'religion', or between *polis* vs. civil religion: Can we not retrieve a community event of freedom and search for truth, for example, in the Hindu traditions that existed prior to the moment of Westernisation? Or,

¹⁶⁹ I use this image in order to suggest caution with precarious judgments, rather than to imply that the other side needs simply to be tolerated, without any good in itself.

even the other way around: Can we not read other religions as the products of the 'religionisation' of the ideal salvific life, just as modern Christianity is interpreted by Yannaras as an event-church transformed into a 'religion'? Is not the struggle between the *polis* and civil religion something inherent also in the other traditions?¹⁷⁰ Brandon Gallaher, drawing on Yannaras' critique of Westernisation, suggests an even more radical approach: "if Orthodoxy retains [...] a vision of the pre-modern which is apart from the West in all its sundry forms, including the religionised or Westernised forms of Orthodoxy, then surely we should be looking to compare it to other non-Christian civilisations that have also retained to some extent a form of non-Western spirituality"¹⁷¹. In other words, if the salvific life has been religionised within Orthodoxy, can we look for non-religionised communities elsewhere?

Yannaras remains very critical of the West, and tends to delimit truly political life only to the ancient Greek, Byzantine and post-Byzantine context¹⁷². However, as will become clearer from chapter 5 of this thesis, he occasionally interprets his own anti-Westernism as a *self-critique*¹⁷³. Since in this way he recognises the possibility of discerning the 'West' within the

¹⁷⁰ I am sympathetic to Paul Tillich's affirmation that "[i]n the depth of every living religion there is a point at which the religion itself loses its importance, and that to which it points breaks through its particularity, elevating it to spiritual freedom and with it to a vision of the spiritual presence in other expressions of the ultimate meaning of man's existence" (Tillich 1961, 96-97).

¹⁷¹ Gallaher 2018, 225.

¹⁷² Yannaras 1972a; 1984.

¹⁷³ See Yannaras 2006.

'East', I propose that his framework is potentially fit to make a symmetrical move the other way around, namely recognising the 'East' within the 'West'.

I would further suggest that Aurobindo may provide some insights on how to discern the salvific life outside one's own tradition. I will go into more detail about the Aurobindonian inclusive framework, which "rejects no new light"¹⁷⁴ in the last chapter of this thesis. Presently, though, I would only suggest that Aurobindo's conclusions about the possibility of discerning salvific life within other traditions are actually required by the logic inherent to Yannaras' own *political* theology. Actually, the idea, lying behind Yannaras' *polis* is that people together are better equipped to discover and verify truth than a lone individual. Now, if this principle is brought to a broader level, we must conclude that a given community (be it Greek, Indian, Orthodox, or Hindu) can still need others in order to cause its understanding to become fuller and more profound. As Edward Schillebeeckx put, "there is more religious truth in all the religions together than in one particular religion, and [...] this also applies to Christianity. [...] There are different authentically religious experiences which Christianity, precisely because of its historical particularity, has never thematized or put into practice"¹⁷⁵. I further argue that the possibility of discovering the *polis* in other contexts would ensure that

¹⁷⁴ Ghose 1997j, 38.

¹⁷⁵ Schillebeeckx 1990, 166.

polis does not deteriorate into a Hellenistic civil religion, but that it remains a more universal theological and social ideal.

I will now develop this argument in terms of the Durkheimian relationship between religion and sacred/profane dichotomy, explained in chapter 2 of the thesis. This is all the more appropriate since, in Yannaras, the tension between the 'event-church' or salvific life, and 'religion' seems to have the same dynamic and semantic force as Durkheim's sacred/profane distinction. I would argue, therefore, that Yannaras' obsession with trying to identify salvific life (the sacred) with the political experience of Hellenic history, while presenting a serious problem also, paradoxically, suggests a potential solution. If salvific life (the sacred) ceases to be expressed in terms of religion, the discernment of the salvific life stops being an exclusive possession of a given community. In other words, if the link between religion and the sacred is broken, and if religion ceases being identified with the sacred, then (a) there is a place in it for the profane; (b) the sacred can be found outside given denominational borders. In this way, the division between the domains of the sacred and the profane would not follow the division between the religious and secular/political, as drawn by modernity, but instead fall *within* each of these domains—within both the church and the secular. Timothy Fitzgerald in his *Discourse on Civility and Barbarity* develops a similar critique of what he calls "the uncritical scholarly conflation of the

‘sacred’ with the ‘religious’, and the ‘profane’ with the ‘secular’” within religious studies and humanities¹⁷⁶. I argue that a critique of such a conflation is fully justifiable from a theological perspective. Let me draw two implications of such a critique for Christian theology: one on the non-coincidence of the church with the sacred, and another on the non-coincidence of the secular world with the profane.

First, I argue that the church cannot be defined exclusively in terms of the sacred, being not just a belief- or moral-system, but an ethos, and a socio-cultural enterprise. More importantly, the Christian community is apt not only to borrow various secular, even pagan elements¹⁷⁷, but also to absorb profane (or ‘religious’, in Yannaras’ sense) aspects, so that the event-church can be ‘religionised’ and, in a way, betray its true nature. This suggests that within the church we can distinguish, at least to a certain degree, between the *church-as-polis* and the *church-as-civil religion*—which coexist in a constant tension. It should be emphasised that the distinction between what can be described as the sacred and the profane is an *internal* one.

¹⁷⁶ Fitzgerald 2007, ch. 3, citation is from p. 108.

¹⁷⁷ Cf. Daniélou, who argues that early Christianity “has picked up all the values of religions of Greece and Rome, the places of cult, in which it substituted the Virgin Mary to the pagan goddesses, the rhythm of feasts with Christmas and Candlemas” (Daniélou 2012, 92, my translation). Christianity does attempt to purify and transfigure the pagan religiosity, but it starts by assuming it. Even more importantly, Daniélou argues that many Christians continue to live Christianity as “a purified paganism”, by using Christian rites in order to “sacralise the essential acts of the human life, the birth, the marriage, the death” (Daniélou 2012, 100, my translation). Cf. also chapter 1 *supra*.

Within Greek Orthodox theology, a step in this direction is taken by Konstantinos Agoras, critical of what he believes to be an overemphasis on the dichotomy *church vs. world*, on the one hand, and of the over-identification of the church with the Kingdom, on the other¹⁷⁸. Agoras argues that “the terms of the distinction-and-interaction between the Church and the World [...] are three, and not just two: the Church, the Cultures and the coming Christ”¹⁷⁹. The church cannot possibly judge the world, without a *tertium quid*, the eschatological Christ. Equipped, as it were, with this *third term*, the church can avoid two historical errors. First, to reject the world in its totality, situating itself in a “desert” position. Second, to embrace the world in its totality, by proclaiming a given socio-political structure (“empire”) as the Kingdom of God, described by Agoras as the “eschatologising (*eschatologikopoiēsē*) of history”¹⁸⁰. In terms of the theological distinction between the sacred and profane which I have been developing, Agoras’ articulation would entail that religion and the secular are not the only two terms to be taken into consideration. There exists a *third term*, the sacred, which enlarges—or better—transcends the dichotomy religious/secular.

The possibility of the distinction between the sacred and profane within the church is suggested—from various perspectives—by thinkers such

¹⁷⁸ Agoras 2016. Cf. Agoras 2017.

¹⁷⁹ Agoras 2016, 33, my translation.

¹⁸⁰ Agoras 2016, 36, my translation.

as Ivan Illich¹⁸¹ and Giorgio Agamben¹⁸², the latter drawing on Joseph Ratzinger's research on Ticonius, African theological writer of the 4th century. In different ways, these authors refer to the Pauline *mysterium iniquitatis*, the "secret power of lawlessness" (2 Thess. 2:7), which consists in the tragic fact that the church's body is *bipartite*: blessed and sinful, that of Christ and that of Antichrist, which co-exist in history and can be separated only in the eschaton. I would argue that such an approach does not theologically allow the church (or, let us say, the empirical church) to be defined as the sacred *tout court*, and to be contraposed to the all-profane world, as theologians such as John Zizioulas¹⁸³ or William Cavanaugh¹⁸⁴ would seem to suggest.

Second, if—as I argue—one should not claim that the church and the sacred coincide, then one should not identify what lies outside the church as simply profane. I reflected on this as far as the other religious traditions are concerned. I would now suggest that a similar approach can be applied to the secular as a totality¹⁸⁵. In chapters 1 and 2, I pointed out that the political has recourse to the 'sacred'. But can we *theologically* speak of sacred within

¹⁸¹ Illich 2008.

¹⁸² Agamben 2013.

¹⁸³ On the church as Christ's corporate body, see Zizioulas 1985a, 128ff; 1987, 331.

¹⁸⁴ Cf. Cavanaugh 2011; 2016.

¹⁸⁵ I acknowledge that the secular, as conceived by at least some theological perspectives, could be comprehensive of *other* religious traditions.

the secular or political?¹⁸⁶ Yannaras' treatment of ancient Greek *polis* implicitly indicates that we can answer in the affirmative.

An additional argument, which strengthens this, is provided by Arend van Leeuwen and Vladimir Soloviev. Leeuwen, in his reflection on the phenomenon of secularisation, argues that the church started by liberating the world from the dominion of pagan powers, but then itself became lured by the will of domination¹⁸⁷. What then occurs as a reaction to this ecclesiastical *libido dominandi* is "the prophetic judgment, of the Word of God", manifested as "the protest of a world set free by the Church [...] and refusing to wear another yoke of slavery, even if the label it carries is now a Christian one"¹⁸⁸. In what Leeuwen describes as a simultaneously churchly and an anti-churchly move, "the *Corpus Christianum* which the Church has built up collapses from within, under the impact of forces which the Church herself had stirred into active life"¹⁸⁹. What Leeuwen suggests is that the secular world can, at least at some moment, become an evangelical force acting *against* the church.

This resonates with the following consideration of Vladimir Soloviev, a 19th century Russian philosopher¹⁹⁰. In a reflection on the effects of post-

¹⁸⁶ Bernard Lonergan provides some useful distinctions (sacred vs. sacral, profane vs. secular) which can help to speak about both theological and secular sacrality (Lonergan 2004).

¹⁸⁷ Leeuwen 1964, 332.

¹⁸⁸ Leeuwen 1964, 332.

¹⁸⁹ Leeuwen 1964, 332.

¹⁹⁰ On Soloviev, see Valliere 2000, 109-226.

Constantinian secularisation of the church, Soloviev asks: "As feigned Christians have renounced and renounce the Spirit of Christ in their *exclusive dogmatism, one-sided individualism and false spiritualism* [...], where has that Spirit concealed itself?"¹⁹¹ Soloviev considers that the social progress of the preceding centuries, the abolition of torture, religious tolerance, and progress in justice are the work of the Spirit of Christ, God's action within 'secular' society. He concludes, leaving us with the following question:

if Christians in name have betrayed the purpose of Christ—and would have ruined it, if only they could have—then why can't those who are *not Christians* in name, and who renounced Christ in word, serve the purpose of Christ? In the Gospel, we read of two sons; one said, 'I will go' and he did not go; the other said, 'I will not go' and he went. [...] Which of the two [...] did the will of his Father?¹⁹²

The implication is that the church should be willing to, and capable of, discerning God's action outside its sacramental and institutional borders, not least in the challenges posed by modernity. As Daniélou succinctly suggests, it is through the modern "signs of times" that "God challenges the church, so that the dialogue of the Church and the modern world is, at the end of the day, a dialogue of God with God, since it is God who speaks through the Church, and it is God who speaks through the world"¹⁹³.

¹⁹¹ Soloviev 2008, 168-69, emphasis added. Please note that the points emphasised in the citation are also mentioned by Yannaras, as signs of religionisation.

¹⁹² Soloviev 2008, 168-69. Cf. also Girard's assertion, in line with Soloviev's argument, that "Christian truth has been making an unrelenting historical advance in our world. Paradoxically, it goes hand in hand with the apparent decline of Christianity" (Girard 2001, 164).

¹⁹³ Daniélou 2012, my translation.

To conclude, the argument of this chapter, built on Yannaras and Aurobindo, indicates a possible way of approaching Soloviev's question theologically, insofar as it contends that we are authorised to stop tying the sacred to the domain of the church, or religion, as the post-Enlightenment would like us to do, but be open to discerning it within the secular.

Moreover, the comparison with Aurobindo suggests that rejection, by Yannaras (but also by Barth and Bonhoeffer) of the church's association with 'religion' might not necessarily be due to some Christian theological presuppositions. What might be hiding behind this rejection is the problem with the category of religion itself and its Western background. I will develop this idea in the next chapter.

Chapter 4. Category of religion

The aim of this chapter is to address some questions related to 'religion' as a category. Arguments advanced in chapters 1 and 2 of the thesis suggest that nationalism imitates certain patterns of religion, and have constant recourse to religious symbols and narratives. This leads many scholars to speak of nationalism as civil or political religion, or simply as *the* religion of modernity. But *what is religion?* This question has been touched on in chapters 2 and 3. While in chapter 2 the emphasis was on the distinction between the sacred and profane, and not on religion as such, this chapter will focus on religion as the category which, in a very specific way, reflects the modern religious/secular binary. This chapter will also address some questions raised in chapter 3. Can Orthodoxy or Hinduism be described in terms of 'religion'? Why does Yannaras resist including Christianity into the category of religion? Why does he contrast the 'event-church' and religion? Why is Aurobindo so uneasy—or even ambivalent—about 'religion'? What lies behind his preference for the category of 'spirituality'? I hope in this chapter to offer tools to assist in addressing these questions. This chapter will situate the theological rejection of 'religion' by Yannaras and Aurobindo in the wider context of the contemporary debate about the category of religion. It will suggest that, because 'religion' is so

inextricably linked to the religious/secular divide, situating Christianity or Hinduism within the domain of the religious is felt by both thinkers as theologically inopportune.

In order to accomplish the stated tasks, the chapter will engage with the discipline of religious studies and theology, and place them in dialogue. Firstly, it will present three major lines of critique of religion, as a category, which in different, albeit sometimes overlapping ways, accuse 'religion' of being a biased and non-universal concept. The first line of argument claims that religion is an Abrahamic (or more narrowly, Christian, or even more narrowly, Protestant) category, which should not be applied outside its context of origin. The second cluster of arguments insists on the statist and secularist bias behind this category, and its semantic dependence on the ideology of the nation-state. And the third suggests that the category of religion is a political tool of Western colonialism, rather than a faithful description of a transcultural phenomenon.

Secondly, it will approach the three above-mentioned arguments from a theological perspective, addressing the following questions: To what extent is the category of religion useful for the self-comprehension of Orthodox and Hindu traditions? How do Yannaras and Aurobindo deal with this category? Does 'religion' help them to convey their ideas to the reader or, instead, create confusion? What can we learn about 'religion' by tracing Yannaras'

and Aurobindo's dealing with it? How can these two thinkers contribute to the current debate concerning this category?

A further reason why this debate is useful for the purpose of this thesis concerns the light it sheds on how the religious/secular binary is constructed in modernity. As I argued in chapter 2, the sacred is not something that can be considered in itself, without its binary. In what follows, I argue that the same is true of 'religion'. Any discussion of religion as a category is in fact explicitly—or more often than not—implicitly also a debate on what religion is not, i.e. on what we describe today as the secular or the political. Now, since in the modern age the political normally expresses itself through the nation-state, as was argued in chapter 1, a discussion on 'religion' is implicitly also a discourse on nationalism.

Hot Potato

One may have the impression of participating in a Hot Potato game played among theologians and students of religion, when one becomes familiar with the discussions on the category of religion¹. A scholar of Hinduism may throw a potato of 'religion' into the hands of a scholar of Judaism, saying, 'The potato belongs to you'. The Jewish scholar, may pass it

¹ 'Hot potato' is a game that involves tossing a potato between the players while music plays. The player who holds the potato when the music stops is eliminated.

to a Christian Orthodox theologian: 'Have it, the potato isn't Jewish, it's Christian'. 'Christian?' will wonder the Orthodox theologian, 'Certainly not ours', passing it to a Catholic. She will pass it to her Protestant colleague who, in his turn, will throw the potato to the secularist, saying: 'You've planted it in order to get rid of us'. Finally, the hot potato will end up in the garbage bin, from a well-crafted fling of a Post-modernist. But never fear, the game will not end here, since a Post-colonialist has already taken a carrot from his pocket. However, do the rest of the participants know how to play Hot Carrot? Theologians are happy to play with the category of religion but vigorously deny that their own tradition belongs in this category.

(I) Three critiques of religion

In what follows I will present some of the critiques of the category of religion; these I have classified into three groups, according to whether they argue that 'religion' is a denominational (first critique), secular (second critique), or colonial concept (third critique). As will become clear, what often happens is that certain scholars advance more than one line of argument. For example, the same author can simultaneously claim religion to be in both Semitic and Protestant categories². I suggest, however, that three critiques can be interpreted as semantically independent.

² In fact, S. N. Balagangadhara claims that 'religion' "refers at least to Christianity"

First critique: 'Religion' as a (secularised) denominational concept

Is 'religion' universal?

A robust critique of the category of religion emerges in the context of comparative religion and religious studies³. Due to the fact that 'religion' is so heavily loaded with specifically Western features, it is considered to be inadequate as a semantic tool to describe other traditions. Richard King and Frits Staal, both scholars of South Asian traditions, point to the fact that while emphasis on God, truth, doctrine and correct interpretation, the written word, a duality between the worldly and transcendental, which became the key characteristics of religion *tout court*, are meaningful for the Judeo-Christian and Islamic traditions, this is not necessarily the case for the others⁴. The aforementioned scholars are critical of the fact that such a particular Western set of features has been made into a transhistorical and transcultural essence, which is then being applied to non-Western, e.g. Asian, contexts. This debate is brought to its radical conclusion by arguing that religion does not exist outside the Semitic context. Consistent with this, S. N.

(Balagangadhara 2010, 158, emphasis added). He further argues that 'religion' is "the 'Christian' concept [which] is not just Christian. It cuts across the three Semitic religions" (*ibid.*). Cavanaugh draws on the post-colonial critique and, at the same time, argues that 'religion' is a secularist anti-Christian category (Cavanaugh 2009, chapter 2).

³ Wilfred C. Smith is usually credited as being the first to argue that 'religion' should be treated as Western, rather than as a universal phenomenon. See Smith 1964.

⁴ Staal 1996, 393-98; King 1999, 40.

Balagangadhara claims that it was the “shared heritage of the Semitic religions”, which allowed both Muslims and Christians to “identify” religion in India, where it does not exist⁵.

Is ‘religion’ Abrahamic?

Is ‘religion’ then a category pertaining exclusively to Abrahamic traditions? Talal Asad is one of the critics of such a position. According to Asad, some Abrahamic traditions (*in primis* Islam) cannot be adequately described as ‘religion’ since, in modernity, this category came to be defined as an

intellectualized abstracted system of doctrines that has no direct bearing on [...] forms of embodied practices [...] [and] a set of belief-statements that makes it possible to compare one religion to another [...]. This state of affairs is radically opposed to one in which correct practice is essential to the development of religious virtues [...]. In Islam, this is what matters⁶.

This exclusion of the correct practice is linked, in Asad, to the conception of religion, understood as a domain distinct from the political. Now, the latter, so the argument goes, is a specifically Protestant idea. Accordingly, ‘religion’ is to be considered a reflection of the post-Reformation worldview, and therefore fails when applied to Islam or, for that matter, to Medieval Christianity⁷. What is important in Asad’s argument is his insistence that the concept of ‘religion’ makes sense only when it is predicated as something

⁵ Balagangadhara 2010, 140.

⁶ Asad 1996.

⁷ Asad 1993, 28.

semantically different from the political sphere—and thus does not cover pre-modern or non-Western cultures.

It would, however, be simplistic to say that, for Asad, 'religion' is completely defined by the above-mentioned Protestant accents. His position is more nuanced, if not ambiguous⁸. In fact, he is conscious that 'religion' is a multifaceted concept. When commenting on the concept of political religion—and on its recourse to ceremonies and symbols, as tools of legitimacy construction—Asad turns his scepticism toward this concept by pointing out that it "does not ask why *particular* elements of 'religion' as a concept should be picked out as definitive, and therefore fails to consider the discursive roles they play in different situations"⁹. This remark—at least implicitly—suggests that, for Assad, religion is not just "belief" or a "system of doctrines", but may also include ceremonial and symbolic dimensions, which means that the term 'religion' can play out differently depending on the context.

A further critique of Semitic 'religion'—this time from the perspective of Judaism—is expressed by Daniel Boyarin. Drawing on his research on Judeo-Christian relations in the first centuries CE, Boyarin argues that religion as a Christian phenomenon is inadequate to be applied to Judaism. Boyarin

⁸ Ivan Strenski, one of the most trenchant of Asad's critics, calls him "by far the most elusive critic of the idea of religion on the current scene" (Strenski 2010, 42-43).

⁹ Asad 2003, 189.

rejects the claim that 'religion' is an Abrahamic category, but also disagrees with Asad's claim of religion as possessing an inherently Protestant background. For Boyarin, 'religion' is Christian *tout court*, discernible from the very beginning of the church's history. According to Boyarin, the "difference between Christianity and Judaism is not so much a difference between two religions as a difference between a religion and an entity that refuses to be one"¹⁰. Boyarin argues that although, "occasional[ly]" and "partial[ly]", Judaism "operates" as a religion, Jewish appropriations of this category are "strategic, mimetic, and contingent"¹¹. Boyarin considers it to be "highly significant that there is no word in pre-modern Jewish parlance that means 'Judaism'"¹². What is explicit in Boyarin's category of religion (and what allows him to consider Judaism to be a non-religion) is that this concept is strongly linked to "a faith that can be separated from ethnicity, nationality, language, and shared history" and to "a system of beliefs and practices to which one adheres voluntarily and defalcation from which results in one's becoming a heretic"¹³.

Besides Asad and Boyarin, there are other scholars who insist on the Christian presuppositions of the category of religion. For example, Daniel Dubuisson argues that 'religion' is a Christian category that does not exist, as

¹⁰ Boyarin 2004, 7-8.

¹¹ Boyarin 2004, 8-13.

¹² Boyarin 2004, 8.

¹³ Boyarin 2004, 8, 224.

an autonomous sphere, outside the Western context¹⁴. According to Dubuisson, the “most visible structural characteristic” of ‘religion’ is “opposition”¹⁵. From the very beginning, Christianity imposed upon reality the paradigm of semantic division and radical alternatives, such as true religion vs. false religion, orthodoxy vs. heresy, and religious vs. the profane.¹⁶ The Christian ‘religion’ therefore arises as a “distinct domain”—different and autonomous, not only from the secular (as claimed e.g. by Asad), but from everything “[t]hat was external to it”¹⁷. On the contrary, the non-Western world approaches reality in terms of harmonious integration, conciliation of the opposites and divisions.

Is ‘religion’ Christian?

Dubuisson, in line with Asad, emphasises the specifically *Protestant* content, inherent in the category ‘religion’. He denounces the ways in which the category of religion is dependent on individualism, internalisation, and attention to emotions. These are all heirs to the specifically Protestant developments of Christianity. Dubuisson observes that inherent to many of the academic definitions of religion, found in the literature, is “individualistic

¹⁴ Dubuisson 2003, 189.

¹⁵ Dubuisson 2003, 105.

¹⁶ Dubuisson 2003, 105.

¹⁷ Dubuisson 2003, 27-28, 105. Dubuisson further argues that this autonomy of religion has historically “favoured the autonomy of other spheres of human or social activity conceived on this model (art, politics, jurisprudence etc.)” (Dubuisson 2003, 113).

vision", which "reduces religion to an interior sentiment [...] born of the experience of transcendence", and is of "Lutheran inspiration"¹⁸.

This analysis resonates with that of Richard King. His criticism of the Protestant features of 'religion' is far more extensive than that of either Asad or Dubuisson¹⁹. Referring to the Indian case, King argues that in the process of colonisation, an "Anglo-Protestant conception of religion" had been imposed on Indian traditions, both by the colonisers and the Indians themselves. King enumerates six paradigmatic assumptions of such a category of 'religion' that were transposed onto the Indian context:

(1) 'religion'—as a realm which is different from the scientific, political and economic domains—is a universally present phenomenon;

(2) emphasis on belief in, or assent to, a set of creedal propositions;

(3) "scripturalism"—the pre-eminence of scriptures (defined by a canon) over other dimensions, particularly rituals;

(4) "discreteness"—assumption, according to which syncretism is inappropriate;

¹⁸ Dubuisson 2003, 53. Dubuisson, however, does not assign all the 'sentimental nature' of religion to Protestantism. Rather he understands this sentimentality as a convergence of the latter with Roman personal law and Stoic preoccupation with conscience (Dubuisson 2003, 109).

¹⁹ According to King, the concept of 'religion' constitutes "a Christian theological category" and "universalization of a narration of world history that reflects dominant occidental [...] accounts of history" (King 1999, 40, 104).

(5) “the primacy of pure origins”—the idea that the instant of a religion’s inception represents a moment of purity *par excellence*, to which believers should aspire to return by means of reformation and purification; and

(6) “centripetalism”—the conviction that traditions attempt to unify under a common denominator or core²⁰.

King points out that, although those features of religion, as a category, do not remain unchallenged, they become “the default position” from which to understand religion as such²¹. This analysis resonates with the conclusions reached by various other scholars, who point out that many of the assumptions cited by King have affected traditions in the non-Western world, particularly in India²².

King’s argument on ‘religion’ as distinct from other domains of life recalls Asad’s, cited earlier. It is also reminiscent of Dubuisson’s emphasis on the individualistic dimension of ‘religion’. All three scholars point to ‘religion’,

²⁰ King 2010, 105-06.

²¹ King 2010, 106.

²² Sharada Sugirtharajah, Jacqueline Hirst and John Zavos provide examples of how certain aspects, mentioned by King, have influenced Hindu traditions. Sugirtharajah points out the extent to which the idea of pure origins led to the overemphasising of texts in colonial India—an endeavour in which European scholars were “privileged and dominant partners” of the local pundits. Scripturalism contributed to a reductive view of Hindu traditions and to the neglect of “other equally legitimate forms such as dance, music, art, and folk traditions that are more telling about how Hindus relate to their traditions” (Sugirtharajah 2010, 72). An example of how various aspects of this ‘religion’ (such as its non-political character, scripturalism, and the idea of pure origins) became important in defining what is and what is not legitimate within Hinduism, is provided by the debate about *sati* in 19th century Bengal (Hirst and Zavos 2005, 7).

as being conceptualised as a disincarnated and normatively non-political sphere. This idea is further developed by scholars of the 'Ghent school', such as Balagangadhara (on whom King draws heavily) and Jacob De Roover, who offer one of the most original and multifaceted critique of 'religion' as a *sui generis* phenomenon to date. According to Balagangadhara,

the separation of state from religion [...] is a theological doctrine of Protestant Christianity. [...] The triumph of Protestantism in Europe has led even the Catholic Christians to accept a watered-down version of this theological claim as a political doctrine²³.

De Roover, Claerhout and Balagangadhara argue that the category of religion as distinct from the political, represents a secularised version of the particular Protestant separation of two kingdoms²⁴. De Roover concludes that conviction about the cultural universality of religion is a product of "the transformation of theological postulates into anthropological facts"²⁵.

It is important to emphasise that, in their critique of 'religion', the scholars of the Ghent school do not propose to get rid of the category entirely. They have no problem in applying it, nor the religious/secular dichotomy to the Western context. They actually have recourse to 'religion' in order, e.g. to say that Protestantism (or Islam—depending on how wide is the

²³ Balagangadhara 2010, 143.

²⁴ De Roover, Claerhout, and Balagangadhara 2011, 580.

²⁵ De Roover 2014, 16. In his most recent book, De Roover argues that "the conceptual language of this model [...] is 'secular' only in so far as it secularized the tropes of Christian political theology into the topoi of liberal political theory. The term 'secular' here refers to a *Christian* secular world produced by this religion. In this world, the separation of 'the religious' from 'the political' is self-evident because it builds on centuries of theological reflection" (De Roover 2016, 236).

concept at the time of being articulated) *is* religion, while Hindu tradition *is not*²⁶.

Second critique: 'Religion' as an instrument of secularisation

Another series of critiques of the category of 'religion' denounces its secularist ideological bias. These critiques develop the idea, elaborated by Asad, Balagangadhara, King and De Roover, that intrinsic to the modern category of 'religion' is its separation from the secular realm. 'Religion' is the product of the binary of religious and secular—so the argument goes—and, instead of describing the reality, it renders this binary normative.

There are, however, some important differences between this position and arguments expressed by the authors mentioned earlier. While according to Asad, Balagangadhara, King and De Roover, 'religion' is a *Christian* category imposed on non-Western contexts, for scholars like William Cavanaugh and Gavin D'Costa, 'religion', on the contrary, is an *anti-Christian*, secularist concept imposed on Christianity itself, in order to legitimise the modern nation-state and de-legitimise the church²⁷.

²⁶ One of the problems here is that the religious/secular binary is thorny also in the West, as De Roover's interpretation of the *Lautsi v. Italy* case (in which secular judges addressed theological matters) implies (De Roover 2016, 23-30). I suggest that were 'religion' (and the binary) a "self-evident" part of Western culture, one would expect that its articulation in the West be less problematic than in India—which, apparently, is not the case.

²⁷ I do not claim that the two arguments are necessarily mutually exclusive. They provide, however, two different answers to the question on the causality of, and the agents behind, the ideological articulations of 'religion'.

According to Cavanaugh, neither religion nor the secular have a “once-and-for-all definition”²⁸. He further argues that “to say that there is a transhistorical and transcultural concept of religion that is separable from secular phenomena *is itself* part of a particular configuration of power, that of the modern, liberal nation-state as it developed in the West”²⁹. This quote reveals another difference between Cavanaugh’s position and that of e.g. Balagangadhara. The latter does not reject ‘religion’ as a category³⁰, as Cavanaugh does when he says that there is no transhistorical and transcultural *sui generis* religion.

Cavanaugh points out how the opposition between religion and the secular is being ideologically articulated through other binaries, such as the violence of religion vs. the pacifism of the state, and the irrationality of religion vs. the rational universality of the state.

Religion and violence

Let us start with the link between religion and violence. In chapter 1, I argued, drawing on Özkirimli, that it is not always easy to state with precision, whether people die (or kill) for ethnicity, belief, concern for their loved ones, or out of fear. It seems that many narratives about early modern violence, in

²⁸ Cavanaugh 2016, 181. Cf. Cavanaugh 2009, 3.

²⁹ Cavanaugh 2009, 59.

³⁰ Cf. Keppens and Bloch 2010, 11.

which religious identities were involved, are slightly less nuanced in their judgments than Özkirimli's point would have demanded.

Both William Cavanaugh and Gavin D'Costa challenge the classical accounts of the European wars of religion, the moral of which is that a neutral, non-partisan state is the only solution to religions' violent rivalry³¹. According to both authors, such a narrative represents a focal point in the ideological justification of the modern nation-state. Cavanaugh calls this narrative "one of the foundational legitimating myths of the liberal nation-state", which "tells a story of the overcoming of primordial chaos by the forces of order", and "helps to construct and marginalize a religious Other, prone to fanaticism, to contrast with the rational, peace-making, secular subject"³². Similarly, Gavin D'Costa, argues that,

the wars of religion are [...] the effects of the emergence of the nation state seeking to consolidate power and thus oppose [...] every other power that would claim allegiance from citizens. In order for the state to be sovereign, citizens owe the state total and unconditional allegiance³³.

Examination of the Charles V conflict with the Lutheran states, Catherine de Medici's St. Bartholomew's Day massacre, and Ferdinand II's policies, leads D'Costa to the conclusion that "the 'wars of religion', even if they are really

³¹ D'Costa 2009, 60; Cavanaugh 2009, ch. 3. Kaviraj seems to be on the same lines, when he tries to explicate the narrative behind the secularism of the Indian state (Kaviraj 2014a, 204-05).

³² Cavanaugh 2009, 4, 123.

³³ D'Costa 2009, 78-79. This analysis resonates with what I argued in chapter 1, namely, how the modern nation-state disempowers the intermediary social institutions, in order to impose a direct relationship between citizen and state.

wars of state, are dwarfed by the carnage exacted by the wars of the secular modern sovereign state where religion was certainly not an issue"³⁴.

So, were the wars of religion actually not about religion at all?

D'Costa's arguments converge in the conclusion that the wars of religion were not about religion, but rather about the political issues linked to the rise of the modern nation-state. However, while telling the two narratives of the wars of religion—one "as modernity has told it"³⁵, and his own, alternative story—D'Costa admits that "reality is rarely a matter of either/or narratives", thus suggesting that our question does not have a simplistic answer³⁶. On the other hand, Cavanaugh explicitly does not deny that the wars of religion were about religion. He responds to one of his critics as follows:

I do not argue that the wars were really political [...] and not religious. The very distinction between religious and political [...] was what was at stake in the wars [...]. [T]o blame religion as opposed to politics is anachronistic [...]. The point is not that Christianity was not involved; of course it was. The point is that one cannot finger a transhistorical [...] 'religion' that—as opposed to more 'secular' [...] pursuits—was the main cause of the conflicts³⁷.

This suggests that not only is 'religion' a modern category, but also the

³⁴ D'Costa 2009, 74-75. At the same time, he claims that his "alternative narrative does not seek to [...] suggest that when violence did happen there were always other motives than religious ones involved" (D'Costa 2009, 74). The logic of D'Costa's and Cavanaugh's argument is applicable also to an Indian context: not all violence between religious groups should be labelled as religious. Cf. Thapar 1989, 219-25; Nicholson 2010, 202-03.

³⁵ D'Costa 2009, xi.

³⁶ D'Costa 2009, 57.

³⁷ Cavanaugh 2016, 185, 93. Cf. Cavanaugh 2009, 123-24. Cavanaugh's account resonates with Pandey's interpretation of the statist version of this narrative in India (Pandey 2003, 56). Pandey also points out how the narrative of the 'irrational' violence of Hindu and Muslim riots was used by both the colonial power and secular nationalists, in order to defend their legitimacy (Pandey 1997, 253). On the conception of state secularism as antidote to communal violence, see De Roover 2016, 213ff.

'political'³⁸.

Religion and irrationality

The narrative about the inherent violence of religion, mentioned above, implies that religion constitutes an irrational force vis-à-vis the rationality of the state³⁹. Cavanaugh illustrates the claim about religion's inherent irrationality by engaging with scholars such as Bhikhu Parekh and R. Scott Appleby, who depict religion as archaic, belonging to the sphere of the irrational, generating emotions, going beyond rational calculations, and *therefore* potentially threatening the secular rational order⁴⁰. Cavanaugh challenges such a narrative by asserting that secular phenomena, such as nationalism, "can be just as absolutist, divisive, and irrationally fanatical as certain types of Jewish, Christian, Muslim, or Hindu militancy"⁴¹. Cavanaugh appreciates that both authors see how Marxism, liberalism (Parekh), and ethnicity (Appleby) exhibit and cultivate irrational impulses, and become quasi-religious, but rightly observes that if those ideologies are reducible to "a kind of religion, then the whole religious-secular distinction is in danger of

³⁸ Cf. Fitzgerald 2015.

³⁹ See Cavanaugh 2009, 42ff. Cf. King, who points out how the modern definition of religion is linked to the dichotomy between 'mystical' vs. 'rational' (King 1999, ch. 1). Cf. Fitzgerald 2011, ch. 3.

⁴⁰ Cf. Parekh 1999; Appleby 2000.

⁴¹ Cavanaugh 2009, 55.

crumbling into a heap of contradictions”⁴². In other words, if rationality becomes a point of distinction between the religious and the secular, then pointing out the irrational character of secular phenomena should prevent us from considering them as secular in the first place.

The apex of the opposition between modernity and the rationality of the state, and the backwardness and irrationality of religion can be seen in the ‘scientific atheism’ promoted by various communist regimes. As Miriam Dobson points out, in relation to the Soviet Union, “the assertion of modernity—packaged as ‘progress’—was absolutely central to the regime’s claim to legitimacy and the binary with religion especially prominent”⁴³.

Dobson further argues that

the Soviet party-state needed believers, even as propagandists labored for their extinction. Take, for example, Nikita Khrushchev’s reported boast that one day soon the last priest would be paraded on Soviet television. Even in this much-anticipated moment of religion’s destruction, a believer was required in order to publicly display the dark past Soviet power had ousted⁴⁴.

This need for religion by the modern state, in order to be able to construct its legitimacy, is expressed very differently by Marcel Gauchet. In *La religion dans la démocratie: Parcours de la laïcité*, he argues that the development of the modern nation-state is so strictly linked to its confrontation with religion

⁴² Cavanaugh 2009, 44.

⁴³ Dobson 2015, 81.

⁴⁴ Dobson 2015, 81. The need of the other, and in particular of the religious other, as a ‘support’ of one’s identity, seems to be a widespread phenomenon. For example, Stroumsa interprets Christian tolerance of the Jews in similar terms. He argues that the Jews were seen by the Medieval Christians as “a living proof of Christian truth” (Stroumsa 1998, 358).

that, in the present moment of the exit from religion (*sortie de la religion*)—a term Gauchet prefers to secularisation—politics loses a part of its purpose for existence, and therefore its prestige and dynamism⁴⁵. The consequence is the contemporary crisis of democracy.

Drawing on what Cavanaugh, Gauchet and Dobson point out from very different angles, I suggest that religion serves as the condition and *raison d'être* of the modern nation-state's existence, as the 'other', against which the modern-state constructs and legitimises itself. This dynamic also confirms, at least descriptively, Schmitt's intuition about the necessity of the enemy as the condition of the political. In Europe, the weakening of churches and diminution of religious practice leads to the decay of the political. Accordingly, the appearance of another dynamic religious presence, e.g. Islam, might be the moment of the reawakening of the political⁴⁶. Religion might yet again become a Girardian scapegoat, whose expulsion from public domain leads to reconciliation and harmony of the political.

Re-definition of the category of religion

What is important in Cavanaugh's and D'Costa's reflection on the modern narrative of violent and irrational religion, is the evidence of the

⁴⁵ Gauchet 1998.

⁴⁶ One could suggest, for instance, that in Europe the debates on Islam have the potential to reinvigorate French identity. Cf. Derrida 2005, 89; Doyle 2013.

profound unity of the *practical* privatisation of religion and its *theoretical* re-definition as non-public. Allegedly violent and irrational religion needs to be privatised, and lose its public character, which then gets taken over by the allegedly non-partisan and rational state. As D'Costa argues, this forcing of religion into the private sphere goes hand in hand with its conceptual re-articulation by the nation-state. It is the latter which has been "central in generating the definition of religion that shapes so much thought today", i.e. religion as a private, non-public matter⁴⁷. The collateral consequence of this re-articulation is that hereafter religion is deemed to occupy itself with doctrine and liturgy, rather than with the exercise of power⁴⁸. Cavanaugh draws a yet more radical conclusion. He goes so far as to claim that the modern re-articulation of religion was established "not by argument", "[not] as a rational theory about how best to describe human social life", but "through violence", as the outcome of "contingent shifts" in European power struggles between state and church⁴⁹. To express D'Costa's and Cavanaugh's idea in Schmittian terms, religion must be depoliticised, purified of its capacity to make friend/enemy distinction, and embraced in the *new* political of nation-state⁵⁰.

⁴⁷ D'Costa 2009, 75.

⁴⁸ See D'Costa 2009, xii.

⁴⁹ Cavanaugh 2009, 7.

⁵⁰ Cf. Nicholson 2011, 6-9, 49-50.

Of course, a possible objection to Cavanaugh and D'Costa could be that in the Middle Ages the church took over from the state some activities for purely contingent reasons. One does not need to fully embrace the Protestant position to see that, e.g. the control exercised by the Roman Catholic Church in Europe over land and huge properties and the connected taxation⁵¹, or the Patriarch of Constantinople's collection of duties from the farms belonging to the Christian subjects of the Ottoman Empire⁵², clearly represent a rupture with the practice of early Christianity. As does the ecclesiastical engagement in education and political administration linked, according to Bernard Lonergan, to "the long and slow decay of the empire", which "created a vacuum of talent and prestige that gradually transferred to local bishops an increasing share in the burden of secular offices"⁵³. Furthermore, one could cite the instances of (individualistic and non-public) religious identity in pre-modern times, or in early modern contexts, apparently yet untouched by the rise of the nation-state⁵⁴. But it might be that these objections strengthen D'Costa's and Cavanaugh's argument, in pointing out the contingency of the border between the religious and the

⁵¹ Philpott argues that such a situation "sharply limited the powers of secular rulers within their territories" (Philpott 2001, 106).

⁵² See the recent research by Papademetriou 2015.

⁵³ Lonergan 2004, 276.

⁵⁴ Stroumsa points out the extent to which the Judeo-Christian tensions in the first centuries CE, led to "the new definition of identity in religious, rather than cultural, terms" (Stroumsa 1998, 357). Cf. Boyarin 2004. On a much later period, see Greyerz 2008, ch. 7.

secular, the interdependence of the two spheres, and thus the impossibility of considering the modern re-articulation as universally and trans-historically normative.

Usages of the secular myths

The modern (re-)definition of religion has some far-reaching political consequences, both internal and external, which can be felt in the present. Internally, the category of religion works as a tool of state hegemony vis-à-vis the intermediary structures or, to use Gauchet's expression, "islets of sociality" (*îlots de socialité*), such as church, class or tribe⁵⁵. As Cavanaugh argues, "what counts as religious or secular depends on what practices are being authorized. The fact that Christianity is construed as a religion, whereas nationalism is not, helps to ensure that the Christian's public and lethal loyalty belongs to the nation-state"⁵⁶. Therefore, the myth of religious violence and the state's rational pacifism "is used in domestic politics to legitimate the marginalization of certain types of practices and groups labelled religious, while underwriting the nation-state's monopoly on its citizens' willingness to sacrifice and kill"⁵⁷. This also allows the state to legitimate its internal monopoly over the use of violence, a novelty with

⁵⁵ Gauchet 1985, 285, my translation.

⁵⁶ Cavanaugh 2009, 60.

⁵⁷ Cavanaugh 2009, 4. Cf. chapter 1 *supra*.

respect to the previous historical periods. The new conceptualisation of 'religion' is used by the nation-state also externally. In fact, by positing religious/secular distinction as normative and universally valid, modern Western states justify their colonial and cultural imperialism. This leads us to the third major critique of 'religion'—as a colonial instrument.

Third critique: 'Religion' and colonisation

While there is disagreement on whether 'religion' is denominational or secularist, two clusters of critiques—mentioned above—converge in claiming that it is a European concept, used both in the past and present as an instrument of Western cultural imperialism. The third line of critique—which resonates, to a considerable degree, with the conclusions of the previous two—puts a special emphasis on the idea that the category of religion (and religious/secular distinction, as a fundamental part of the package) is not, or not so much, the result of the poor judgment of scholars who projected the Judeo-Christian or Western secularist framework outside its original context but, rather, constitutes an important component of the military and cultural colonisation of non-Western peoples.

Edward Said's influential book *Orientalism* (1978) gives a new perspective—and indeed caused a "revolution", to use David Smith's

expression⁵⁸—in the understanding of how the Western description of the East, and particularly of the Middle East, has been linked to the colonial agenda of Western powers⁵⁹. The East, according to Said, was not only *described* by Westerners but, more importantly, was *constructed* by them.

The theory is political, and Said's project attempts to show that

the general liberal consensus that 'true' knowledge is fundamentally non-political (and conversely, that overtly political knowledge is not 'true' knowledge) obscures the highly if obscurely organized political circumstances obtaining when knowledge is produced⁶⁰.

I would suggest that here we have a similar approach to the understanding of the process of knowledge, which lies behind what I explicated as the second critique of 'religion'.

In what way is knowledge about 'religion' political? How does this work in practice? Scholars, who have extended Said's Orientalist theory and method to other contexts, particularly to India, have enumerated several aspects of the colonial use of the category of 'religion' in dealing with the East. I would like to point out two of them: (1) to view the way of the Western (local) condition as *the* normative, not only allows the bringing or annexing, as it were, any reality into the Western conceptual framework, but also gives the right to explain the non-West to the non-Western cultures themselves; (2)

⁵⁸ Smith 2003b, 46.

⁵⁹ See Said 2003.

⁶⁰ Said 2003, 10.

to classify the existent reality according to Western categories is a way to rule and control it.

As Dubuisson points out, the West has a tendency to consider its own particular world-view as universal and to project this onto the rest of the world. The title of one of his essays, *Exporting the Local* is indicative of his argument—the West exports its own local conception of religion as a universal anthropological fact⁶¹. Dubuisson also makes an assertion—to which I will return in chapter 5—that, unlike the West, non-Western cultures have not attempted this sort of export, e.g. India has never thought of imposing its own category of *dharma* on the rest of humanity, coming out with a sort of *homo dharmicus*—which is precisely what the West has done with the category of ‘religion’ and its *homo religiosus*. By imposing ‘religion’ outside the Western context, “the West purely and simply annexed the humanity of mankind to its own indigenous anthropology, which in turn allowed it to declare that man, fully realized man, found its most perfect expression in Western man”⁶².

Classification seems a very innocent endeavour. But it can also be an instrument of colonisation in which unification, but also selection and construction of differences, serve the agenda of the hegemonic power⁶³. In

⁶¹ Dubuisson 2007. Cf. Dubuisson 2003, 101.

⁶² Dubuisson 2007, 794.

⁶³ Asad 1993, 17; King 1999; Keppens and Bloch 2010.

this sense, 'classify and conquer' constitutes an updated translation of the ancient *divide et impera*⁶⁴. As Ronald Inden argues, to classify also means to discover and/or impose the laws of order—according to which a phenomenon or society functions—and, at the same time, is a manifestation of the rationality of the one who performs it⁶⁵. Moreover, classification is a component of a process which creates “a dichotomy” and indeed “a hierarchic relationship between knower and known”, in which the “knowing subject transcends its object; it is not part of it”⁶⁶.

However, I would argue that there is a sense in which the West, in transferring onto the East its own secularist framework, in reality projects a version of secularism, which is idealised, not empirically existent in the West itself. As Peter van der Veer rightly observes, “[t]he assumed secularism of modern British and Dutch societies makes sense only as a colonial theory”⁶⁷. I suggest that this statement can be interpreted in a way which suggests a discrepancy between the real and the idealised West. What I mean is that the normativity of the religious/secular divide, on the one hand, and the existence of established churches in Europe, or Judeo-Christian elements of

⁶⁴ See Chidester 2005, 1857.

⁶⁵ Cf. Inden 2000, 14-15.

⁶⁶ Inden 2000, 15-16. Cf. Smith's critique that Inden misses the point about who is who in the Orientalist hierarchy, since he “overlooks” that “Orientalism in its original meaning was not oppression of the East, but the colonization of the western mind by the East” (Smith 2003b, 61).

⁶⁷ Veer and Lehmann 1999, 10.

American civil religion, on the other, can be reconciled only with a little creative ambivalence, which has often been denied to the colonised⁶⁸. Such an ambiguity is required if one wants to consider (the aspiration to) secularism as the highest stage in human intellectual evolution, and to treat other non-secular societies as non-modern, backward and irrational⁶⁹. The fact that secular rationality, taken as a norm, does not necessarily exist in the West itself, is a further argument that the religious/secular divide is imposed upon the non-West as a colonisation tool, rather than an innocent inability of the West to understand 'the Rest'⁷⁰. In other words, the West is imposing something it does not master. I would also like to argue that this inconsistency is in fact very similar to the one that takes place when the nation-state, embedded with the reference to its own symbolic and transcendental sacrality, positions itself as axiomatically secular vis-à-vis religion.

Secular rationality, as allegedly the highest rung in human intellectual evolution, having only been achieved by the West, becomes a useful tool of colonisation and invasion. As Cavanaugh puts it,

In foreign policy, the myth of religious violence serves to cast nonsecular social orders [...] in the role of villain. *They* have not yet learned to remove the dangerous influence of religion from political life. *Their* violence is therefore irrational and

⁶⁸ Dumont suggests the existence of such an ambiguity when he argues that the "exclusion of religion as the basis of the nation is not an empirical, but a normative affair" (Dumont 1998, 316). This assertion implies that the West can postulate a *normative* secularism, without being *empirically* secular. Cf. Descombes 2016, 166-67.

⁶⁹ Cf. Masuzawa 2005, 20; Fitzgerald 2015, 313.

⁷⁰ The expression is borrowed from Hall 1992.

fanatical. *Our* violence, being secular, is rational, peace making, and sometimes regrettably necessary to contain *their* violence⁷¹.

Moreover, since non-Western societies, or any culture which has not exiled religion into the private sphere, are considered as both violent and irrational, a military intervention might seem to be a more logical approach to them, as compared to dialogue and negotiation⁷².

Cosmographic formation

Would abandoning the category of religion save the world from Western imperialism? Would it help our discourses be less ideological, more faithful to the variety of human experience? Or, to put the question sharply and abruptly, should we abandon 'religion' once and for all?

A concept which would be more culturally inclusive, is suggested by Dubuisson. He is looking for an alternative to 'religion' as a universally applicable category, which would save us from "hav[ing] recourse to artificial expressions such as 'politico-religious' [...] to qualify realities and events that obviously do not result from a simple mixture of pure substances borrowed respectively from [...] the ['political'] and the 'religious'"⁷³, as e.g. Aurobindo does when he speaks of a "single socio-religious whole"⁷⁴. Dubuisson

⁷¹ Cavanaugh 2009, 4.

⁷² See Cavanaugh 2009, 13-17.

⁷³ Dubuisson 2003, 197.

⁷⁴ Ghose 1997a, 421.

proposes “the all-encompassing category of cosmographic formations”—in which he assembles “all those facts we call ‘religious’ along with some others (collective conceptions and practices, symbolic constructions, corporeal and mental techniques, discursive and semiotic systems, imaginary worlds of beings etc.)”⁷⁵. I would argue that, on the one hand, the list of “facts”, composing Dubuisson’s “cosmographic formation”, suggest that this new category is not very different from that of ‘culture’ or ‘civilisation’. On the other hand, his dislike of “politico-religious”, as a description of the non-Western traditions, seems to be motivated more by its clumsiness and artificiality, rather than by untruth. Is there a better solution?

Hermeneutic fluidity

Before proceeding with an analysis of Yannaras’ and Aurobindo’s contribution to the discussion on ‘religion’, I would like to voice some preliminary observations. What is striking in the controversy on whether this category is a Semitic, Christian, Protestant, secular, or colonial conception is the ambivalence in assigning a specific original source to ‘religion’. Let me explain. As I suggested earlier, it would seem that some authors defend more than one position. For example, Asad, Balagangadhara, King—occasionally even in the same essay—argue that ‘religion’ is simultaneously a

⁷⁵ Dubuisson 2003, 17.

Semitic, Protestant and secular concept. What do they understand by 'religion'? Well, it would seem that each tends to construct his own category of religion, and sometimes more than one. While for Asad 'religion' is a category defined by the dismissal of correct practice in favour of intellectual doctrines, for Boyarin, the key element of 'religion' is voluntary adherence (vs. the link with ethnicity and nationality). In his turn, Dubuisson emphasises 'religion's' propensity to articulate reality as a set of oppositions (which assigns the paternity of 'religion' to early Christianity), but simultaneously he points out the importance of individualism, internalisation and emotions (elements of Protestant inspiration). Balagangadhara's defining point of 'religion' is its separation from the secular domain, linked to the Protestant Reformation, and yet he claims that Islam was able to "identify" religion in Medieval India, where it allegedly did not exist. Also worth noting is that the same characteristic of 'religion' is sometimes assigned by various scholars to different traditions. For example, the argument of individual adherence, which both Dubuisson and King use as proof of the Protestant features of religion, has been cited earlier by Boyarin, but in his case, it was in order to make the claim that 'religion' is an early Christian construction.

I do not wish to suggest that the fact that the above-mentioned scholars construct their own categories *a priori* invalidates their arguments. In fact, something similar could be said about scholarship in general. As Bruce

Lincoln argues, “scholars actively construct that which they study through their selection of evidence, a process in which they systematically disarticulate certain data from their original context while ignoring others, and rearticulate those so chosen within a novel context of their own devising”⁷⁶. However, the problem I have with the authors cited is that their respective constructions of the category religion go hand-in-hand with an attempt to present their own construction as *the* Western category.

The ambivalence about the specific content of different conceptions of religion developed by scholars, seems to contradict the assumption of their position, i.e. the fact that the Orient was subject to a very *specific* alienating category. In other words, if ‘religion’ is a Semitic category, and therefore semantically covers a Judaic ethno-religious synthesis, Islamic and Byzantine political theologies alike—then it is difficult to see how it can also cover a very modern concept of ‘religion’ as a domain clearly (though perhaps somehow ideally) distinct from the political and secular. On the other hand, if it is claimed that the defining feature of ‘religion’ (in all the argumentative lines cited) appears to be the separation of ‘religion’ from the secular, one should be able to see the extent to which the religious and secular separation—in whatever way expressed—is part of the heritage of Judaism or Greek Orthodoxy.

⁷⁶ Bruce Lincoln, cited in Nicholson 2011, 197.

By this I do not mean that traditions should be considered hermetically, or that they never 'borrow', in a more or less 'syncretic' manner, from other traditions⁷⁷. Furthermore, as I will argue in chapter 5, to purify is often a way of denying one's own tradition. I would only insist that semantic manoeuvres, by which a 'unique' category of religion takes to itself a huge variety of shapes, from Semitic to secularist, undermine the credibility of the criticism.

(II) Aurobindo and Yannaras on 'religion' and its alternatives

Each of the three critiques of 'religion', mentioned earlier in the chapter, contains much truth. However, I would like to emphasise that this category has an important theological side, which is not always taken into consideration⁷⁸. In what follows, I will examine the theological aspect of the problem and address the following questions: To what degree have 'religion's' confessional (Semitic/Christian/Protestant), secularist and colonial backgrounds rendered this category misleading and dangerous, necessitating a rejection of it? What are the theological outcomes of the process, in which 'religion' migrates outside its Western cradle, to an Orthodox or Hindu context? Does having recourse to this category

⁷⁷ Cf. Nicholson 2010, 188ff.

⁷⁸ Incoherence of the religious/secular binary is a matter not only of theological, but also of secular importance. On the problems with the binary for European and Indian judiciary, see Minor 1999; De Roover 2016.

necessarily involve accepting its Western presuppositions? Do religious traditions see themselves in this category? Do they find the category useful? Would Hindu or Christian traditions benefit from *not* being understood in terms of 'religion'? In what follows I will engage in a dialogue with Aurobindo and Yannaras, building, to a large extent, on what has been argued in chapter 3. I will start with Aurobindo, and proceed to Yannaras, in order to show how their dealing with 'religion' can help us in addressing these questions.

'Religion', as understood by Aurobindo and Yannaras, appears to be a complex and ambiguous concept. In analysing the different uses of the *term* 'religion' by the respective thinkers, one arrives to see how these function as *categories*. This section will be primarily focused on scrutinising the various articulations of 'religion' by both authors, and those aspects of their theologies, which are directly related to the discussion on the category of 'religion' and help to examine its alleged Western connotations.

Aurobindo and 'religion'

In chapter 3, I pointed out that one of the most common meanings of Aurobindonian 'religion' is the human search for, and the relationship to, the Divine. I also approached 'religion' through two sets of binaries, at play in Aurobindo—religion vs. religionism, and religion vs. spirituality—suggesting

that, in the first binary, 'religion' appears as a positive concept, and, in the second binary, as a negative one. In the second binary, spirituality appears to have a more integral, holistic character (as compared with 'religion'), and to fulfil the function of harmonising human nature with its relationship to the Divine⁷⁹. I concluded that, although Aurobindo often describes his ideal as 'religion', and uses expressions such as 'true religion' or 'universal religion', his preference goes to the category of spirituality. Here I would like to point out other ways in which Aurobindo uses the term 'religion', provide a more detailed analysis of the binary 'religion' vs. 'spirituality', and finally reflect on some Western components of this category.

Religion of humanity and sanatana dharma

Besides 'religion', as the opposite of 'religionism', on the one hand, and 'spirituality', on the other hand, there are two other noteworthy ways in which this category is used by Aurobindo. The first is the concept of "the religion of humanity". This concept, according to Peter Heehs, was borrowed from August Comte, and then re-articulated in an experiential and spiritual key⁸⁰. Although the way in which Aurobindo articulates 'religion of humanity' has many of the aspects present in his category of 'spirituality' (search for the

⁷⁹ Ghose 1997d, 178-83, 227-31.

⁸⁰ Heehs 2005a, 19.

“kingdom of th[e] divine Spirit”⁸¹, opposition to ‘religionism’), the general content of this concept (“earthly progress”, abolition of torture, and even the French tripartite motto—liberty, equality, fraternity⁸²) corresponds to what today would be called humanism.

The second usage of the term ‘religion’ is connected to *dharma*, or *sanatana dharma*, and the articulation of nationalism in terms of the former. *Sanatana dharma* is translated by Aurobindo as “eternal religion”, and usually bears the same semantic meaning as the expression “Hindu religion” with an important clarification: it is Hindu “only because the Hindu nation has kept it”⁸³. Another important feature of *sanatana dharma* is its holistic character (present also in the concepts of spirituality): it covers politics, philosophy, literature, and even science⁸⁴. As Robert Minor rightly argues, Aurobindonian *sanatana dharma* “eliminate[s] any and all distinctions between religion, politics, social action, and national uplift”⁸⁵. I argue that the *sanatana dharma* serves as a semantic *topos*, linking the holism and normativity of “true religion”, or spirituality, with the Hindu tradition and Indian nationalism. As a matter of fact, *dharma* is described as “the national

⁸¹ Ghose 1997f, 577.

⁸² Ghose 1997f, 566-69.

⁸³ Ghose 1996, 375-76. On the contrary, S. Radhakrishnan translates *sanatana dharma* as *philosophia perennis*, eternal philosophy rather than religion (Radhakrishnan 1947, 43).

⁸⁴ Ghose 1997i, 24.

⁸⁵ Minor 1999, 21-22.

religion which we also believe to be universal”⁸⁶. Sometimes nationalism and religion *tout court* are identified as, for example, in Aurobindo’s Bombay speech of 1908. Here he states that “Nationalism is a religion that has come from God; Nationalism is a creed in which you shall have to live”⁸⁷. I will address the interrelation between religion and nationalism in chapter 5. For now, what is important is to point out that for Aurobindo the category of religion is extensive enough to include politics and the struggle for Independence.

Spirituality

In chapter 3, I examined the Aurobindonian concept of salvific life through the binary religion vs. spirituality, pointing out the ambiguity of the interrelation between the two categories. I examined various dimensions of spirituality, particularly its holistic orientation and relationship to freedom and individualism. I also argued that religion and spirituality appear in Aurobindo’s writings in three different interrelations. The first consists in presenting spirituality as a synonym of religion. In the second, the two categories can be interconnected: e.g. as Aristotelian essence is connected to the accidents, or as effect is dependent on a key condition. The third way

⁸⁶ Ghose 1997i, 24. Cf. Ghose 1996, 374.

⁸⁷ Ghose 2002, 818-19.

of relating spirituality and religion assumes a clear and distinct opposition. In this chapter, I will approach spirituality from a different angle, with respect to chapter 3, where I examined the convergence between two categories. Here I will start by exploring the ways in which spirituality is articulated as *distinct* from religion. I will then address the following question: What is the logic behind this distinction, and what can it tell us about the category of religion?

In *The Human Cycle* Aurobindo argues that organised religions are results, rather than causes, of outbursts of spirituality; in the long term, they tend to subordinate spirituality to dogmas and cult, shifting almost inevitably into “religionism”⁸⁸. This leads Aurobindo to oppose spirituality to religion, as a historically inadequate “guide [...] of human society”⁸⁹.

Aurobindo also argues that the evolutionary process of spirituality might include episodes of rejection of religion. In particular, atheism can constitute “a necessary passage to deeper religious and spiritual truth”⁹⁰. Aurobindo blames the “religionism” of the past for the anti-religious tendencies of modernity, considered to be in a certain way necessary⁹¹.

Historical religions “needed a denial, a revolt of the oppressed human mind and heart to correct these errors and set religion right”⁹². On the other hand,

⁸⁸ Ghose 1997d, 263.

⁸⁹ Ghose 1997d, 176.

⁹⁰ Ghose 1997d, 229.

⁹¹ Ghose 1997d, 175.

⁹² Ghose 1997d, 175.

the modern age, through its criticism of religion, brings about the rediscovery of the spiritual essence of religion⁹³.

In a different context, while discussing internationalism and the unity of humanity, Aurobindo observes that those ideals were promoted by the French Revolution, while religion, “which ought to have led the way”, instead became “a sower of discord”, forgetting its “chief business”, which is spirituality⁹⁴. I would suggest that the implication of this analysis resonates with Soloviev’s interpretation of the *Parable of the Two Sons*, mentioned earlier: if religion mutes its “spiritual impulses”, the Spirit acts through other, even anti-religious, agents⁹⁵.

Is, then, spirituality an alternative to religion, rather than its essence or condition? A complication, which arises when one tries to address this question, consists in the lack of clarity of whether when speaking of ‘religion’ Aurobindo means a somewhat abstract and idealised “true religion”, or an existing, “organised”, one. However, what one can deduce, at least from his social trilogy, is that spirituality is an alternative to the *organised*, or *empirical* religions. Moreover, except for one case, in which Aurobindo speaks of spirituality understood as something unrelated to worldly life⁹⁶, spirituality has only positive meanings—something that cannot be said for religion *tout*

⁹³ Ghose 1997d, 38.

⁹⁴ Ghose 1997f, 551.

⁹⁵ Cf. Soloviev 2008, 168-69.

⁹⁶ Ghose 1997d, 178.

court. Moreover, Aurobindo does not need any additional adjectives when he speaks of spirituality. On the contrary, when speaking of religion, he usually feels obliged to specify whether he means the “true” or the “sectarian” and “corrupted” one. I would therefore propose that one can confidently conclude that, between the two categories, Aurobindo prefers spirituality. Why is that?

First, I would argue that the concept of spirituality is preferred by Aurobindo primarily for its holistic connotations, and because it allows him to keep the religious and secular within one domain. As I argued earlier in this chapter, many scholars—not without good reason—emphasise that the category of religion presupposes the division of the reality into the religious and secular. What does Aurobindo’s preference for spirituality over against religion tell us about this discussion? Aurobindonian spirituality, I argue, has the benefit of not being dependant on the religious/secular binary and, at the same time, being critical of the latter. The ‘fluidity’ of the modern concept of spirituality has caught scholars’ attention. It has been argued that spirituality can fluctuate between being co-extensive with religion, or in radical opposition it; not being identical with conventional religions, it may experiment with new—even secular—paths, and serve as an invitation to borrow from art, science, and other domains of secular culture⁹⁷. Boaz Huss

⁹⁷Van Ness 1996, 1; King 2009, 15-16. Cf. Schreurs 2002; Carrette and King 2005.

refers to the increasing number of those who are hesitant in describing themselves as either religious or secular, and argues that one of the ways to deal with this situation is through "a new cultural category, which defies the disjunction between the religious and the secular and creates new social institutions, cultural practices and personal identities"⁹⁸. In other words, the separation between the religious and the secular is problematic not only on an intellectual level, but also from the perspective of a popular self-designation. Second, spirituality, by being conceived as a condition of religion, and at the same time, being present outside in the non-religious world, has the advantage of transcending religious and confessional borders. Or, at least, it can treat those borders with more ambivalence, as compared to a conventional religion. As I will make clear in chapter 5, spirituality, understood as an all-inclusive synthesis of all experiences which transcends denominational divisions, allows for the inclusion of various empirical traditions under the umbrella of *sanatana dharma*. One could even speculate that spirituality is preferred to religion, for the exact reason of its non-identity with anything that has happened in religious history. Of course, the question then would be: Is it legitimate to compare spirituality, a fairly abstract and idealised concept, with the empirically given examples of 'organised religions'? Third, 'spirituality' can be regarded as an instrument of anti-

⁹⁸ Huss 2015, 101.

colonialism. As Partha Chatterjee suggests, the concept introduces the dichotomy between the 'outside' world of material and scientific progress (in which the West is superior), and the 'inner' world of spirituality (which becomes the "domain of sovereignty" of colonial nations)⁹⁹. This binary opposition between the materialistic West and the spiritual East becomes an instrument of rejection of "the claims of the modern West to a superior culture and asserting the sovereignty of the nation over the domain of spirituality"¹⁰⁰. In this way, the Western deficit in spirituality can be interpreted of its inferiority vis-à-vis the East. This imperfection undermines colonial claims of the West, and serves as an important argument in the nationalist struggle¹⁰¹. Chatterjee's analysis is to a large degree applicable to Aurobindo. However, although Aurobindo reproduces the spiritual East vs. material East binary, he also attempts to claim that East is *both* spiritual and practical. I will elaborate on this in chapter 5.

An English term for Indian reality?

One further question, related to the current debate on religion as a category, arises when reading Aurobindo. To what extent is 'religion' an

⁹⁹ Chatterjee 1993, 5-6.

¹⁰⁰ Chatterjee 1993, 48.

¹⁰¹ Cf. Veer 2014, 45ff. Halbfass, e.g., speaks of an Indian "spiritual expansionism and 'imperialism'" proposed by Vivekananda in opposition to Western colonialism" (Halbfass 1988, 238).

adequate term to speak about Indian tradition and *dharma*? Here, again, Aurobindo is ambiguous. On the one hand, as I demonstrated earlier, he translates *dharma* as “religion”. On the other hand, however, he is sufficiently explicit in stating that religion is a Western category and cannot describe the lived-reality in India. To develop this aspect further, consider how Aurobindo, who became familiar with Western religiosity during his studies in Britain, synthesises his perception of European religion:

There is no word so plastic and uncertain in its meaning as the word religion. [...] Sometimes [Europeans] use it as equivalent to a set of beliefs, sometimes as equivalent to morality, coupled with a belief in God, sometimes as equivalent to a set of pietistic actions and emotions. [...] Religion and daily life are [...] two entirely different things [...]. Altruistic works are sometimes brought under religion, sometimes excluded from it. [...] [R]eligion and knowledge are [...] unconnected, if not opposed [...]. The place of knowledge is taken by faith [...] stripped of any reason¹⁰².

Three things emerge from this slightly caricatured evaluation of religion as understood by a European. The first is a clear recognition—many decades before Said and others—that ‘religion’ is a Western concept, and that in dealing with it, one should be aware of its European presuppositions. The second consists in the conclusion that there is no *single* generally recognised European meaning of religion. In reality, the latter is “plastic and uncertain”, and has different interpretations. I would argue that this point has been missed by many critics of the usage of the category of religion outside the Western context, who seem to imply that the West has produced one,

¹⁰² Ghose 2003, 491. Cf. Ghose 1997j, 32.

unequivocal category, transhistorical and inter-denominational in its nature. My third point, which balances the previous statement, is that notwithstanding the absence of a unique conception of religion, Aurobindo grasps an important constant within a variety of European understandings of religion. The citation indicates that Aurobindo considers the European notion of religion to be too disincarnate from everyday life and critical knowledge or, to use Dubuisson's expression, a "distinct domain"¹⁰³. None of the three meanings of religion, listed by Aurobindo (belief, morality, piety), correspond to the holistic entity of *sanatana dharma* or spirituality. On the contrary, all three indicate an understanding of religion as something 'partial', 'autonomous'—in brief, a club of interests.

In *A Defence of Indian Culture*, Aurobindo argues that "Indian religion cannot be described by any of the definitions known to the occidental intelligence. [...] [I]t has been a free and tolerant synthesis of all spiritual [...] experience [...], nameless, formless, universal, infinite, like the Brahman of its age-long seeking"¹⁰⁴. He further claims that

[t]he original Vedic society had no place for any Church or religious community [...], [and] the people formed a single socio-religious whole with no separation into religious and secular¹⁰⁵.

¹⁰³ Dubuisson 2003, 27.

¹⁰⁴ Ghose 1997a, 193.

¹⁰⁵ Ghose 1997a, 421.

Even a quick comparison of the two cited statements with the way in which Aurobindo describes European religiosity suggests a profound difference between two ways of conceiving religion. The first reason consists in the claim that Hinduism is tolerant and inclusive, the implication being that it cannot be described as a 'religion' since it includes and transcends all religions¹⁰⁶. The second reason is that Hinduism, in its past and present, represents a socio-religious whole, not unlike the Durkheimian 'religion', mentioned in chapter 2. The "religious community" is considered to be insufficiently holistic, with respect to the Vedic ideal. Accordingly, to define Hinduism as 'religion', would be to leave aside the "social" and "secular" part of the "whole"¹⁰⁷.

Is then 'religion' an inadequate term to express the Hindu tradition and its Aurobindonian version? Paradoxically, the answer given by Aurobindo is that 'religion' can be used in this sense, on the condition of the re-articulation of the category itself. In *The Renaissance in India*, after reaffirming that "the word ['religion'] is English, smacks too much of things external" and that "there is no one Indian equivalent", he concedes that "if we give rather to religion the sense of [...] the all-embracing unity", of the "rais[ing of] life in all its parts to the divinest possible values", then the term

¹⁰⁶ See chapter 5.

¹⁰⁷ As Aurobindo says elsewhere, *dharma* or "Indian religion" includes anything, "from the heights of Yoga" to "eat[ing] on the floor and not at a table" (Ghose 2003, 492-93).

becomes acceptable¹⁰⁸. Even more importantly, in the same passage, Aurobindo provides an example of how to speak of 'religion', without losing sight of the plurality of semantic accents that this term bears. In this regard, Aurobindo argues that if "religion" is taken with its Western connotations of external beliefs and piety, then India is an example of "an excessive religiosity"; however, if Indian reality is evaluated according to the re-articulated, i.e. holistic, semantics of the term, then one should ascertain "too little" of religion.

I would argue that this passage is relevant for several reasons. First, the way in which Aurobindo speaks of 'religion' in the passage cited above, indicates that he is capable of using 'religion' in its various meanings. This suggests that this category can be used to both describe a holistic *and* autonomous reality—and that the confusion is *per se* avoidable if the writer is careful enough to explicate which sense she has in mind. One could therefore conclude that, although in modernity 'religion' is linked to the binary of the religious/secular, the latter is not *a priori* inherent in every modern discourse on religion. This would also mean that to sustain that e.g. the "Anglo-Protestant conception of religion" became passively assimilated in India as religion *tout court*—as King and others have suggested—would

¹⁰⁸ Ghose 1997j, 39.

be an oversimplification¹⁰⁹. Aurobindonian analysis provides an example of how Indian tradition has challenged those Protestant assumptions¹¹⁰.

Moreover, one could also make a case that the logic behind some of those assumptions, not only has not prioritised the Western approach to religiosity but, on the contrary, empowered the East over against the West¹¹¹. This point will become clearer in the next chapter of the thesis. Second, Aurobindonian critique of Indian religiosity is important for the theological discussion on the interrelation between religion and the sacred. The logic behind Aurobindo's articulation suggests that "excessive religiosity" (concentration on the things considered sacred, such as creeds and worship) leads, in fact, to the autonomisation of religion, which constitutes its decline. In other words, the moment that religion detaches from the rest of life, i.e. when it emerges as 'religion' and becomes articulated as a distinct reality, it loses its aim. Third, I suggest that, from the theological perspective developed in the previous chapter, 'religion' *qua* the separate and autonomous sphere of life relates to 'religion' *qua* holistic reality, as decline relates to the ideal. It is, thus, not helpful to imagine both meanings of 'religion' as being completely different

¹⁰⁹ Cf. King 2010, 105-06.

¹¹⁰ Aurobindo is not the only voice in India to reject those assumptions. On instances of insistence on pre-eminence of religious practice vs. doctrinal issues, see Zavos 2001, 115-17.

¹¹¹ As Halbfass points out, the idea of the primacy of the origins led to the Romantic turn towards India, 'the cradle of world civilisation' (Halbfass 1988, 57ff). According to Hutchinson, the 'rediscovery' of a Sanskrit civilisation of India "undermined hierarchies of authority [...] between Europe and the rest of the world" and "legitimized anti-colonialist nationalists who asserted rights to freedom as heirs of the founding civilizations of humanity" (Hutchinson 2013, 78).

and unrelated. This theological statement is not irrelevant to the discussion on the category of religion, insofar as it provides a way to keep both meanings logically united.

Can history be reversed?

One last point in Aurobindo's thought is worth mentioning in relation to the present discussion on 'religion'. As I will demonstrate in the next chapter, a good portion of Aurobindonian cultural writings were composed, to a large degree, as a reaction to the West. However, while moving forward with his anti-Western agenda, Aurobindo shows a great deal of realism. Here is what he says in his essay "Indian Culture and External Influence":

Any attempt to remain exactly what we were before the European invasion [...] is foredoomed to an obvious failure. However much we may deplore [...] [being] dominated by the Western standpoint [...], we cannot get rid of a certain element of inevitable change it has produced upon us, any more than a man can go back in life [...] [T]he form of our thinking [...] has changed by the very fact of new thought and experience [...]. My mind [...] is modified by what it observes and works upon [...], modified even when it denies and rejects; [...] an old thought or truth which I affirm against an opposing idea, becomes a new thought to me in the effort of affirmation and rejection¹¹².

I will return to this insight by Aurobindo in the conclusions to the chapter. For now, I would like to emphasise two relevant points. Firstly, a change in conceiving reality may be due not only to a foreign imposition, but to the very *encounter* with the 'other'. Meeting another tradition, polemicising with it, and even rejecting it, modifies the mind of the one who encounters.

¹¹² Ghose 1997g, 51-52.

Secondly, some changes made during the encounter with the 'other', in this case the West, are irreversible. To paraphrase a Salman Rushdie expression, all our words cannot make India unsee what she saw or unfeel what she felt¹¹³.

Yannaras against religion

'Religion': Western or universal?

In chapter 3, I engaged with Yannaras' articulation of Christianity as the very reversal of the terms of religion. It is extremely clear in Yannaras that Christianity is *not* a religion. Now, an interesting question to ask at this point would be: Does this denial invalidate 'religion' as a category? In other words, is 'religion' a useless conceptual tool, from Yannaras' point of view?

Yannaras, writing in Modern Greek, is using the term *threskeia* (translated into English as 'religion') which etymologically is more linked to cult and piety, with respect to Latin *religio*¹¹⁴. One is tempted to ask: How Western could *threskeia* ever be?

As I argued in chapter 3, Yannaras treats this issue somewhat ambiguously. In *Orthodoxy and the West*, Yannaras depicts the West as essentially religious, and the source of the religionisation of the East. This

¹¹³ Cf. Rushdie 2017, 88.

¹¹⁴ Cf. Benveniste 1969, 266-67.

religionisation is defined in terms of “subordination to rationalism, individualism, ‘ideologization’, and secularization of faith”¹¹⁵. However, as I mentioned in the previous chapter, Yannaras gives us a completely different picture of ‘religion’ in his later book, *Against Religion*. In this essay, described by Kalaitzidis as “an exception to the Yannarasian rule”¹¹⁶, ‘religion’ constitutes a natural way to cope with human anxieties and, as it were, the default position of man in relation to God. The church *transcends* this natural stance. Unlike in *Orthodoxy and the West*, religion here appears to be a universal anthropological fact, not something exclusively Western. In the next chapter, I will indicate a possible way of making sense of this ambiguity. For now, what is important to emphasise is Yannaras’ assertion that religionisation is a constant threat for the church, from the New Testament’s Judaizers to modern Orthodoxy. A key moment in the process of ‘religionisation’ is that of Constantinian Christianity: in what sounds like a reversal of Schmittian dictum, the event-church gets ‘secularised’ to become the civil religion of the state. In his “Human Rights and the Orthodox Church”, Yannaras points out a different moment of ‘secularisation’, after more than a millennium. The ideologised and individuocentric Christian civil religion now gets further “secularised” as an equally ideologised and

¹¹⁵ Yannaras 2011d, 61.

¹¹⁶ Kalaitzidis 2017, 429.

individuocentric modern nation-state. It is this latter moment which resonates with Schmitt's analysis. However, unlike the 'first' secularisation, in which the church was essentially transformed, in the 'second', nothing really changes. As Gallaher puts it, commenting on Yannaras, "[r]eligion births a new political order as equally diseased as the form of life of the Church [...] that expresses it"¹¹⁷. This idea, I suggested in the previous chapter, is important insofar as it opens up a possibility of critiquing modern nationalism and 'religion' along the same lines.

What is also important for the sake of my argument is that, in *Against Religion*, Yannaras points out that 'religion' is a *constant* threat. The implication here is that of fluidity: a community can become a 'religion' and eventually cease to be one. Thus, the question is not: Does Greek Orthodoxy constitute a 'religion'?, but rather: To what extent is it 'religion'?

'Religion' and religious/secular binary

Vasilios Makrides interprets Yannaras' distinction between church and religion as an attempt to claim Christian superiority vis-à-vis other religions¹¹⁸. By this manoeuvre Yannaras would be reacting against postmodern tendencies towards a more pronounced tolerance towards and appreciation

¹¹⁷ Gallaher 2018, 212.

¹¹⁸ Makrides 2017.

of other religious traditions. Yannaras' unwillingness to define Christianity in terms of religion would be a sign that non-Christian religions remain a problem for Orthodox theology¹¹⁹. There is, perhaps, some truth in this, and I will explore it in chapter 5. I would argue, however, that the core of the problem is slightly different than that indicated by Makrides¹²⁰. Yannaras is ultimately not interested in other religions. His problem with 'religion' is a matter of religious/secular division, as articulated by modernity. Moreover, as I will argue in the next chapter, the *other* against which this articulation is being conceived, is not the non-Christian traditions, e.g. Islam, but the West as civilisation.

As I suggested in chapter 3, Yannaras, throughout his work, emphasises that Christian commitment is a unity, involving the whole human being in all the dimensions of her life, both private and public. The aim of ethics, as understood by Yannaras, is to bring human life into harmony with the truth of the world, and transform a human person into "the celebrant of life in its totality, in the universal oneness of existence beyond any division or separation between [the] transcendent and mundane, between [the] material and spiritual", in order to reach "the unification of 'all in all' in the uniqueness

¹¹⁹ Makrides 2017, 374-75.

¹²⁰ In his critique of Yannaras' 'religion', Makrides takes this category in its conventional meaning (Makrides 2017, 378). However, as I argued in chapter 3, 'religion' in Yannaras is a particular construct, dissimilar to what is conventionally understood by the term.

of divine life"¹²¹. Christian endeavour, manifested in the Eucharist, aims at the "transubstantiation' of the world into a fact of communion", and has its "ontological roots" in the incarnation of God", in the "natural union of created and uncreated"¹²². The Eucharist should be realised in the *saeculum*: "Work, economic life, the family, art, technology, politics and cultural life all become part of man's eucharistic relationship with God"¹²³ In this regard, I find the following fact very indicative: The works of Greek novelist and poet Alexandros Papadiamantis—whom Yannaras considers to be "the most important and most authentic modern Greek theologian"—are praised for blurring the "distinction between 'sacred' and 'profane'" and for placing "the most 'desacralized' aspects of human behavior [...] [with]in the dialogue between love and freedom, [and] passionate divine love for humanity"¹²⁴. The church, Yannaras argues, "becomes relevant only if it represents something as tangible or as concrete as our food and clothing, work-tools and daily transport, the medical infrastructure necessary for our health, and our need to share, to love and be loved"¹²⁵. Moreover, the very concept of

¹²¹ Yannaras 1984, 85-86.

¹²² Yannaras 1984, 92, emphasis in original.

¹²³ Yannaras 1984, 94.

¹²⁴ Yannaras 2006, 254-55. Yannaras refers to Papadiamantis' prose as an "authentically Orthodox" "theology of transfiguration" (Yannaras 1972b, 212).

¹²⁵ Yannaras 2003, 31.

church's catholicity is interpreted by Yannaras as "wholeness and fullness of a *mode of existence*", which does not separate faith, morality and life¹²⁶.

Through drawing a historical and semantical continuity between the church and *polis*, Yannaras challenges the 'received' distinction of the religious and the secular, advanced by the Enlightenment, but also the description of religion as Rudolf Otto's *mysterium numinosum*¹²⁷. It might even seem that Yannaras wants to go further than Medieval Christendom, which—through ideas of a 'symphonia' (in Byzantium) or 'two swords' (in the Latin West)—recognised a certain boundary between the sacred (and the church, or at least ecclesiastical hierarchy, property) and the profane (state's political authority), albeit as a distinction *internal* to a religious worldview¹²⁸.

(III) What to do with 'religion'?

I will now draw some conclusions, regarding 'religion', based on my engagement with Aurobindo and Yannaras. Both thinkers construct their respective theologies using the category of religion. At the same time, however, they are clearly reluctant to identify their respective traditions (and their own articulations of these traditions) with 'religion'. Both thinkers manifest various degrees of this reluctance. Aurobindo's unease and

¹²⁶ Yannaras 2013, 152.

¹²⁷ Cf. Otto 1950.

¹²⁸ Cf. De Roover 2016. On Constantine's *regnum* as something also coming from God, cf. Sherrard 1973.

ambivalence when dealing with 'religion' is very indicative: he sometimes describes Hinduism, and his particular conceiving of it, as 'religion', a 'true' and 'eternal' one, while in other moments he explicitly re-articulates the category, giving it his own characteristics, and in still other instances he rejects it altogether and prefers spirituality instead. Yannaras, in his dealing with 'religion' is also ambivalent. On the one hand, by arguing that Christianity is a political and non-religious entity, he, in a way, employs the category 'religion' (and the duality of religious/political, which is the foundation of the category), in order to be able to claim that Christianity belongs to the domain of the political, and not of the religious. But on the other hand, Yannaras is unhappy with the division of reality into the sacred and secular, and insists on the unity of the transcendental and mundane, faith and life. Generally speaking, while Aurobindo is quite explicit about the semantic fluidity of 'religion', Yannaras gives to 'religion' a very specific, and negative connotation, to a certain extent analogous to that of Aurobindonian "religionism".

Finally, both Yannaras and Aurobindo construct their own categories of 'religion', through recourse to their own devised binaries (the "event-church" and "mode of existence" in Yannaras; "religionism" and "spirituality" in Aurobindo). In Yannaras, the critique of religion is more radical, while the Aurobindonian project remains unfinished, or, rather, open-

ended. It is true, however, that the latter receives its final solution from the Mother (Mirra Alfassa) and other followers who reject 'religion' altogether in favour of 'spirituality'¹²⁹. As I suggested in my previous chapter, such a solution—too idealistic and not sufficiently self-critical—seems to encounter the pitfalls of which Aurobindo was very conscious.

I would also argue that the category of religion, far from being alienating as some of its critics have suggested, is successfully used by both Aurobindo and Yannaras. 'Religion', by being simultaneously utilised, re-articulated and rejected, serves as a precious semantic reference point within both theological projects.

In the preliminary conclusions to this chapter, I argued that the scholars, who contributed to the three critics of 'religion', tend to construct their own category of religion (rather than merely describe an existing one), emphasising those aspects which would strengthen their arguments. In particular cases, this goes hand in hand with the implicit assumption that there exists a unique understanding of the category of 'religion'. Now, what we have in the theological analysis of Aurobindo and Yannaras is, on the one hand, a creative construction of 'religion', reminiscent of the tactics of the scholars mentioned above while, on the other hand, a recognition of the fluidity and dynamism of this category throughout history.

¹²⁹ Cf. Minor 1999, 42ff.

Is *religio(n)* not good for Hinduism?

Many of the scholars who contributed to the three critiques, mentioned above, argue that since 'religion' is a Semitic (or Christian, or Protestant) category which postulates an autonomous and privatised domain, it should not be applied outside its context of origins, for instance to Hindu traditions. While I see the logic of their presupposition, I do not necessarily share their conclusion. To explain my reluctance, I refer to the Greco-Roman cult, as a *tertium comparationis* between Christian and Hindu traditions.

In my discussion of Yannaras' idea of the non-religious character of the early church, in chapter 3, I argued that when talking about Greco-Roman religiosity of the first centuries of CE, it makes little sense to draw a strict line of separation between the 'religious' and the 'secular'. I referred to the scholarship on this topic and pointed out its tendency to insist that the Greco-Roman cult was actually not something a-political, and therefore our modern category of religion should be amended adding to it a political dimension if we want to apply this category to antiquity¹³⁰. This suggests that, rather than insisting on the need for a new category, one could perhaps find ways of distinguishing between ancient and modern religion, or one private and holistic.

¹³⁰ See particularly Beard, North, and Price 1998, x-xi. Cf. Juergensmeyer 2008a, 18.

I argue that a problem with the critique of the possibility of applying the category of 'religion' to non-Western traditions, in particular to Hinduism, lies in the fact that such a statement presupposes the inability of Hinduism to accomplish something that has been performed by Christianity, i.e. to re-articulate itself in terms of a *different* tradition. In fact, if we bring together Balagangadhara's idea of a clear contrast between Hinduism and Greco-Roman paganism, on the one hand, and Christianity and other Semitic religions on the other, as well as his own concession that early Christianity translates itself in *foreign* terms of the Roman *religio*, then should we not conclude that 'religion' could also be a category capable of migrating through different traditions, and might also be adapted to Hinduism, just as *religio* was adapted from classical Roman usage to Christianity?

How did Christianity articulate itself as *religio*? It did so through a re-definition which involved not only a conceptual shift, but yet a linguistic manoeuvre of providing 'religion' with a new etymology—"historically false" and "invented by Christians", according to Benveniste—which consisted in a shift from Ciceronian 'tradition' (*relegere*) to a Lactantian 'link' of the believer with God (*religare*)¹³¹. Now, as Balagangadhara himself claims, Roman *religio* would be synonymous with what we today define as culture and, accordingly,

¹³¹ Benveniste 1969, 265. Cf. Sachot 1985.

the Romans would not consider Judaism and Christianity as *religiones*¹³².

Thus, in order to show that theirs was also a *religio*, Christians have re-defined *religio* itself¹³³.

The question which arises at this point can be formulated as follows: If Christianity could have appropriated and re-articulated the category of *religio* from a polytheistic, theologico-political, non-centralised entity which we call pagan Roman religion—not dissimilar in some of its structure from Hinduism, as Balagangadhara himself recognises¹³⁴—why could not ‘religion’ also, *mutatis mutandis*, be applied to, and re-articulated by Indian traditions? In other words, why would one grant to Christianity the right of re-articulation and application to itself of the Roman *religio* (without necessarily implying a diminishment of Christianity’s agency)—but *a priori* deny the same possibility to Asian traditions¹³⁵? Of course, the question remains whether Christianity’s

¹³² See Balagangadhara 1994, ch. 2.

¹³³ According to Balagangadhara, in their apologetic endeavour with the Romans, the Christians “transformed the very question: instead of showing that they were true to ancestral *practice*, they argued that their *doctrines* were [...] true” (Balagangadhara 1994, 48, emphasis in original). He also argues that Christianity advanced a nexus *practice* and *belief*, unprecedented until then (Balagangadhara 1994, 53). This resonates with Boyarin’s claim that the orthodoxy/heresy dichotomy is a Christian invention (Boyarin 2004). If this analysis is correct, Yannaras’ insistence on the secondary role of doctrine for the Christians might be theologically valid but historically inaccurate.

¹³⁴ I conclude this from Balagangadhara’s assertion that both Hindus and the followers of the Roman *religio* “see the various traditions as a *human search* for ‘truth’, [...] [and] share a common attitude which distinguishes them from Christians and Muslims alike. They do not approach the diversity of human traditions in terms of doctrinal truth” (Balagangadhara 2012, 207).

¹³⁵ I concede, however, that Balagangadhara’s suggestion that Hindu tradition cannot be re-articulated in terms of religion, is not *per se* incoherent. The question of agency (by which I mean the possibility of re-articulation) is complicated. Perhaps, based on Hindu theological data one can conclude that Hinduism cannot do something analogous to what Christianity

self-description in terms of *religio* was a re-articulation of a foreign category, or instead—as Yannaras would suggest—a re-articulation of the church by this category, leading to a loss of Christian identity¹³⁶. But, independently of how this question is answered, there remains the fact that the encounter (and, one should add, not a symmetrical one) of two traditions, Christianity and Roman paganism, led the ‘newcomer’ to an articulation within the linguistic and epistemic paradigm of the dominant tradition.

I would like to mention one last point, in relation to the possibility of ‘religion’ to be articulated in a less autonomous and more inclusive manner. Both Aurobindo and Yannaras articulate their theological ideals in a holistic and, as it were, religio-political way. It is true that, while Aurobindo sometimes re-articulates ‘religion’ to fit his holistic framework, Yannaras prefers to do the contrary. In fact, he defines his holistic framework over against ‘religion’. However, it would seem that neither author would be able to express their respective ideals without having recourse to the category of religion. The question, which seems worth asking at this point, would be as follows: Are the holistic approaches of Aurobindo and Yannaras something

has done, for one or another reason. Such a position would be completely acceptable. However, Balagangadhara seems to suggest that Hinduism is *a priori* incapable of such an articulation, which I find problematic.

¹³⁶ Balagangadhara does not seem to be interested in this question. He argues, that “it is as difficult to separate out the Greek contribution to the development of Christianity, as it is to say what is ‘truly’ Christian. Christianity is a result of both. [...] [G]iven another environment, Christianity would have evolved differently” (Balagangadhara 1994, 434). Again, one could wonder why, for Balagangadhara, ancient Christianity should have a right to freely evolve in its own milieu, while Indian traditions would be necessarily suffocated by a foreign context?

completely unseen in Western academic conceptualisation? I would argue that Durkheim's position resonates to a large degree with the holistic religio-political perspectives of Aurobindo and Yannaras. It is significant that the Durkheimian approach to religion, as virtually coterminous with society, is largely ignored by an important portion of scholarship, which insists on religion as a domain distinct from the secular and the political, and argues that religion is a Western category, which should not be applied to similar phenomena outside its place of origin¹³⁷. One of the reasons might be that the Durkheimian conception of religion, as coterminous with society, did not succeed in competing with 'religion', as autonomous domain, and remained at the margins of academic and, more importantly, the social and political conceptualisation of reality. In other words, it did not become part of what has been received both by the scholars mentioned earlier and by this dissertation as the modern category of religion.

¹³⁷ For example, the category of religion, presented in Dubuisson's *magnum opus*, is the one articulated by Schleiermacher and Otto, and the references to Durkheim and his *Elementary Forms* are limited to sacred/profane distinction rather than religion as coterminous with society. The same can be said about many other critics of 'religion'. Now, I do not postulate that a reference to Durkheim is a *sine qua non* condition of talking about religion in modernity, but his theory does at least present religion as something inherently social, not separated from the political—and would provide more of the story about Western approaches to 'religion', which is otherwise omitted.

New category?

Will we benefit from a novel category, more inclusive and less crypto-Western, as it were, to be used instead of 'religion'? Or, as Balagangadhara would put it, a new category which would be suitable to describe both Western 'religion' and Asian 'non-religious' traditions? Earlier in the chapter I briefly introduced Dubuisson's category of *cosmographic formation* which, I suggested, is not dissimilar to the much more familiar category of *culture*. The intention of finding a more inclusive category than that of 'religion' is also present in the writings of many other scholars. Such a category is implied by Dumont, who speaks of a "general configuration of values, which in all cases but one [Western] is coterminous with religion"¹³⁸. Another example is provided by Mark Juergensmeyer who, as I mentioned earlier, is well aware that 'religion' before and after the Enlightenment, or Christianity and Hindu *dharma* as 'religions' are not quite the same. He proposes a category of "ideologies of order", which would cover not only various forms of 'religion', but also secular nationalism¹³⁹.

But are the categories proposed by Dubuisson, Dumont and Juergensmeyer really better alternatives to 'religion'? Are they really less culturally biased? Are they less Western? As Etienne Balibar rightly puts it in

¹³⁸ Dumont 1971, 33.

¹³⁹ Juergensmeyer 2008a, 19-21.

his engagement with Asad's critique of 'religion', "the category of 'culture' (as well as the categories of 'society' and 'politics') is no less Eurocentric and 'Western' than the categories of religion and secularism"¹⁴⁰. I even wonder whether such a thing as a neutral category exists, because every category is culturally and historically biased.

Human categories do tend to be biased, because so is human knowledge which, as Yannaras suggests, is often forced to function as a remedy for human fears of insecurity. In what follows, I propose to look at what Fitzgerald and Said assert about the Western tendency to describe the variety of cultures in Western-made terms, through the lens of Yannaras' emphasis on insecurity, mentioned in the previous chapter.

Timothy Fitzgerald, who takes a similar line to Dubuisson and Cavanaugh, makes an interesting point, by suggesting that imposing 'religion' upon the Eastern cultures "has the effect of protecting dominant western ideology from the perceived threat of relativity"¹⁴¹. A similar dynamic has been pointed out by Edward Said who argues that, in reality, the argument works for both sides—for the colonisers and the colonised. Speaking about Western images of Islam, Said suggests that Orientalism has

¹⁴⁰ Balibar 2011, 14-15.

¹⁴¹ Fitzgerald 2000, 23.

behind itself the same uneasiness to deal with constant fluidity of identity, as do fundamentalism and nationalism:

no one finds it easy to live [...] with the thesis that human reality is constantly being made and unmade [...]. Patriotism, [and] extreme xenophobic nationalism [...] are common responses to this fear. We all need some foundation on which to stand; the question is how [...] unchangeable [...] this foundation is. [...] [A]n essential Islam or Orient [...] are no more than images, and are upheld as such both by the community of the Muslim faithful and [...] by the community of Orientalists¹⁴².

What Said implies is that there exists a sort of semantic 'collusion' between Westerners and Orientals, which liberates them from the anxiety connected to the need to constantly re-define the key points of their identity. An engagement with Yannaras' thought may be useful at this point. Both Fitzgerald's threat of relativity and Said's uneasiness with the fluidness of reality are reminiscent of Yannaras' description of 'religion'—as opposed to the event-church—in terms of the human need to deal with the life's anxieties and insecurities. As I indicated in chapter 3, Yannaras points out to what extent 'religion', but also modern ideologies (*in primis* nationalism) and indeed rationalism, are reactions to the human fear of ignorance and the lack of points of absolute reference. The solution, which Yannaras offers, is to live, abandoning oneself to the risk of freedom, exercised politically through communal and constant verification of the truth. Pushing his argument further, I would suggest that *constant* verification means that the answers,

¹⁴² Said 2003, 333.

definitions, classifications of yesterday are not *a priori* capable of giving a true representation of the reality of today.

The question remains concerning the 'legitimate' degree of the essentialisation. Already Said has been criticised for being ambiguous on whether the Western representation of the Orient is inadequate because it is incorrect, or because any representation is *a priori* inadequate, or perhaps because the Orient does not exist as a representable entity¹⁴³. It is not the aim of this thesis to provide an answer to this complex puzzle. I would only like to emphasise that human categories tend to be biased not only *qua* bearing political interests, but as reactions to human anxiety and the discomfort of making sense of the constant transformation of identity.

Let us return to the category of religion. Alternative categories (to 'religion') proposed by the scholars, cited above, are not necessarily less Eurocentric or preferable. Is Juergensmeyer's 'ideology of order' a conception with no specific Western background? Why should we reject 'religion' but continue to use categories of 'culture' or 'body', as does Dubuisson? What Dubuisson says about biases, which 'religion' hides behind, makes much sense. However, perhaps it is *exactly* because we are aware of

¹⁴³ Summarising some of the critiques of Said's work, King points out that he "oscillat[es] between a radical and Foucauldian critique of representation and a humanistic stance that appears profoundly incompatible with [...] the relativistic anti-representationalism with which Said seems to flirt. [...] [A]s Bruce Robbins has suggested, [...] 'if everything is representation, then representation is not a scandal. Or if all representation is a scandal, then no particular representation is especially scandalous'" (King 1999, 83).

the pitfalls of 'religion', that we are able to use this category much more self-consciously and critically than we would with a possible alternative¹⁴⁴.

I conclude that Aurobindo and Yannaras (not directly exposed to the scholarship which represents the three mentioned critiques) have grasped the ideological content of 'religion', and were able to usefully engage with the category, in order to reject its Western connotations. Having said that, I must also acknowledge that one should not *a priori* exclude the possibility of the usage of categories other than 'religion', nor that we might be able to arrive at a better one. Of course, certain proposed categories have their limitations. 'Religion' is not immune to shortcomings, and is a problematic category, used not only to describe reality, but to transform it. However, this is a challenge for all human language, not just this or that category.

'Religion' and modernity

Arguments which emphasise the political rationale—both of the emerging nation-state vs. intermediary structures, and of colonial powers vs. the colonised—of the emergence of 'religion,' are convincing in pointing out that violence and alienation are deeply involved in the process of this emergence. Yet, drawing on Aurobindo, I would argue that, however regrettable these processes might have been, their consequences cannot

¹⁴⁴ Cf. Sweetman 2003, 350-51.

easily be undone. Of course, we can reject a category, as some scholars do, but we cannot eliminate the history, which led to its appearance. As Aurobindo pertinently points out, it is the encounter itself—whether accepted or rejected—that modifies our perception of reality. In this sense, ‘religion’, or better the discovery of ‘religion’ in India, might be the product of an encounter with the *other*, to no less a degree than a result of Western asymmetrical and colonising pressure.

Consider the logic behind Denis Guénoun’s dictum “[r]eligion happens as the *difference of religions*”¹⁴⁵. The wars of religions, so the argument goes, lead to

the emergence of religions as *religions*, [...] as something that *divides*. [...] For the religious to come up, a division of the church is necessary [...]. In order to say (or think), ‘This is my religion’, it is necessary to have another religion across the way. If there is only one religion, there are only stories, behavior, assembling [...], but no religion. It is only as a plurality or duality of religions that religion comes about¹⁴⁶.

I would suggest that, however critical one is of the wars of religion, the consequences of the ‘discovery’ of the religious other, are not something that can be eliminated from human memory.

Talking more specifically about India, I accept that initially Hindu traditions were not religions in the modern Western sense of an autonomous and private domain. I should add, however, that the way of their articulation has undergone, and is probably still undergoing, some profound changes (as

¹⁴⁵ Guénoun 2013, 70.

¹⁴⁶ Guénoun 2013, 69.

De Roover, King and others point out). But I would argue that the same can be said about Christianity. As suggested by Yannaras and others, Christianity has become much more private and autonomous in modern times, as compared to its antique and medieval ethos¹⁴⁷. I also suggest that colonialism may not be the only agent behind the articulation of Indian traditions in terms of modern 'religion'. The cooperation of natives with what is sometimes called the 'invention of Hinduism' has been widely described by the scholarship¹⁴⁸. Therefore, I would feel safe to argue that 'religion' is also a product of a particular context of encounter, which modernity (and colonialism, as part of this) certainly facilitate.

In relation to India, I would emphasise that the West is not the only *other*, the encounter of which has forced Indians to re-think their identity. As Halbfass rightly points out, contact with the Muslims has already led to a re-articulation of Hindu identity: "This sense of identity against others [...] is different from the old self-understanding of the *arya*, or the 'orthodox' self-identification in the framework of the one absolute, i.e., Vedic *dharma*. *Dharma* is no longer the one and only, all-comprehensive *dharma*, but one *dharma* among others"¹⁴⁹. I would suggest that the semantic link between the encounter with the 'other' and what we conventionally call 'modernity' is

¹⁴⁷ Cf. Dumont 1971; Juergensmeyer 2008a, 18.

¹⁴⁸ See Hirst and Zavos 2005; Pennington 2005; Sugirtharajah 2010.

¹⁴⁹ Halbfass 1988, 192. On the construction of Hindu identity in the context of Muslim domination in India, see Lorenzen 1999; Nicholson 2010, 190ff.

of extreme importance. On this point, I find John Zavos very convincing. Speaking of the role of the Hindu-Mughal encounter in the 17th and 18th centuries in defining religious and supra-local identities, he argues: “We can, then, see these developments as indicative of the ways in which religious identities were developing in critical new ways as part of that broader process of supra-local identity formation associated with modernity. Religion, in this sense, is a discourse of modernity”¹⁵⁰.

How then are modernity and the West interrelated? I find convincing the argument which emphasises the role of an encounter with the West in interpreting Hindu traditions in terms of ‘religion’. But, again, is this ‘religion’ a product of colonialism, or modernity as such? As van der Veer correctly observes, in some Asian countries, such as India, “modernity has been mediated by imperialism”¹⁵¹. I would suggest that there is an ambivalence between modernisation and Westernisation, and consequentially an ambivalence between ‘religion’ as a product of modernity, and as a product of imperialism. It is surely impossible to historically separate modernity from Western imperialism, or to deny that respective contributions of the West

¹⁵⁰ Zavos 2010, 60. Cf. his account of Indian Sabhas, formed as “representative of that public whose interest they invoked”, in order to claim legitimacy vis-à-vis the colonial government (Zavos 2001, 112-14). Such a way of organisation represents a new approach to exercising religious agency. However, I suggest, this innovation—rather than being a colonial imposition—is a response to modernity, i.e. a way of addressing the new representative legal culture.

¹⁵¹ Veer 2015, 12.

and East towards shaping modernity have been asymmetrical¹⁵².

Furthermore, this asymmetry has a limiting effect on the way one can speak about the East since, as Chatterjee puts it, “[t]he only language available is the Western language of modernity”¹⁵³. However, at least *conceptually*, modernity and Westernisation are two different things¹⁵⁴.

To conclude, ‘religion’ (and Hinduism, as ‘religion’) is not a local Western concept *tout court*. It is a Western concept, but *also* a modern one, insofar as modernity produced a new context for encounter: meeting between religious traditions, meeting between East and West, Indians and Europeans, meeting between traditionality and newness, meeting between the nation-state and what it considered to be its competitors. It is not strange therefore that Hinduism emerges only through its contact with Islam or Christianity—one cannot emerge as a religion without this encounter with the ‘other’.

What does ‘secularised’ in secularised Christianity mean?

Finally, I would like to make a point, which touches the fundamental concept that underlies the multidimensionality of the relationship between religion and the modern state: secularisation. All three above-mentioned

¹⁵² Cf. Halbfass 1988, 372; Amaladoss 1992.

¹⁵³ Chatterjee 2008, 49.

¹⁵⁴ See Kaviraj 2014b. Kaviraj argues that ‘colonial’ and ‘modern’ are “coeval”, rather than “equivalent and interchangeable” (Kaviraj 2014b, 162).

critiques point out that there is something special about 'religion' in modernity—linked to the rise of secular discourse and to the migration of a category from one cultural milieu to another. I find this argument convincing. But of what exactly does this novelty consist? But what kind of transformation are we talking about? Are we talking about—to use Gourgouris' expressions—"annihilation of the theological" or "the mere repetition of the theological in other guise"?¹⁵⁵ Are we talking merely about analogies? As Hans Blumenberg pertinently points out, "[a]nalogies [...] are precisely not transformations"¹⁵⁶.

Balagangadhara's and especially De Roover's conclusion that the religious/secular binary and the politics of secularism constitute secularised Christian theology, can be read as a way of exemplifying the implications of Carl Schmitt's celebrated dictum that "[a]ll significant concepts of the modern theory of the state are secularized theological concepts"¹⁵⁷. Not only modern political doctrine, but also modern secular rationality would constitute a secularised theology. Such an interpretation, however, seems to be problematised by authors such as Cavanaugh and D'Costa, who point out the anti-ecclesiastical or, one could perhaps say the anti-Christian character

¹⁵⁵ Gourgouris 2013, 102.

¹⁵⁶ Blumenberg 1983, 93. He suggests that "metaphoric borrowing from the dynastic language treasures of theology", or "linguistic secularization" should not be identified with secularisation in a strict sense of the word, or secularisation understood as *transformation*.

¹⁵⁷ Schmitt 2005, 36.

of the extraction of 'religion' from 'the secular'. The latter is particularly visible in the French way of articulating secularity as *laïcité*¹⁵⁸. One could even go further and argue, together with Guénoun, that the modern nation-state, with its pushing religion out of the public sphere, far from being a secularisation of Christianity, is the return of the pagan religio-political, a sort of reversed theocracy, in which the political takes the place of the religious¹⁵⁹. In other words, the modern nation-state would represent the very reversal of what Leeuwen describes as evangelical liberation "from the tyranny of the Hellenistic deification of the state"¹⁶⁰.

If one applies the interpretations, just mentioned, to De Roover's theory, one is led to the conclusion that the secularisation of Christian theology is in fact its rejection or, at least, a radical deformation. If this were the case, what inherently 'Christian' remains in the religious/secular separation? And what is the semantic meaning of *secularised* in an expression such as the "secularised Christian idea"? If secularisation becomes synonymous with rejection and deformation, what is the semantic value of using this concept

¹⁵⁸ See Baubérot 2014.

¹⁵⁹ In his reading of the ethos of the French Revolution, Guénoun argues: "The sovereign people stand [...] as the perfect reunion of what had been disjoined—the church and the empire *absolutely* fused [...]: the First City [...], indissociably theological and political inasmuch as it reconstitutes the first unity, of which 'the theological' and 'the political', when separated, are unhappy [...] avatars" (Guénoun 2013, 81-82).

¹⁶⁰ Leeuwen 1964, 332.

with respect to e.g. 'negation'? Surely, similar questions could be addressed more generally to Schmitt's famous thesis.

Notwithstanding the problems with describing the process, pointed out by De Roover, as 'secularisation', it seems that he has grasped an important aspect in emphasising the relationship between the dichotomy of the religious vs. the secular, and Christian theology. I would suggest two alternatives, which might be better ways to conceptualise this process, with respect to 'secularisation': *profanation* and *parody*.

First, I suggest that 'profanation', a concept suggested by Agamben, may be a better term to speak of this process. Agamben draws the following distinction between secularisation and profanation: while *secularisation* transfers the forces it deals with from one place to another without eliminating the forces, *profanation* neutralises its object¹⁶¹. With this nuancing, Agamben problematises the category of secularisation and, in a certain sense, implicitly suggests that the criteria for distinction are theological, since it would be up to theology to decide whether a given transformation had left the 'object' intact, or had completely rejected it. In this sense, the process, described by De Roover, seems to be better understood as 'profanation', since its outcome appears to be the "neutralisation" of the Christian content. In any case, this hypothesis deserves to be tested.

¹⁶¹ Agamben 2005a, 88.

Second, I would suggest that there is yet another alternative, which would reconcile simultaneously Christian and anti-Christian nature of the division between the religious and the secular. This solution would be to imagine modern secularism as *parodic* of Christianity, as both imitative and antagonistic. Consider, for example, Cavanaugh's argument that the modern nation-state is *parodic vis-à-vis* Christianity, with a proper soteriology *mythos*, a new covenant, and a new Body¹⁶². As has been argued in the initial chapters of this thesis, the nation in modernity has recourse to religious narratives and symbols, and constructs itself in a mimetic manner, as a *new ecclesiality*, to use an expression inspired by Guénoun¹⁶³. Since the modern Western nation-state does not have many other patterns on which to model its own political legitimacy, its parodic construction is both Christian (as Christian is its model), and anti-Christian (because it imagines itself over-against the church). I would argue that, analogically, modern secularism and the extraction of 'religion' from 'the secular', can be considered as parodic of Christianity—it draws on some Christian models, as De Roover points out, but more importantly, it rejects them.

This raises the question of whether claiming Christian paternity of the religious/secular distinction leads us anywhere? I agree with the implication

¹⁶² See Cavanaugh 1999.

¹⁶³ Guénoun 2013, 80.

of De Roover's argument, which establishes a link between the idea of the separation of the church (religion) and state, on the one hand, and Christian articulations of the two kingdoms theology, on the other. However, I want to invite more caution while trying to understand the category of religion as a 'secularisation' of the Christian concept. Consider Yannaras' argument—detailed in chapter 3—that Christianity's loss of its political and holistic nature, and its becoming a 'religion' is a non-Christian, 'secular' (i.e. a result of an imperial, rather than evangelical worldview) deformation of the Gospel message. Yannaras further asserts that it was Christianity as a civil religion (and not the event-church) which became secularised as the modern nation-state¹⁶⁴. Would this not lead us to the rather casuistic conclusion that 'religion' is a modern secularisation of an ancient 'secular' (imperial) concept, which penetrated Christianity along its transformation into *religio imperii*? Thus, finally a 'profanation' from a theological perspective. Of course, what matters for De Roover, is not so much the 'archaeology' of the concept (be it secular or Christian), but its applicability beyond the West. However, one cannot proceed without addressing the question of whether 'religion' is applicable to Christianity in the first place.

To conclude, I argue that, behind the ambivalence of Aurobindo's and Yannaras' thought on religion, there is a very persistent and robust logic,

¹⁶⁴ Yannaras 2011b.

which emphasises the holistic nature of the salvific life. Both authors, when read in parallel, and against the background of contemporary discussions on the category of religion, converge in rejecting the separation of reality into the religious and secular/political, which is inherent in the modern category of religion, as I argued in the first section of this chapter. This rejection allows them to integrate national (Indian and Hellenic) and, as it were, civilisational ('Eastern') concerns within their respective theological projects—an issue which will be addressed in the following chapter. At the same time, their rejection of 'religion' is not a simple refusal to accept the binary of the religious and secular, which comes from the West but rather, and more importantly, the very framework, in which the encounter between East and West is taking place, and through which the East is polemically articulated. This will be developed further in the next chapter.

Chapter 5. Sacred nationalism

This chapter is a reflection on how Aurobindo's and Yannaras' respective concepts of salvific life are contextualised. I will attempt here to address the following questions: If salvific life is a holistic and political endeavour, as I argued in chapter 3, how does it fit into the cultural and nation-centric context of modernity? If 'religion' is a Western construct, as I argued in the previous chapter, to what extent do engagement with and polemics against this concept affect the theology produced by non-Western thinkers? What are the outcomes of conceptualising salvific life over against a category which comes from the West and, even more importantly, is *mimetic* or *parodic*, of Western Christianity? How does 'political' salvific life relate to the political, understood in terms of friend/enemy distinction? Does it follow or, perhaps, transcend this distinction?

The chapter will engage with Aurobindo, and his anti-colonial project, in order to examine Yannaras' critique of the West. Unlike in chapter 3, where I focused predominantly on issues raised by Yannaras, here my point of departure and principal focus will be Aurobindo and his concept of inclusivism. I will argue that the Aurobindonian conception of salvific life is developed as deeply nationalistic and an anti-Western and Westernising. I

will then try to see whether any of my conclusions can be applied to the work of Yannaras. This will enable Yannaras' theology to be seen in a very different and new light, as compared to reading him within the domain of Christian thought alone.

(I) Tolerance as inclusivism

In what follows I will argue that far from being abstractly theological, Aurobindo's idea of inherent Hindu tolerance—articulated as inclusivism¹—is deeply charged with political overtones, and constitutes one of the most interesting instances of interplay between nationalism, anti-Westernism and Westernisation. Such a conclusion can be reached for a series of reasons. Firstly, Aurobindonian inclusivism is directly connected to the nationalist cause, insofar as it aims at creating unity among Hindus and more generally among all Indians to face unanimously the colonial power in a struggle for independence. In other words, the theological conception of inclusivism is to a large degree subordinated, or at least intrinsically linked, to the imagining of an Indian nation as a basis for the creation of a nation-state. I will analyse various facets of this link between Hindu tolerance and nationalist agenda, in

¹ As will become clear from what follows, Aurobindo understands religious tolerance in terms of inclusivism. I will therefore use the two terms interchangeably, although *per se* the terms can be semantically distinguishable. Cf., for instance, D'Costa 1996.

order to claim that inclusivism is deeply conditioned by political and secular logic.

Secondly, I will argue that the Aurobindonian particular way of articulating inclusivism constitutes an important *topos* of engagement with the West. Aurobindo skilfully uses this concept simultaneously to achieve two aims, which *prima facie* seem irreconcilable. On the one hand, Hindu inclusivism is resorted to as an instrument of anti-Westernism: it overturns a scheme, mentioned in chapter 4, which tries to include the Orient in the framework of Western categories and, instead, conceives of the Occident as a partial component of an Eastern synthesis. This theoretical manoeuvre allows Aurobindo to foster the moral superiority of India vis-à-vis the West. On the other hand, however, the inclusivist discourse becomes a back door, through which the West can penetrate and be absorbed by the East, in a manner which would allow Indians to Westernise and modernise, while conserving their dignity and self-esteem.

I will then try to examine whether something similar occurs in Yannaras' thought. Through comparison with Aurobindo, I will argue that, counterintuitive as it may sound, Yannaras also produces a sort of inclusivism, articulated in terms of "catholicity", which, in a very ambiguous way, includes *inter alia* the pre-modern Ottoman heritage. I will also point out to what extent this catholicity is articulated as a means of constructing Orthodox

identity in an anti-Western key. I will also show that, not unlike Aurobindonian *sanatana dharma*, Yannaras' Hellenism is ambivalently conceived as both part and whole of this catholicity.

Let us begin by considering the Aurobindonian articulation of Hinduism as the reversal of the very terms of the Western category of religion. In *A Defence of Indian Culture*, Aurobindo deplores the Western inability to understand Hinduism and addresses a perceived Western unease with Hinduism:

How can there be a religion which has [...] no credo distinguishing it from [...] rival religions? [...] How [...] can Hinduism be called a religion when it admits all beliefs, [...] all kinds of religious adventures? [...] This misunderstanding springs from the total difference of outlook on religion that divides the Indian mind and the normal Western intelligence. [...] The Indian religious thinker knows that [...] [t]he supreme truths are [...] fruits of the soul's inner experience. [...] [t]he most varying intellectual beliefs can be equally true because they mirror different facets of the Infinite. [...] There are no true and false religions, but rather all religions are true in their own way and degree. Each is one of the thousand paths to the One Eternal².

I would like to make five points in relation to this passage, in which some of the concerns pointed out earlier are recognisable. First, here we have a recognition that Hinduism *is* a religion, but a religion of a different kind with respect to the criteria set forward by the Western category of 'religion'. Second, a characteristic feature of Hindu religious particularity is its groundedness in experience rather than in intellectual propositions. Third, experience—as the basis of religion—and tolerance are conceptually linked. Fourth, Indians, unlike Westerners, understand that intellectual propositions

² Ghose 1997a, 181.

are only partial glimpses into the “facets of the Infinite”. It is by virtue of their partiality, that religions are not necessarily mutually exclusive, and therefore can all be true. The fifth important point is that Aurobindo, in arguing that all religions are true, does not claim all to be *equally* true. Instead, by claiming that religions are true “in their own way and degree”, he implicitly suggests that there may be a certain grading or hierarchy among religions. What are the criteria for such a grading? What place does Hinduism occupy within such a hierarchical order? Aurobindo suggests that, since Hinduism is aware of the partiality of religions, it can claim a certain superiority. But what kind of Hinduism does Aurobindo have in mind when he makes this implication?

I propose that it is possible to detect two ways in which Aurobindo articulates inclusive Hinduism, which correspond to the two modes—examined in chapter 3— in which he conceives of his ideal religion or spirituality. The first mode emphasises the *historical* reality of this spirituality, and tends to identify spirituality with Indian heritage. Tolerance, here, is meant to find a way to both unite various Hindu groups and to link the remaining traditions of India to Hinduism, conceived very broadly. In this way, I argue, tolerance becomes inclusivism. This deduction is further strengthened by the second way of articulation, which conceives spirituality as an *ideal*, if not an abstract or even utopian, reality. Accordingly, tolerance, related to this mode, entails a co-option of any religious or even secular

humanistic tradition, into the framework of a not-yet-fully-realised *sanatana dharma*.

I argue that the ambivalence between the two modes of tolerance-as-inclusivism is a means by which Aurobindo articulates his religious thought as contextualised in the contemporary political challenges, first of all in the nation-building and, secondly, in the polemics with, and imitation of, the West. The latter conclusion is suggested by the very context in which Aurobindo's *Defence* was conceived. The essay was written in response to Archer's *India and the Future*, where Indian culture and Hindu tradition are criticised³ in order to suggest the necessity for Christianisation of the population⁴, and to defend the colonial dominion of Britain over the Indian subcontinent⁵. Archer uses philosophical arguments in order to promote a clearly political agenda. Aurobindo reacts with a similar technique in his polemical exchange with Archer.

Inclusivism and Political Representation

Aurobindo articulates his tolerance-as-inclusivism on three different levels: all-Hindu, all-Indian, all-human. Beginning with the first level, I argue that Aurobindonian inclusivism is aimed at including diverse Hindu traditions

³ India is described as lying "under the maleficent spell of caste, fetishism, cow-and-Brahmin worship" (Archer 1918, 310).

⁴ Archer 1918, 282.

⁵ Archer 1918, especially 282, 307.

in one religious body. In a passage, cited earlier, Aurobindo argues that “Hinduism [...] admits all beliefs”⁶. He also claims that “Hinduism [...] gave itself no name, because it set itself no sectarian limits”⁷. I argue that here Aurobindo addresses, in a creative way, the problem of the absence of a historical term to describe the totality of Hindu traditions⁸. He interprets this fact in order to develop his inclusivist idea: since the existence of such a term would suggest exclusion and borders, its absence indicates Hinduism’s inclusivity.

Julius Lipner, without referring directly to Aurobindo, pointed out that Neo-Hindu recourse to *sanatana dharma*, as an umbrella term for various Indian sects and schools, “presupposes that Hinduism is a monolithic tradition in which there is agreement about some static, universal doctrine”, and argued that “there can be no such thing”⁹. Aurobindo’s articulation of *sanatana dharma* attempts to suggest that the only ‘agreement’ contemplated is the very *absence* of a ‘static’ and ‘universal’ creed. This indefinability of Hinduism resonates highly with the semantical emptiness of the Durkheimian sacred, on which I commented in chapter 2, describing it in terms of what Žižek calls “the shift of the predicate itself into the position of

⁶ Ghose 1997a, 181.

⁷ Ghose 1997a, 179.

⁸ Cf Pennington 2005, 60.

⁹ Lipner 1994, 221.

subject"¹⁰. A paraphrase of Žižek's Soviet joke, this time in adaptation to Aurobindo, would sound as follows: "I found the essence of Hinduism". "But one cannot find it; Hinduism is indefinable". "Well, this indefinability is the essence of Hinduism".

At this point, I would like to emphasise the political importance of formulating a framework to cover the variety of Hindu traditions. John Zavos importantly points out that the conceptualisation of *sanatana dharma* in the 19th and 20th centuries functions as a symbol of "a binding together of the social structure that sought to protect existing divisions and present them as elements of an 'organic' unity"¹¹. Construction of such a unity responded to the expediency, felt by the Hindu elites, to legitimate their claim of representation of the largest possible community¹². This suggests that the idea of intra-Hindu inclusivism is strictly linked to a conception of political power in a context defined by the notions of nation-state and democracy. At the same time, an all-Hindu community would have related in a more robust way to the cultural resources of the past, capable of providing a basis for colonial resistance and self-esteem. As Daniel Gold rightly puts it, "[i]n order for Hindus to reclaim the glory of their homeland, they had somehow to unite"¹³.

¹⁰ Cf. Žižek 2012, 585, 242.

¹¹ Zavos 2001, 121.

¹² Zavos 2001; Kaviraj 2010.

¹³ Gold 1991, 548.

Aurobindonian all-Hindu inclusivism resonates with the efforts of other Indian nationalist leaders and institutions of the late colonial period who have tried to address the intra-Hindu differences. To cite only one instance of such an endeavour, one could refer to the issue of the *caste system*. Aurobindo is in line with Gandhi¹⁴, and representatives of Hindu Mahasabha¹⁵, in an attempt to construct a sort of amalgamating framework, capable of uniting various castes and of incorporating the 'untouchables' into a wider Hindu community. I would suggest that such an effort should be understood not only as a way of resolving the precarious condition of the untouchables, but also as a step towards imagining Hindu community as organically united¹⁶. Aurobindo's treatment of the outcasts' problem can hardly be interpreted on strictly egalitarian terms¹⁷. What we have instead is, on the one hand, a critique of the present discrimination of the outcasts¹⁸ while, on the other hand, an appreciation of the *varna* system of the past, positively narrated as

¹⁴ Norbu 1992, 133; Veer 1994, 26. Cf. Larson 1995, 187ff; Pandey 1997, 237.

¹⁵ Jaffrelot 1993, 520; 1996, 19ff.

¹⁶ On the issue of caste as a motive for conversion from Hinduism, see Viswanathan 1998.

¹⁷ This would imply the rejection of a significant aspect of Hindu tradition. Aurobindo comes out with an abstract relativisation of the caste issue: "each man contains in himself the whole divine potentiality and therefore the Shudra cannot be rigidly confined within his Shudrahood, [...] but each contains within himself [all] the potentialities [...] of a divine manhood" (Ghose 1997d, 126-27). As Gold rightly observes, the caste divisions—the very point through which "Hindu society recognized itself as an organic whole"—appeared to be "at odds with twentieth-century political imperatives of Hindu unity" (Gold 1991, 551). Similarly, Kaviraj, argues that "to ask Hindus to forget their caste while asserting their Hindu identity is to offer [an] untraditional and paradoxical programme", involving "a heroic suppression of historical memory" (Kaviraj 2014a, 206).

¹⁸ Ghose 1997h, 89-90.

an institution of flexibility and tolerant attention to diversity, and presented over against the “error of the religions that impose a single dogmatic and inflexible rule on every man regardless of the possibilities of his nature”¹⁹. With this move, Aurobindo attempts not only to promote the all-Hindu unity, but also to defend the Indian past against the Western critiques of caste, and to launch his own critique against Western rigidity.

I conclude that by insisting on tolerance-as-inclusivism as *the* unifying outline of Hinduism, Aurobindo addresses the political issues which have arisen in this historical context, defends Hindu history, and thus contributes to the process of nation-building. As I suggested earlier, Aurobindonian *sanatana dharma* is a way of constructing Hinduism over against the exclusivism and inflexibility of the West and Christianity (and Islam)²⁰. Such an articulation becomes an additional argument in claiming the superiority of Hinduism vis-à-vis the West, brought about by appealing to tolerance, a concept praised by Westerners themselves. Thus, in the picture built up by Aurobindo, Hinduism—unlike Western religiosity—appears to be a religion of tolerance and elasticity, while the very criteria, used to substantiate the argument, are Western. Aurobindo attempts to beat the West at the West’s own game.

¹⁹ Ghose 1997a, 219. The *varnas* are defended against “a senseless geometric rigidity that would spoil the plastic truth of life” (Ghose 1997a, 163).

²⁰ “Hinduism, the most tolerant and receptive of religious systems, is not sharply exclusive like the religious spirit of Christianity or Islam” (Ghose 1997a, 133).

Inclusivism and National Unity

A second major manoeuvre, accomplished by Aurobindo through the articulation of inclusivism, is the co-option of non-Hindu traditions of India, especially Buddhism and Islam, into the all-embracing framework of Hinduism. As a matter of fact, the 'religion of India' and 'Hinduism' are often used interchangeably by Aurobindo²¹.

First, Buddhism is depicted as "only a restatement, although from a new standpoint" of the truths of the Upanishads²². The qualifications given by Aurobindo to Buddhism are not much different from what he says about European religiosity, which makes Buddhism a sort of 'Asian Westerner': the concentration on ethics, beliefs and "exclusive negations"²³, the incapacity to balance between the spiritual and the material, etc.²⁴. Moreover, in what may seem a rather counterintuitive move, Aurobindo describes the "ignorant & customary Hinduism of today" as "a Buddhicised [...] edition of the old faith"²⁵, which suggests that despite Buddhism's incorporation into a Hindu framework, it is also accused of the contemporary decay of Hinduism. What seems to be happening here is that 'Hinduism' is being understood in two

²¹ Ghose 1997a, 193.

²² Ghose 1997a, 208. Cf. Heehs 2008, 297.

²³ Ghose 1997a, 208.

²⁴ Ghose 1997a, 127; 2005, 26.

²⁵ Ghose 2001, 339.

different ways: once as the eternal religion, then as a factual one. In the first move, Buddhism is incorporated into the *eternal religion* of Hinduism, while in the second, *empirical* Hinduism is described as being under Buddhism's negative influence.

Second, there is a tendency in the Aurobindonian opus—non-systematic, but still noticeable—to 'indigenise' the Islamic presence in India²⁶. Muslims are not considered foreigners²⁷; the Mughal art is interpreted as "a typically Indian creation", which represents the "Indian mind" and values of Hindu tradition²⁸; Islamic revitalisation is included as part of the general revival of Indian spirituality²⁹. Once the Islamic presence has been claimed as genuinely Indian, it is inserted into a *Hindu* framework. "Indian Nationalism", Aurobindo argues, is

largely Hindu in its spirit [...], because the Hindu made the land and the people and persists, by the greatness of his past [...] and his invincible virility, in holding it, but wide enough also to include the Moslem and his culture [...] and absorb them into itself³⁰.

Peter Heehs rightly points out that this latter passage was written the moment there was a risk that the Muslims would cause a communal split in

²⁶ Pandey observes a similar tendency to minimise the antagonism and emphasise affinities between Hindus and Muslims, at work in the late colonial Congress. See Pandey 1997, 250ff.

²⁷ Aurobindo claims that on the subcontinent, "the Mussulman domination ceased very rapidly to be a foreign rule. The vast mass of the Mussulmans [...] are Indians by race", while "the British is the first really continuous foreign rule" (Ghose 1997a, 441).

²⁸ Ghose 1997a, 282-84.

²⁹ Ghose 1997j, 25.

³⁰ Ghose 1997i, 305. Cf. Ghose 1997i, 289ff.

the all-Indian freedom movement³¹. Heehs concludes that “[Aurobindo’s] intent was not to Hinduize Muslims but to lay the groundwork for an undivided Indian nationality”³². I would rather suggest that what Heehs presents as two alternatives—Hinduisation of Indian Islam and providing a base for Indian nationality—belong, from Aurobindo’s perspective, to the same project. Put into a more general context of Aurobindonian inclusive Hinduism the passage is better interpreted as an ambiguous identification between what is Indian and what is Hindu, and as an attempt to co-opt Indian Islam into this ambivalent unit. Such an interpretation becomes all the more plausible, when one takes into account that Hinduism and the Indian nation used to be ambiguously identified in the Indian political discourse of the first half of the 20th century³³. Accordingly, the symbols and imagery provided by Hinduism (one could think here of Aurobindo’s *Karmayogin*³⁴, or India as *Shakti*, power³⁵, or the struggle for independence as *yajna*, a

³¹ Heehs 2005a, 32.

³² Heehs 2005a, 32.

³³ In his study of the politics of Congress in Uttar Pradesh in the 1930s and '40s, Gould sustains that “[i]n the building of a mass movement, religion helped to provide the necessary framework [...]. In varied contexts the Hindu people were represented as being conterminous with the Indian nation. [...] Many Congressmen assumed that Hinduism would help [...] to embrace different religious communities: as Gandhi put it, there was space enough in Hinduism for Christianity and Islam” (Gould 2004, 266-68). Gould suggests that Congress was generally conceived as a rather secular movement, not aiming at promoting Hindu ‘religious’ tradition. On Congress’ secularism and religious policy, see Pandey 1997, chapters 6 and 7. Cf. Sharpe 1976, 41; Larson 1995, 188ff.

³⁴ On Aurobindonian conception of Karmayoga, cf. King 1980.

³⁵ Ghose 2002, 83, 273, 311.

sacrifice/worship³⁶), together with the idea of inherent Hindu inclusivism, were considered as the best available language of popular cohesion and nation-building. Notwithstanding the fact that such an approach did not prove successful³⁷, one can see why it seemed attractive to thinkers like Aurobindo.

In chapter 1, I mentioned Thapar's critique of communalist historiography for its emphasis on the historical divisions between communities, and her admiration of nationalist history-writing for being "supportive of the interlinking of the communities that constituted Indian society" and exalting their common characteristics³⁸. This fits well with what Aurobindo is doing with this all-Indian inclusivism. He prioritises some identities (Indian, Oriental), and minimises the importance of others (Hindu vs. Muslim, high caste vs. low caste). In this way, he tends to both overlook the existing intra-Hindu differences (and to curtail historical animosity between Hindus, Buddhists and Muslims), and to retrospectively imagine them as a part of a whole, i.e., the Indian nation. This tendency is an example of nationalist selective remembering and forgetting. In the passage to which I referred in chapter 1, Renan insisted that a part of belonging to a nation is to

³⁶ Ghose 2002, 302.

³⁷ Cf. Thapar 1990, 18. See also Nandy, who mentions the fear that "under the guise of Gandhian 'secularism', a Hindu culture would discomfit both the Indian secularist and the Indian Muslim" (Nandy 2003, 42).

³⁸ Thapar 2016, 12.

“have forgotten” some pieces of common history, particularly the ‘fratricidal’ conflicts³⁹. Anderson deduces that the conflicts between various religious or regional groups, whose heirs now constitute a nation, should be forgotten, in order to be rediscovered as the “family history” of compatriots⁴⁰. I argue that Aurobindonian all-Indian inclusivism implies a similar manoeuvre: Indian Hindus, Buddhists and Muslims must “have forgotten” what prevents them rediscovering themselves as one Indian family. Religious and cultural identities should give place to the national identity. I also suggest that, in a certain sense, this leads to the depoliticisation—in the Schmittian sense—of religious differences, now embraced in the *new political*, the nation-state⁴¹. However, unlike many Western cases, this national identity is conceived by Aurobindo not as secular or antagonistic towards the religious traditions, but as directly linked to the Hindu ethos of inclusivism.

Finally, I suggest that the Hinduisation of Islam by Aurobindo is not unrelated to his anti-Westernism. In chapter 2, I argued that the *Self* needs a real or imagined *other*, to construct and re-construct their identity.

Aurobindo’s inclusion of Muslims into his framework, and critique of the West, could be interpreted as an attempt to provide an *alternative other*, in opposition to which the new identity of the Indian nation-state could be

³⁹ Renan 1996, 51.

⁴⁰ Anderson 2006, 199ff.

⁴¹ See chapter 2 of the thesis. Cf. Nicholson 2011, 6-9, 49-50.

affirmed. It has been argued that “the Other of the Hindu is the Muslim, and vice-versa”⁴². It seems possible to suggest, that Aurobindo, for reasons of political expediency is, as it were, reversing the others: the Muslim becomes part of the Self, while the Westerner becomes the other, in relation to whom Indian identity is conceived, and who should be antagonised in the independence struggle.

Yannaras’ inclusivism?

In Yannaras’ thought, there is nothing like Aurobindonian inclusivism. However, both the way in which inclusion/exclusion into salvific life work in Yannaras, and his articulation of catholicity and the ‘political’, present some interesting parallels with Aurobindo.

Let me begin by suggesting that the reading of Aurobindo, proposed above, helps to understand an important aspect of Yannaras’ *othering* manoeuvre. In a rather curious passage in *Orthodoxy and the West*, Yannaras gives his account of an intellectual disputation between two Greeks, Athanasios Parios, Orthodox theologian and educator, and Adamantios Korais, one of the major figures of Hellenic Enlightenment, which happened at the end of the 18th century⁴³. Korais was an advocate of an independent

⁴² Heehs 2000, 132.

⁴³ Yannaras 2006, 117-21.

Greek nation-state, inspired by Western liberal models. Conversely, Parios defended the *status quo* of the multi-ethnic Ottoman Empire, an entity with a shared culture, and heir to Byzantium. What is interesting here is the judgement Yannaras gives to their dispute. Fully taking the side of Parios, Yannaras argues that this dispute

was not simply a struggle between conservatives and progressives [...] [but rather about] two contrasting visions of Hellenism. Against the realism of Byzantine catholicity's *mode* [of life], or culture, embodied in a Greek Orthodox Nation transcending racial boundaries, an imaginary racial Hellenism could draw an identity from antiquity by arbitrarily ignoring the Byzantine centuries"⁴⁴.

Elsewhere, Yannaras argues that unlike the Ottoman Empire, the Modern Hellenic nation-state "was, and remains to this day, unrelated to the needs, the historical habitudes, and the particular characteristics of the Greeks"⁴⁵. In other words, partaking in the modern-nation state entails "being shaped according to the Western *mode* [of life]"⁴⁶. Now, for Yannaras this applies not only to the Greeks, but universally. The assumption of the Western pattern of social organisation forces any culture into an individualistic way of life,

⁴⁴ Yannaras 2006, 121, emphasis in original. Here, again, I do not enter into analysis of the historical accuracy of Yannaras' claims about 'catholicity' of Byzantium and the Ottoman Empire. I would only refer to the research by H el ene Ahrweiler, which casts doubts about idealisation of Byzantium by Yannaras. Ahrweiler argues that Byzantine imperial ideology was not immune to the "collective sense of superiority", "chauvinism" and "*sui generis* racism, manifested towards those who were considered to be foreign", e.g. Armenians, Franks or Slavs (Ahrweiler 1975, 51, my translation). Ahrweiler concludes that already after the 9th century, "the multi-ethnic and multinational Empire [...] has given way to one that is Greek Orthodox and mono-cultural, and therefore intolerant [...] in its attitude to peoples [...] governed by different ideals" (*ibid.*, translated by Magdalino 2016, 19-20).

⁴⁵ Yannaras 2017, 86. Yannaras describes the idea of the nation-state of Korais and his followers as "secondhand", in the sense that it was crafted for other contexts and was "foreign to the Greek" (Yannaras 2017, 90).

⁴⁶ Yannaras 2012, 275, my translation.

“antithetic to the life and existence centred on the idea of community (*koinōnia*)”⁴⁷. The Ottoman heritage, uncontaminated by the West, is thus included into Yannaras’ ideal, to which modern Greece should attempt to return. In fact, in an essay from 1972, Yannaras advocates “a return to the tradition of Byzantium and of the ‘Turkish domination’, to the autochthonous values [...] of the country”⁴⁸.

There are several important points here, one of which is surely the image of a “Nation”, which is determined not by racial but by cultural identity, and which is, to a large degree, antithetical to the modern nation-state⁴⁹. For now, I would insist only on a point which will allow engagement with Aurobindonian thought. In the passages quoted—unlike in others, where Yannaras insists on the difference between Orthodox and Muslim worldviews⁵⁰—he does not claim that Greeks and Turks constituted one nation. However, he suggests that they share a “catholicity’s *mode* [of life], or culture”, which will be put in jeopardy, if the Greeks decided to exit the Ottoman Empire in order to form an independent nation-state. Now, one could possibly imagine various reasons whereby Hellenism would have better flourished in the Ottoman Empire than in a sovereign state. But what appears

⁴⁷ Yannaras 2012, 179, my translation.

⁴⁸ Yannaras 1972b, 214.

⁴⁹ Cf. also Yannaras’ claim that “[c]laims to modern Greek racial homogeneity or ‘purity of blood’ have little real basis; they are mostly romanticism” (Yannaras 2006, 8).

⁵⁰ See Yannaras 1991, 159; 2003, 43-44; 2005b, 30-33.

from the overall context of the passages cited, is that the final line of demarcation between the two ways of conceiving Hellenism lies, for Yannaras, in the acceptance or rejection of Western liberal values, the Enlightenment, and the social contract theory. The implication would be that the *mode of life* and *culture* which the Greeks shared with the Ottomans, was deemed to be more important than common Christian faith, which the former shared with the Westerners.

I suggest that here Yannaras is attempting to do something similar to the Aurobindonian 'reversing the others' manoeuvre. By pointing out a communality (if not identity) between the Hellenic and Ottoman modes of life, he implicitly invites Greeks to forget or "have forgotten" the history of animosity towards the Muslim *other*. By doing this, Yannaras actually proposes an alternative *other*: the Westerner, in opposition to whom the Greek identity could now be imagined and constructed.

Criteria of belonging

This leads me to the question of the nationalist need to *select* criteria of belonging to a nation. In chapter 1, drawing on Hobsbawm and Nathanson, I pointed out the difficulty in finding objective criteria for defining a nation. I suggested that, in the process of definition, there is a good deal of selection involved. And a need to answer the following questions or similar

arises: Should religion prevail, as a criterion of belonging over language or race, or vice versa? Which part of history is normative for nationhood and which is not—the one where Hindus and Mughals (or Greeks and Turks) fought each other, or the one where they cooperated? I argue that what Aurobindo does with inclusivism (as the definition of Hinduism), and Yannaras with *politics* (as the definition of Hellenism) can be read through the lens of this nationalist need to select the criteria of national cohesion. Aurobindonian inclusivism asserts that the only criterion is the absence of a criterion: the essence of the Indian nation and Hinduism consists in being inclusive of any difference. The differences—linguistic, confessional, tribal etc.—no longer matter, because Indian identity is to be found not in them but in the very inclusion, or transcendence of differences. Can Yannaras' salvific life be read according to the same lines? At first glance, this would not seem possible: Yannaras is profoundly exclusive in what counts as the salvific life and what does not—and the latter comprises not only the Western *ethos*, but also elements of Orthodox tradition: Slavic *in primis*, but also Greek. On the other hand, though, Yannaras' decision to define Greek as a 'political animal' and Hellenism as a *mode of life* has the prospective of being universally inclusive. As I suggested in chapter 3, it is not a step Yannaras himself contemplates, but it seems evident enough that defining a nation in terms of a *political* mode of life, rather than confessional Orthodoxy, is potentially extremely

inclusive⁵¹.

At the same time, to identify national identity in such wide terms is far from being new and exceptional; I suggest that the contrary is true. In chapter 1, I pointed out that the paradigmatic cases of nationalism in France and in the USA appeal to an understanding of national identity in effectively humanistic terms, and not in terms of language, religion or ethnicity. As Charles Taylor points out, the 'original' American and French Revolutions were not nationalistic, but rather concentrated on what is universal⁵². It is only with the passage of time that it appeared that a re-shaping of the state in the name of ethnicity is easier than in the name of universal values; thus even American and French 'patriotisms' have to be re-interpreted in a more ethnic way. Similarly, Alasdair MacIntyre ascribes some normativity to the fact that "Robespierre proclaimed that [...] the cause of France and the cause of the Rights of Man were one and the same cause"⁵³. MacIntyre concludes by suggesting that in the modern world citizens' allegiance is based on the confusion between their allegiance to a given nation-state, on the one hand, and to liberal universality, on the other; citizens often believe the good of their nation and the good of humanity coincide⁵⁴. Inclusive identities, articulated by Yannaras and Aurobindo, when read in this broader context,

⁵¹ See Yannaras 2011f, 83-84.

⁵² Taylor 1997, 40-41.

⁵³ MacIntyre 2003, 299.

⁵⁴ MacIntyre 2003, 299-300. Cf. Rasmusson 2000, 181-82.

can be interpreted as a desire to present themselves in cosmopolitan terms, since the latter have reached a certain degree of normativity, which is ambiguously—and, as Taylor and MacIntyre suggest, not very successfully—competing with the ethno-cultural normativity of the nation-state.

Pars pro toto and catholicity

This leads me to a further point in the comparison of Aurobindo and Yannaras. It regards the understanding of a given tradition as a whole, or as part of the totality of salvific life. I mentioned the way in which Aurobindo interprets Hinduism as inclusive of both all-Hindu and all-Indian traditions. In what follows I will point out that something not entirely dissimilar is happening with the way Yannaras constructs his Hellenism. I will then return to Aurobindo's articulation of inclusivism on the universal level, and indicate some parallels with Yannaras' thought. I will point out what I call the *pars pro toto*⁵⁵ manoeuvre, by which Aurobindo and Yannaras extend a momentary sacrality in the history of their respective traditions (*pars*) on Hinduism and Hellenism in their entirety (*toto*). I will also argue that Hinduism and Hellenism, in respective interpretations by the two authors, are ambivalently presented as both parts of the not-yet-realised synthesis, and the substance of the synthesis, its basis and method.

⁵⁵ Latin for "a part (taken) for the whole".

Let us proceed with Yannaras. I argue that his articulation of the relationship between the unity of the Orthodox churches and nationalism produces an ambiguity between Hellenism as simultaneously a *part* and a *totality* of salvific life. On the one hand, Yannaras insists that the catholicity (*katholikotēta*) of the church should transcend the bonds, which are constructed on natural, geographical, national, or linguistic homogeneity⁵⁶. Every people has the potentiality to “realis[e] the *catholic* through the *particular* and *specific*”⁵⁷. Yannaras ascribes to a nation the same kenotic principle he applies on the personal level: “[t]he more a people, as bearer and incarnation of national (*ethnofyletikē*) cultural tradition transcends the egoistic affirmation of its particularity, the wider catholicity it acquires”⁵⁸. From this point of view, one may conclude that Hellenism—as a cultural and geographical unit—is something that ought to be transcended by the church’s catholicity. On the other hand, Yannaras defines catholicity as a mode of life based on relationality⁵⁹. Now, as I attempted to argue in chapter 3, when Yannaras speaks of such mode of life, what he usually means is a

⁵⁶ Yannaras 1993, 17-18.

⁵⁷ Yannaras 1993, 19, my translation, emphasis in original.

⁵⁸ Yannaras 1993, 19, my translation. I have a problem with Yannaras’ attempt to draw opposition between nationalism and catholicity according to a criterion of the transcendence of egoism and self-giving. Such an opposition does not take into account the sacrificial dimension of nationalism, which I emphasised in chapter 1. It is true that nationalism can be defined as the egoism of a nation, but one should be aware that egoism *ad extra* toward other nations, can coexist with—or even be the other side of—the sacrifice *ad intra*: as devotion to one’s nation and the readiness to give one’s life for it.

⁵⁹ Yannaras 1993, 17-18.

culture of *polis* and Hellenic orthodoxy. Consider the two following recurrent arguments put forward by Yannaras. First, his argument, discussed at length in chapter 3, that the event-church is nothing other than the mode or culture of relationship (vs. religion, dogma or ethics). Second, the claim that Hellenism is identical to the true political mode of existence—since “the definition of a Greek is political animal (*zōon politikon*)”⁶⁰—and Yannaras’ inability to see this truly political way of relationship in any context outside Hellenism. I would argue that these two claims taken together lead to a conclusion that one cannot live in a catholic manner without somehow partaking in Hellenism. As Kalaitzidis rightly observes, Yannaras seems to imply that those who do not participate in the Greek culture *ipso facto* do not fully participate in the salvific mode of life⁶¹. This implies, that when Yannaras claims that the orthodox liturgy and dogma are products of specifically Hellenic catholicity, he means this not as a coincidence, but rather as a logical outcome of the co-penetration, or quasi-identity, between Orthodoxy, catholicity and Hellenism. The latter is considered to have been able to “transcend and deny its own ethnic [...] essence”⁶². On the contrary, the nationalism (*ethnofyletismos*) of “Franks” and Pan-Slavists, is depicted as antithetical to the Hellenic *catholicity* and incapable of such transcendence⁶³.

⁶⁰ Yannaras 2016.

⁶¹ Kalaitzidis 2017, 422.

⁶² Yannaras 1993, 19, my translation.

⁶³ Yannaras 1993, 19.

Let us now return to Aurobindo, and look at how the *pars pro toto* mechanism functions in his thought. I pointed out earlier how inclusivism was functioning on the all-Hindu and all-Indian level. In what follows, I will introduce the third, universal level of Aurobindo's articulation of tolerant Hinduism. I will start by showing how an Aurobindonian articulation attempts to include into the Hindu framework the totality of other religious and humanistic traditions. I will proceed to point out how Christianity and the West are included into this framework. I will then draw some implications concerning the Eastern superiority vis-à-vis the West, and the link between the West and secularism.

First, in a passage commented upon earlier, Aurobindo claims that "Indian religion" has been a "free and tolerant synthesis"⁶⁴. The same inclusivism is predicated about the future universal religion envisaged by Aurobindo⁶⁵. On the one hand, the ideal religion is conceived as a "synthesis", thus suggesting that it is broader than Hinduism. But, on the other hand, it is Hinduism which appears to be the basis of this new universal entity. The latter is but an extension or development of the inherent synthetic principle of Hinduism, as understood by Aurobindo. To put it in Hegelian

⁶⁴ Ghose 1997a, 193.

⁶⁵ Aurobindo describes this religion as follows: "a new synthesis of religious thought and experience [...], accepting all forms of religion [...] religion which embraces Science and faith, Theism, Christianity, Mahomedanism and Buddhism and yet is none of these [...]. In our own [...] Hinduism which is not a dogma [...] but a law of life [...] we find the basis of the future world-religion" (Ghose 1997i, 26).

terms, Hinduism is both the antithesis (to the West), and the synthesis (of the East and the West).

Second, in both *Defence* and *Karmayogin*, Christianity (and Islam) are embraced in the all-inclusive framework of *sanatana dharma*. I would argue that, besides stating that Hindu inclusivism is capable of absorbing any religion, Aurobindo has yet another way of Hinduising Christianity. This method consists in claiming Christianity for the East. Not only does Aurobindo emphasise the Asian origins of Christianity⁶⁶, describing it as an “oriental ideal”⁶⁷, he also claims that Christianity, Islam, Buddhism and other Asian religions alike “are all offshoots of one great and eternal religion of which India has the keeping”⁶⁸. Likewise, Aurobindo intimates a certain reliance of Jesus Christ on Asian sources⁶⁹. On the other hand, Aurobindo tries to undermine empirical Christianity by claiming that, as an Eastern creation, it failed to be realised in the West⁷⁰. At this point, his thinking is of great interest. Aurobindo presents the history of Christendom as a duel between Eastern spirituality and “[t]he genuine temperament of the West”⁷¹. Aurobindo concludes by arguing that “Europe did not separate religion and

⁶⁶ Ghose 1997a, 273; 1997h, 58.

⁶⁷ Ghose 1997a, 139-40. Cf. Ghose 1997a, 205.

⁶⁸ Ghose 2002, 889-90.

⁶⁹ See Ghose 1997j, 8.

⁷⁰ Ghose 1997a, 139-40. Aurobindo adds that what remains in the West is “a rationalised Christianity without either the name of Christ or his presence” (Ghose 1997a, 141).

⁷¹ Ghose 1997a, 140. The West has been grounded in “practical reason” and “the cult of life”, both aiming to assure materialistic well-being, and leading to secularism (Ghose 1997a, 137).

life; but that was because it had no need for the separation. Its religion, once it got rid of the oriental element of the mysteries, was a secular institution"⁷².

Third, I suggest that this original move by Aurobindo has two important implications. On the one hand, it both allows to claim Oriental superiority vis-à-vis the West, and implies the redundancy of Christian missionary activity in India⁷³. On the other hand, it emphasises the link between Christianity and secularism. Christianity is considered to be a step towards secularisation and even atheism⁷⁴. Such a critique of Western Christianity is not dissimilar to that of Yannaras. The resemblance of their respective critiques becomes intelligible only when one takes into account the fact (pointed out in chapters 3 and 4) that 'religion' is used *equivocally* by the two authors: for Aurobindo, 'religion' can be either negative, neutral or positive, while for Yannaras it is always negative. Having this in mind, consider the way both authors critique the West. According to Aurobindo, the "Teutonic" West has "rationalised, secularised and almost annihilated the religious spirit", which has slowly led to the modern separation of religion from "life", culture, science and politics,—basically, to the disappearance of

⁷² Ghose 1997a, 139-40.

⁷³ The latter was perceived by Hindu elites as a significant threat—a point of convergence of religious and nationalist agendas in India. Cf. Sharpe 1976, 47; Jaffrelot 1993, 517; Zavos 2001, 116ff. On conversion as a disruptive action in colonial India, see Viswanathan 1998.

⁷⁴ Ghose 1997a, 136. Curiously, Aurobindo seems to implicitly accept Archer's argument that Christianisation of India would be a step towards secularisation. Cf. Archer 1918, 281-82.

genuine Christianity *qua* religion⁷⁵. Yannaras, on his part, presents the history of the Western Christianity, as a history of ever deeper religionisation of the event-church⁷⁶. Yannaras' 'religion' plays a similar role to Aurobindonian 'secularism'—both categories represent a betrayal of the salvific life. Although the accents in the thinkers differ (Aurobindo emphasises the West's materialism, Yannaras its individualism), both identify the key feature of this betrayal in a wrong articulation of the religious and secular, an error, of which—they claim—Western Christianity is the contagious bearer.

What critique is a self-critique?

An Aurobindonian reading of Buddhism and Christianity has an interesting parallel with Yannaras' critiques of the West. As I pointed out earlier, Aurobindo presents Buddhism and Western Christianity as deviations from an original Oriental religion and, then, depicts them as contaminating elements of empirical Hinduism. This is not dissimilar to the way in which Yannaras approaches the churches of Latin tradition, and the West in general. On the one hand, Yannaras is very explicit that the problem with the West is that it has deviated from the East, and has disconnected from the Hellenic mode of life⁷⁷. But, on the other hand, he blames the West for the

⁷⁵ Ghose 1997a, 140.

⁷⁶ See chapter 3 of this thesis.

⁷⁷ Cf. Yannaras 2015.

religionisation of the empirical Orthodoxy. Moreover, the present-day Orthodox church is presented as a Westernised version of the true Christianity.

Let me begin with the first point, namely Yannaras' idea of the West as the deviation from the East. In this Yannaras is in line with Georges Florovsky (and Russian Slavophiles), for whom, in words of Paul Gavrilyuk,

the 'East' was seen as communitarian rather than individualist, [...] theocentric rather than anthropocentric, valuing informal personal relations over the letter of the law, privileging intuitive and concrete modes of knowing over discursive and abstract reasoning⁷⁸.

Gavrilyuk concludes that "in Yannaras's narrative, both the diagnosis of the problem [i.e., Westernisation] and the prescription [i.e., Hellenism] were issued in distinctly Florovskian terms"⁷⁹. As I have already listed many instances of critique of the West by Yannaras, it will be sufficient to draw a conclusion that in Yannaras' articulation, the East is not only the *other* of the West (or of the image of the West which we are given), but the mirror opposite of the West—the West with the 'plus' sign. The paradox lies in the fact that Yannaras himself is well aware of the danger of identification with the reverse image of the West, when he deals with the other Orthodox authors. In *Orthodoxy and the West*, Yannaras dedicated several chapters to analysis of those Greek theologians, which attempted to articulate Orthodoxy

⁷⁸ Gavrilyuk 2014, 59.

⁷⁹ Gavrilyuk 2014, 249.

in the context of the Ottoman and Latin domination. The general judgement of Yannaras upon those authors (both those pro-Latin and anti-Latin), is that they were conditioned by Western theological thought. Here is how Yannaras describes theologian Vikentios Damodos (1700-1752): "Damodos [...] sought to differentiate himself from the Westerners and denounce their errors [...]. Yet he remained trapped in the Western theological assumptions [...]. Modern Greek academic theology falls into the same trap"⁸⁰. This leads to conclusion, that anti-Westernism is not *ipso facto* a criterion for Orthodoxy. Indeed, Damodos was anti-Latin, and still has perpetuated the Latin influence upon Orthodoxy. Yannaras' analysis suggests that an approach to defining Orthodoxy through 'othering', as anti-West, is conditioned by the very West, it tries to reject. Paradoxically, Yannaras' own articulation of Orthodoxy does not seem to be immune to such critique.

The second point regards Yannaras' interpretation of his anti-Westernism as self-critique. This point merits special attention. In chapter 3, I pointed out Yannaras' search for such a dialogue with the West, which would allow for an "exodus" from the Western cultural paradigm, to which the modern Orthodox is "definitely and integrally" linked⁸¹. This idea becomes

⁸⁰ Yannaras 2006, 101-02. Similarly, even such a profoundly anti-Latin author as patriarch Dositheos Notaras, is considered by Yannaras as "example of the involuntary alienation of Orthodox theologians. This fanatical anti-Westerner and opponent of the Latins was deeply affected by their mentality and religious sensibility" (Yannaras 2006, 83).

⁸¹ Yannaras 1972a, 144.

developed further in his later writings. In the preface to the English edition of *Orthodoxy and the West*, Yannaras prepares his Western reader for his sharp critique of the Occident, in the following way:

The critique of Western [...] tradition which I offer [...] does not contrast 'Western' with something 'right' which as an Orthodox I use to oppose something 'wrong' outside myself. I am not attacking an external Western adversary. As a modern Greek, I myself embody both the thirst for what is 'right' and the reality of what is 'wrong': a contradictory and alienated survival of ecclesiastical Orthodoxy in a society radically and unhappily Westernized⁸².

Similarly, in *Against Religion*, Yannaras asserts that "[w]e Orthodox like to accuse the West [...]. But [...] the West is 'within us'"⁸³. Elsewhere, Yannaras laments the fact that the real-time Greek church is in reality "an ideological or solely religious Orthodoxy [...], which has not [...] taken form in contemporary lifestyle"⁸⁴.

The Westernisation has affected not only the ecclesial being of Orthodoxy, but also the contemporary Greek society. In a recent book, Yannaras claims that modern Greeks are "neither Greeks nor Europeans", but are "trapped in a bastard kind" of "underdevelopment"⁸⁵. The political process in Greece "reproduce[s] borrowed ideologies that have been imported into Greece" from the West, rather than addressing the social problems in a creative way⁸⁶. Yannaras concludes by asserting that the

⁸² Yannaras 2006, viii.

⁸³ Yannaras 2013, 196.

⁸⁴ Yannaras 2011d, 61-62.

⁸⁵ Yannaras 2017, 150.

⁸⁶ Yannaras 2017, 90.

present condition of Greece “resembles that of postcolonial societies, societies without their own identity and without the power to participate with a sense of their own identity and creative otherness in the historical process”⁸⁷. In an essay, under a suggestive title of *Finis Graecie*, Yannaras paraphrases Nietzsche, saying: “Greece is dead, and we have killed her”⁸⁸. Only the West lives.

Finally, Yannaras seems to suggest the futility of East/West dichotomy. In a way which resonates with Chatterjee’s emphasis on the asymmetry between East and West, mentioned in chapter 4, Yannaras argues that “[t]he distinction of Orthodoxy and West has ceased to be discernible [...]. The West no longer has geographical limits, it is everywhere”⁸⁹. In Yannaras, therefore, the asymmetry takes the form of Western omnipresence.

Yannaras’ anti-Westernism as self-critique has attracted attention from various scholars. Basilio Petrà argues that, for Yannaras, “the West becomes a negative moral category, used to designate the permanent temptation of Christianity”⁹⁰. Petrà further argues that the ‘West’ applies to both the Orthodox and Catholic churches, and functions as an invitation to the reform and conversion⁹¹. An interesting approach to Yannaras’ anti-Westernism is

⁸⁷ Yannaras 2017, 86.

⁸⁸ Yannaras 2014, 28, my translation.

⁸⁹ Yannaras 1991, 162.

⁹⁰ Petrà 2015, 124, my translation.

⁹¹ Petrà 2015, 125.

taken by Brandon Gallaher. He attempts to present the radical critique of the West by Yannaras as narration of “an historical *mythos* of the Fall of the West” rather than a “historical interpretation or account of past events”⁹². The ‘West’ stands for “a sort of ontological-cum-spiritual virus”, while the ‘East’ (and ‘Hellenism’) represent “a sort of idyll of a lost political, liturgical and ontological paradise which inspires us to renew our world”⁹³.

I find Petrà’s and Gallaher’s interpretations well-grounded. My problem with them, however, is that Yannaras already has a list of “negative moral categories”—such as ‘religion’, ‘ideology’, ‘individualism’—which he applies both to ecclesiastical and secular context. Why does Yannaras need a category, which, importantly, *transfers the negativity*, as it were, outside of his own milieu and projects it onto another context? Gallaher’s interpretation of the opposition between East and West in terms of the *mythos* of the Fall is also very interesting. The difficulty here, however, is that—to stay with Gallaher’s metaphor—Yannaras sometimes presents his narrative as if the Greeks have been living in a direct continuity with this prelapsarian state and have never completely ceased to eat from the tree of life. In other words, the tension between *mythos* and history remains unsolved.

⁹² Gallaher 2018, 211, emphasis in original. Gallaher provides six rules, referred to as “A Grammar for Orthodox Critiques of the West”, meant to help Orthodox theology avoid a “sterile polarity” with the West (Gallaher 2018, 223-25). I find these rules helpful and daring. It is not clear, however, whether Gallaher believes that Yannaras passes the test of those rules.

⁹³ Gallaher 2018, 211, 14.

I will return to the question of an 'internal' West later in the chapter. For now, I would like to point out the fact that both Yannaras and Aurobindo refuse to attribute the responsibility for the 'decay' to their own respective traditions, but need the *other* to function as a scapegoat. As I suggested in chapters 1 and 2, drawing on Girard, the scapegoat can be external or internal, or both. It would seem that in the case of Aurobindo and Yannaras, the West is, ambiguously and contemporarily, both an external and internal threat, to be resisted.

(II) Experience: Overturning the paradigm

In the following section I will propose three preliminary conclusions. I will argue that Aurobindonian inclusivism is a conceptual instance of anti-Westernism and Westernisation, and is linked to the secularist project. I will start by arguing that Aurobindonian inclusivism is an attempt to overturn the Western-dominating paradigm, and to include the West in another, believed to be Eastern. I will develop my argument by pointing out a semantic manoeuvre, by which Aurobindo attempts this endeavour. It consists in making 'experience' the essence of religion, to be imposed as the criterion of authenticity of any other tradition. I will also argue that Aurobindo attempts to construct the West as a *partial* element of Eastern *totality*, by showing that Hinduism is aware of being the partial truth, while the West is not aware of its

own partiality. I will then examine to what extent similar schemes could be found in Yannaras.

As I suggested in chapter 4, one of the problems concerning our knowledge of non-European traditions is linked to what may be called the *asymmetry* between the West and the Rest. One of the outcomes of the Western privileged—or hegemonic, to use a Gramscian term—political and cultural position, has been the acceptance of Western epistemic categories (e.g. religious vs. secular dichotomy) as normative for the totality of human reality. The East has been included, or ‘annexed’, as Dubuisson puts it, into the Western-tailored framework⁹⁴. I would like to argue that Aurobindo and Yannaras attempt a mirror-opposite manoeuvre, aimed at the overturning of the process just described, i.e. at presenting a narrative according to which the West is included as a partial and local element in an Eastern universality. This would suggest that Dubuisson’s claim, that uniquely the West has tried to include the East in its framework, is not entirely correct⁹⁵.

What is experience?

An important point, where Aurobindo and Yannaras can reciprocally illuminate each other, is their respective treatment of ‘experience’ as the

⁹⁴ Dubuisson 2007, 794.

⁹⁵ Cf. chapter 4 of this thesis

essence and criterion for any genuine salvific life. Wilhelm Halbfass describes 'experience' as "one of the most significant, but also most ambiguous and evasive terms in the recent literature"⁹⁶. In what follows I will point out how Aurobindo and Yannaras appropriate this concept, and subsequently use it against the West.

Aurobindo argues that a true spiritual religion is about experience⁹⁷. Humanity cannot intellectually attain the Truth ("the heart of man is nearer to the Truth than his intelligence"⁹⁸), but it can encounter it through "higher and deeper experiences"⁹⁹. Moreover, the Indian focus on the spiritual experience, which serves as a linking concept in uniting philosophy, religion and yoga, is contrasted, by Aurobindo, to Western "metaphysical thinking"¹⁰⁰.

There is a striking analogy between Aurobindo and Yannaras, in the way they emphasise experience and contrast this point with the West. Yannaras is not alone in the Orthodox tradition in stressing the importance of experience, but his way of doing it is permeated by a clear polemical and

⁹⁶ Halbfass 1988, 378. Cf. Gadamer, who argues that 'experience' is one of the "most obscure [concepts] we have" (Gadamer 2004, 341). On the history of this concept in the West, see Jay 2004.

⁹⁷ Ghose 1997a, 183-84. On the category of experience in Aurobindo, see Deutsch 1964. A similar tendency to define Hinduism in terms of 'experience' can be seen in other Neo-Hindu thinkers, e.g. in Vivekananda and Radhakrishnan. Cf. Halbfass 1988, ch. 21; Minor 1999, 29ff.

⁹⁸ Ghose 1997a, 185.

⁹⁹ Ghose 2005, 4.

¹⁰⁰ Ghose 1997a, 371.

anti-Western logic¹⁰¹. Yannaras claims that the Greek tradition—“from Heraclitus to Gregory Palamas”—made it clear that knowledge is radically linked to experience¹⁰². In the case of classical Greece, the truth was experienced as a “common logos” of “cosmic harmony and order”, while in Christian Hellenism, the truth was linked to the experience of a personal God and human persons¹⁰³. This experiential quality of the Hellenic conception of truth is contrasted by Yannaras to Western epistemology:

The Greeks identified knowledge with experience, experience with the immediacy of relation, and relation with the indeterminacy of freedom. The Westerners were afraid of the freedom of relation, the dynamic of indeterminacy, the risk of experience. They needed individual certainties with objective assurances for their psychological security¹⁰⁴.

In other words, experience means relation, and the latter—in final analysis—means the communal verification of truth in the context of *polis*.

Yannaras’ intent to define (*de-finire*, to limit) ‘experience’ to the *polis*, resonates with the perspective the Russian religious thinker Alexei Khomiakov (1804-1860). According to his theology of *sobornost* (sinodality), “the essence of church consists in the concord and unity of spirit and life of all its members”¹⁰⁵, and it is to the totality of the body of the church that the

¹⁰¹ For a recent overview of the modern Orthodox articulations of experience, see Louth 2017. Another famous Orthodox theologian, who emphasises the experiential dimension of Christianity and Orthodox dogma, is John Zizioulas. However, while Yannaras often seems to sustain that truth originates from the community, Zizioulas insists that the truth “is not the product of sociological [...] experience”, but comes “from another world” (Zizioulas 1985b, 115).

¹⁰² Yannaras 2006, 66.

¹⁰³ Yannaras 2006, 66.

¹⁰⁴ Yannaras 2006, 67.

¹⁰⁵ Khomiakov 1907, 6, my translation.

truth is given¹⁰⁶. The theology of Khomiakov has provoked some criticism. According to Pavel Florensky, Khomiakov “exaggerated the importance of human agreement or disagreement and diminished the dignity and significance of the Truth. [...] [F]or the Church understood by Khomiakov, the *consensus omnium in amore* is sufficient, and this consensus by itself gives knowledge of the Truth”¹⁰⁷. As Zizioulas rightly observes, *sobornost* “confers to the communion (*koinōnia*) ontological priority over the person”, while “the person is being understood within communion as its consequence”¹⁰⁸. This criticism of the concept of *sobornost* can be also directed towards Yannaras. The idea that the truth is discovered in common contains a risk of subjugation of the person by the community, as the cases of the condemnation of Socrates and Jesus indicate. Also relevant to this argument, is that Khomiakov’s thought, on the one hand, has been strongly influenced by German idealism, particularly by Schelling¹⁰⁹, while, on the other hand, it was in clear polemics against the Roman Catholic conception of the

¹⁰⁶ Birkbeck 1895, 94ff. On Khomiakov’s *sobornost*, see Florovsky 2009, 351ff; Cogoni 2005; Ware 2011. The emphasis on ‘people’ as bearer of the truth of the church is another important Khomiakovian element, present in Yannaras thought. It is clearly visible in the way Yannaras argues that while in contemporary Greece the Trinitarian mode of existence, which embraces life in its totality, continues to exist in the “popular base of the ecclesial plenitude (*plerōma*)”, it constitutes but a “forgotten truth” for the clergy and a romantic ideal for the politicians (Yannaras 1976, 62, my translation).

¹⁰⁷ Florensky 1996, 296-97, my translation.

¹⁰⁸ Zizioulas 1991, 16, my translation. Cf. Stavrou 2004, 337.

¹⁰⁹ See Gaillardetz 1994, 20; Stavrou 2004, 336. See a different opinion in Florovsky 2009, 348.

magisterium¹¹⁰. In other words, Khomiakov is paradoxically both Westernising and anti-Western. Again, the same applies to Yannaras.

Let us return to the comparison between Aurobindo and Yannaras. I argue that both authors present experience as the core, not only of Hinduism or Orthodoxy, but of every salvific life. In a passage from the *Defence*, cited earlier, Aurobindo argues that the “supreme truths” are “fruits of the soul’s inner experience”¹¹¹. Aurobindo goes on developing the link between experience and inclusivism: since ‘experience’ is the foundation of religion, and experiences vary, all of them must be “true in their own way and degree”¹¹². In other words, Aurobindonian inclusivism is conceptually based on the primacy of experience. Minor makes a significant observation, by arguing that in Aurobindonian thought “the reified ‘Hinduism’ was defined as a unity based in a common religious experience. [...] [T]he members of all of the religions should recognize [the experience] as the essence of every religion, and thus, religion itself”¹¹³. What Minor rightly points out is that Aurobindo considers the importance of religious experience to be not only a Hindu or Oriental particularity of living religiosity, but the essence of every true religion.

I argue that a similar conclusion can be derived also from Yannaras. In

¹¹⁰ Cf. Wiczyński 1969.

¹¹¹ Ghose 1997a, 181.

¹¹² Ghose 1997a, 181.

¹¹³ Minor 1999, 29.

fact, in a way not dissimilar to Aurobindo, Yannaras considers experience—understood as a relationship of self-giving and freedom—to be not only the core attribute of the Hellenic *polis* and the Orthodox church, but the universal criterion for assessing the truly salvific mode of life. One can reach such a conclusion by analysing Yannaras' engagement with the issue of the comparability of religions, which he briefly approaches in chapter 12 of his *Relational Ontology*, entitled "The Non-sense of Comparative Religion"¹¹⁴. Yannaras begins the chapter by asking: "Can a *relation* with Yahweh, or Christ, [...] or Brahma be formed with the reservation that these names are relational and conventional [...] [and] refer to the same single [...] causal principle of all that exists?"¹¹⁵ Yannaras approaches this question through a set of analogies, drawn from an analysis of human knowledge and consideration of erotic love. He draws a distinction between "the *understanding* of signifiers and the *knowledge* of what is signified"¹¹⁶. For understanding to take place, the "logically correct linguistic expressions" are enough, but knowledge can be attained only based on personal experience¹¹⁷. Yannaras suggests that, while knowledge can be common to different cultures, understanding is linked to an epistemological paradigm elaborated by a specific culture. Let us consider erotic love, the example

¹¹⁴ Yannaras 2011e, 60-67. Cf. Yannaras 2012, 26-31.

¹¹⁵ Yannaras 2011e, 60, emphasis in original.

¹¹⁶ Yannaras 2011e, 60, emphasis in original.

¹¹⁷ Yannaras 2011e, 63.

offered by Yannaras. As a result of a subjective experience of erotic love, so the argument goes, a Greek *knows* what is the reality of the erotic love of a foreigner, but the terms of their *understanding* differ, to such an extent that they remain incomparable. Yannaras claims that the same conclusion is true when applied to religion: "There can be no objective comparison [...] of the religious experiences [...]. Every comparison [...] is based inevitably on criteria and principles of a specific epistemological and cultural paradigm"¹¹⁸. But if religious experiences, originating in two different epistemological paradigms, are incomparable in their cultural and linguistic expressions, can they still refer to the same fact of religious experience? Yannaras does not explicitly answer this question. I would suggest, however, that the implied answer is, 'Yes', provided that this experience is 'real'. As was suggested above, the difference between knowledge and understanding consists in the fact that the former is based in personal experience. Now, experience, according to Yannaras, can be 'real' or 'illusory'¹¹⁹. The distinction between reality and illusion is the distinction between relation and nature, between freedom and necessity. A real experience, erotic or religious, consists in relation and freedom. It takes place "when the desire for the Other is activated with a volitional self-offering, an actual transcendence of the self"

¹¹⁸ Yannaras 2011e, 62.

¹¹⁹ Yannaras 2011e, 64.

and when “the encounter is experienced reciprocally as an *existential* fact different from natural (individual) self-preservation”¹²⁰. What Yannaras’ argument implies is that one could also recognise a genuine religious experience within the other religions, provided that such an experience is based on self-giving and freedom. To conclude, Yannaras, not unlike Aurobindo, conceives of experience as the basis of every genuine religious phenomenon, and of the salvific life as such.

There is, however, a profound difference between the respective conceptions of ‘experience’ in Aurobindo and Yannaras: while for the former ‘experience’ is primarily *individual*, or at least ‘subjective’, and often refers to a mystic exposure¹²¹, for Yannaras, experience is always inter-personal, and refers to a relationship and community. In other words, Yannaras relativises, rather than denies the validity of an individual experience¹²². Thus, from Yannaras’ perspective, Aurobindonian thought would constitute an object of the same critique, which he directs against the West. And, conversely, Aurobindonian critique of “conventionalism” would apply to Yannaras’ *polis*¹²³.

¹²⁰ Yannaras 2011e, 65-66, emphasis in original.

¹²¹ Cf. Minor 1995, 474.

¹²² Yannaras, for instance, argues that Hellenic experiential ethos (*empeirismos*) “respects the *otherness* [...] of every individual experience and, thus, accepts the *relativity* of every reported opinion-testimony-information” (Yannaras 2012, my translation).

¹²³ See Ghose 1997d, 11-25.

Experience and rationalism

An emphasis on experience is combined, in both Aurobindo and Yannaras, with the critique of Western rationalism. The question of the role given by both authors to reason within a religious framework has been already mentioned in chapter 3. Here, I would like only to point out how they conceive of rationalism as antithetical to the primacy of experience, and to indicate the anti-Western side to such an assertion.

According to Yannaras, in the West, rationalism has objectivised the truth which, rather than being considered a result of “personal approach and personal experience”¹²⁴, has become a “complete, closed ‘system’ of concepts”, which can easily lead to an ideological, or even totalitarian situation¹²⁵. Yannaras appears to include in this all Western societies, claiming that “[i]n the age when the rights and duties of the individual are rationalistically regulated there is no ‘society’ (*koinōnia*)”¹²⁶. Aurobindo also contraposes Western rationalism to Eastern experiential ethos, albeit from a different perspective. The problem he has with Western rationalism is its instrumentality in getting rid of “elements which seek to establish a communication with what is invisible [...], to negate spiritual experience and

¹²⁴ I would like to remind the reader that, in Yannaras, “personal” always refers to a relationality, and therefore is antithetical to the “individual”.

¹²⁵ Yannaras 1984, 201-02. For Yannaras’ critique of ideology, see chapter 3 of this thesis.

¹²⁶ Yannaras 1984, 201-02. The Greek *koinōnia* has a slightly different sense to the English ‘society’, since it also bears the meaning of community, and even communion. Cf. Yannaras 1979, 264.

cast out spirituality"¹²⁷. Moreover, Aurobindo—in a way not dissimilar to Yannaras' critique of 'objective' truth—suggests that the discovery of universal laws leads to the suppression of freedom¹²⁸. On the other hand, both Aurobindo and Yannaras try to argue that their respective traditions, insofar as they are experiential, are more consonant with the modern scientific method, than the Western ethos¹²⁹.

Another important difference between the two authors lies in regard to their combined critique of rationalism and the West. Unlike Yannaras, Aurobindo tries both to include reason in a Hindu framework (also retrospectively¹³⁰), and acknowledge those Western developments which have prioritised more holistic approaches to the truth¹³¹. Moreover, in

¹²⁷ Ghose 2005, 904. Cf. Ghose 1997a, 114; 1997d, 131.

¹²⁸ Aurobindo argues that the discovery, by the natural and social sciences "of universal laws of which the individual is almost a by-product and by which he must necessarily be governed [...] seems to lead logically to the suppression of that very individual freedom which made the discovery [...] possible. [...] The result [...] is a new ordering of society [...] in which the individual [...], must have his whole life and action determined [...] by the well-ordered mechanism of the State" (Ghose 1997d, 21). The European totalitarianisms are interpreted by Aurobindo as direct consequences of such a worldview (Ghose 1997d, 21, n. 1).

¹²⁹ Yannaras argues that "empirical science was more compatible with the experiential emphasis of Orthodox Church life than with Augustinian and Thomist intellectualism", the latter being considered as the basis of the Western approach to knowledge (Yannaras 2006, 105). Aurobindo, for his part, argues that Hinduism is the only religion that "[has] include[d] and anticipat[ed] the discoveries of science and the speculations of philosophy" (Ghose 1996, 375). On the emphasis by Aurobindo and other Neo-Hindus on the scientific nature of Indian tradition, see Halbfass 1988, 250; Jaffrelot 1993, 518-19; Veer 2014, 158-59. A. Smith convincingly points out what a great challenge modern science has represented for many indigenous traditions (Smith 1971, 236ff). Aurobindo and Yannaras try not only to address this challenge, but to turn it into an instance of Eastern superiority vis-à-vis the West.

¹³⁰ Cf. chapter 3.

¹³¹ For example, Aurobindo argues that "[i]t is a great error to suppose that spirituality flourishes best [...] with [...] the intellect discouraged [...]. In modern Europe it is after [...] a stupendous activity of the intellect that spirituality has begun really to emerge [...] [,] being [...] the beginning of a large and profound clarity" (Ghose 1997j, 10). This rather optimistic

Yannaras' critique, while the Occident is deeply essentialised, any mention of the historical, or real-time challenges of rationalism (or accents on 'emotional' and 'political' aspects of knowledge) is absent, so that one almost fails to recognise it¹³². I leave aside the question—which would, of course, be of considerable interest—of the extent to which the prominence of experience is 'purely' 'Eastern' intuition, and to what extent it might be conditioned by Western thought¹³³. If the latter were the case, we would have an example of a project of identity-making, ambiguous insofar as it simultaneously rejects and appropriates the characteristic of the *other*. Be that as it may, what I would like to emphasise is that Yannaras fails to see that, by identifying his own tradition as unilaterally experiential and apophatic¹³⁴ over against arguably rational Western Christianity, he falls into the trap of the

reading of the West and modernity, reveals the Aurobindonian position to be more nuanced and less anti-Western to that of Yannaras. For the latter, the West seems to be totally lost, from its very beginning to the very end. On the contrary, Aurobindo is able to see for the West the light at the end of the tunnel, as it were.

¹³² One could make a case, that from Augustine to Said, the Western concept of truth was richer than a simple *adaequatio rei et intellectus* (equation of thing and intellect), as Yannaras would want us to believe. On Augustine, whose intellectualism is one of the main targets of Yannaras' critique, see David Tracy, who emphasises Augustine's link between knowledge, love and will. He also points to a more apophatic side of the Augustinian theology of the human "incomprehensible self", participating in the "incomprehensibility of God's self" (Tracy 2018, 33ff). In this regard, Gallaher points out that "there is very little direct engagement of Yannaras—no exegetical engagement of specific works, let alone *ad litteram* commentary—with the figures he attacks, such as Augustine and Aquinas" (Gallaher 2018, 210-11). Cf. Kalaitzidis 2009, 505.

¹³³ I already mentioned the influence of German idealism on Yannaras via Khomiakov. On Heidegger's influence on Yannaras, see Yannaras 2017, 34-38, 43-51. Cf. Petrà 2015, 29ff. On Western influences on Neo-Hinduism and Aurobindo in particular, see Varma 1976; Halbfass 1988; Hatcher 1999.

¹³⁴ See Yannaras 2005a. Cf. chapter 3 of this thesis.

oppositional dichotomy—rational vs. irrational—in which neither Origen nor Maximus the Confessor, would have felt comfortable¹³⁵. This, at least partially, also applies to Aurobindo¹³⁶. In this sense both Aurobindo's and Yannaras' critique of the West leads them to deny elements of their own tradition.

Let me now draw a preliminary conclusion. Notwithstanding their differences, Yannaras and Aurobindo converge in positing experience as the criterion of salvific life. This allows them to draw opposition between their own traditions, defined by experience, *versus* the non-experiential, rationalistic West. Moreover, I would like to argue that in the writings of both authors, experience functions as the essence and core of any legitimate tradition. The latter seems to be analogous to, or perhaps even *imitative* of what scholars describe as the Western tendency—pointed out in chapter 4—to conceptualise some proper features as transcultural and *sui generis* 'religion'. Aurobindo and Yannaras, by positioning 'experience' at the centre

¹³⁵ On Origen's use of rational argumentation, see Usacheva 2017, ch. 2; Ramelli 2017. On the role of reason in St Maximus' theological method, see Croce 1974, ch. 4. Cf. Lollar 2015. For the role of intellect in patristic theology, see Williams 2007. On the usage of Aristotelian logic in Byzantium, and in theological controversies in particular, see Erismann 2017. On the approaches to reasoning in modern Orthodox theology, in particular in Florovsky, see Baker 2010. Baker argues that "over-generalized animus against an ill-defined [...] 'scholasticism' has blinded much of [...] contemporary Orthodox thought to the profound concern with [...] rationality characteristic of the Greek Fathers" (Baker 2010, 116). See also Pallis' critique that polemical and apologetic use of the Dionysian corpus by Yannaras has negatively affected the coherence of the interpretation of the material (Pallis 2017a; 2017b).

¹³⁶ On reasoning within the Hindu tradition, see Halbfass 1991, chapter 5; Ganeri 2003; Frazier 2011; 2017, part 2. Cf. Clooney 2001, 35ff.

of religion, can claim their own superiority vis-à-vis the rationalistic West, and advance an anti-colonial discourse, broadly understood. Through this move, the West is included in the Eastern-made framework.

Aurobindo's claim about the superiority of Hinduism, based on its awareness of the partiality of religions¹³⁷, highly resonates with Yannaras' critique of (Western) ideology¹³⁸. Ideology, according to the Greek theologian, begins when a theology pretends to exhaust the understanding of reality and forgets the symbolic nature of its language. Theological propositions, and indeed any truths, are "symbols (*symbola*) which bring together (*syn-ballousi*) or coordinate individual experiences, inviting them to an experiential participation in the common *logos* of the experiences"¹³⁹. In this sense, ideology is a theology which has neglected its instrumental vocation of being a sign towards a reality of experience. Yannaras, not unlike Aurobindo, accuses Western Christianity and the West in general, of having lost awareness of the instrumental, non-absolute and symbolic value of its

¹³⁷ Besides the articulation of Hinduism as a framework of synthesis for both East and West, Aurobindo argues that Hinduism is superior to any other religion because it is conscious of its partiality. He elaborates this idea in the following way: the purpose of empirical religions—with their dogmatic and ethical principles—consists in serving as a tool, a "scaffolding", inside of which true spirituality is being constructed. Now—and here arrives the statement of Indian superiority—"Hinduism not only fulfilled this purpose, but, unlike certain credal religions, it knew its purpose" (Ghose 1997a, 179). Thus, paradoxically, the absolute value of Hinduism comes from its self-understanding of being instrumental and non-absolute. Cf. Minor 1999, 34.

¹³⁸ Yannaras 2006, 66-67, 101. On a slightly different approach to ideology by Yannaras, see chapter 3 of this thesis.

¹³⁹ Yannaras 2006, 66-67. Cf. Yannaras 2012, 28-31.

metaphysical propositions and praises the Eastern apophatic and relational approach to truth. Like Aurobindo, Yannaras not only emphasises the consciousness of the instrumental nature of theological speech, he uses this consciousness as an instrument for claiming the superiority of his tradition. Here, of course, arises another problem—to which I will return later in the chapter—regarding the way Aurobindo and Yannaras project the consciousness of partiality on the East/India/Hellenism, as a whole, and deny it to the West in its totality.

To conclude: Aurobindo's articulation of inclusivism, and his emphasis on the complete truth of which Hinduism is (potentially) capable (vs. the partial truth of the West), is a means to overturn the terms of the debate with the West. The answer of Aurobindo to the Western assertion "you are wrong, because we are right", is: "you are right and we are right"—but with an important addition, which is often unnoticed—"since you do not see that we are *also* right, you are wrong, and we are right". By keeping in mind this overturning of the terms of the debate, one can better understand the role, which the synthesis of East and West, and cosmopolitanism more generally, play in the thought of Aurobindo¹⁴⁰. The implicit presupposition of such a

¹⁴⁰ See Ghose 1997f; 1997h. One of the most radical defences of the synthesis of the East and West is expressed by Aurobindo in his *A Message to America*, written two years after Indian independence (Ghose 2006). I would suggest that it is not a coincidence that the need of confrontation with the West diminishes once Indian freedom has been secured. On Aurobindo's cosmopolitanism, see Ballet 2010, ch. 5.

synthesis is that the West ought to be included in it as a *partial* truth, while the inclusive East is the very *topos* of this synthesis. Furthermore, Aurobindonian universalism allows us to be interpreted as inherently nationalistic. This may sound a rather paradoxical statement, but it seems to be justified by the fact that it is always Hindu tradition that appears to be inherently *synthetic*, capable of a universal openness, over against the exclusivism and cultural imperialism of the West as a whole. Another paradox consists in the fact that the anti-Westernism of Aurobindonian universalism can go hand in hand with its Westernising tendencies. I will explain this point in what follows, and then examine whether Yannaras' thought displays similar tendencies.

(III) On Westernisation, secularisation and nationalism

I argue that Aurobindonian articulation of Hindu inclusivism is a means of Westernisation. I argue that, besides the fact that the idea of Hindu inclusivism had Western models¹⁴¹, and that it ignores that part of Hindu tradition which has been neither tolerant nor inclusive¹⁴², Aurobindo's inclusivism creates a framework which is favourable for the Westernisation and modernisation of India. I propose to call this aspect of Aurobindonian

¹⁴¹ Cf. Varma 1976, 259; Halbfass 1988, ch. 22.

¹⁴² On traditional Hindu xenology and its relation to the Neo-Hindu and Aurobindonian theories of tolerance and inclusivism, see Halbfass 1988, chapters 11 and 22; Nicholson 2010, ch. 10; Doniger 2014, 126-41.

thought *Westernising inclusivism*. According to Aurobindo, “the best of what comes to us draped in occidental forms, is already implied in our own ancient wisdom”¹⁴³. I would suggest that there are two basic implications behind such a statement. The first is that everything that is valuable in the West is actually Eastern. The second implication is that absorbing what is Western constitutes a demand, which spreads from the inherent logic of the Hindu tradition itself.

Let me start with the first implication of Aurobindonian *Westernising inclusivism*. This is linked to the claim, expressed above, that Western civilisation has its origins in the East and, therefore, what it has to offer belonged to the East in the first place. Aurobindo appeals to history to find historical justifications for such an approach, and to demonstrate how certain values, which are part of Western modernity, have profound—albeit perhaps neglected—roots in Indian tradition¹⁴⁴.

One of the examples of such an approach is an attempt to claim democracy for India. On the one hand, Aurobindo is clear that India has “exaggerate[d] the monarchical principle”¹⁴⁵, and criticises attempts “to read

¹⁴³ Ghose 1997h, 92.

¹⁴⁴ Cf. Hutchinson, who points out a similar dynamic in different non-European nationalism, from the Ottoman Empire to China, which “claim[ed] that although currently backward, their nation had once been a teacher of the nations, so that borrowing from the advanced was no more than reclaiming their patrimony”. This provided a justification for “a mutual borrowing of cultures” (Hutchinson 2013, 78). Similarly, Taylor claims that “a successful transition [to modernity] involves a people finding resources in their traditional culture to take on the new practices” (Taylor 1997, 44).

¹⁴⁵ Ghose 1997j, 11.

the modern ideas and types of democracy [...] into the past of India" as "ill-judged"¹⁴⁶. On the other hand, however, he insists that Indian society has possessed historically both "a strong democratic element", and representative institutions—"of Indian's own kind" but with characteristics which bear a "certain analogy" with Western parliamentary structures¹⁴⁷. India "was the first to assert a divinity in the people and could cry to the monarch [...], 'O king, what art thou but the head servant of the demos?'"¹⁴⁸.

In Aurobindo, democracy (as inclusivism) is linked to the characteristic of "the Indian mind" of being "more intuitively synthetic and flexible than that of the occidental peoples"¹⁴⁹. The conclusion reached by Aurobindo is that the national renewal of India in the late colonial period "attempted to base the idea of democracy firmly on the spiritual thought and impulses native to the Indian mind"¹⁵⁰. Democratisation thus appears not as adoption of a foreign practice, but rather as a return to the Indian 'Golden Age'.

The way in which Aurobindo claims the Western democratic paradigm as India's own is not dissimilar to the manoeuvre accomplished by Yannaras. The latter's accent on modern Hellenic Orthodoxy as an heir to the ethos of ancient *polis* can be interpreted as an attempt to re-claim democracy from

¹⁴⁶ Ghose 1997a, 386.

¹⁴⁷ Ghose 1997a, 386.

¹⁴⁸ Ghose 1997j, 11. In ancient India, "contrary to the sentiment of other ancient peoples", neither women nor the outcasts were deprived of a voice in politics (Ghose 1997a, 411).

¹⁴⁹ Ghose 1997a, 412.

¹⁵⁰ Ghose 1997j, 30.

the West for Greece and, in the meantime, to articulate it against the 'pre-political' West.

The second implication of Aurobindonian *Westernising inclusivism* consists in showing that the absorption of everything valuable, which happens to be Western, is inherent to the ethos of Hindu tradition. If Hinduism has been historically inclusive and has rejected nothing, it should not reject anything valuable coming to India now.

In *The Renaissance in India*, Aurobindo advocates the need for a "reawaken[ing of the] national spirit"—a concept typical to nationalism worldwide¹⁵¹. In its concluding pages, we are offered a reflection on how this reawakening interacts with modernity and the West. Aurobindo starts by affirming that Indians "should be as faithful, as *free* in [their] dealings with the Indian spirit and modern influences"¹⁵². Freedom, thus understood, entails a possibility of "acceptance and assimilation" of science and "essential modern ideas" from the West¹⁵³. In a very interesting move, the openness to such acceptance is presented by Aurobindo as being faithful to the inherent inclusive logic of Hindu tradition, and as something that "our ancestors did"¹⁵⁴. A possible presupposition for exclusively claiming such an inclusivism

¹⁵¹ Ghose 1997j, 4. On the reawakening rhetoric of nationalism, see chapter 1 *supra*.

¹⁵² Ghose 1997j, 38, emphasis added.

¹⁵³ Ghose 1997j, 38, 46.

¹⁵⁴ Ghose 1997j, 46. Rejection of innovation, rather than assimilation of it would constitute a betrayal of the traditional ethos and would be "unspiritual", since "true spirituality rejects no new light" (Ghose 1997j, 38).

for India would be that other cultures, *in primis* the West, conceive of their identity as being exclusive of the others. India, however, is different in that it overturns the terms of encounter with the other: instead of building one's identity over against the other, it absorbs the other. From such a perspective, Westernisation is not considered as an alienation or surrender to the *Weltanschauung* of the oppressor, but rather as an implication of one's own tradition.

However, the assimilation, advocated by Aurobindo, is not unconditional. The Western values should be "assimilated to our spiritual aim"¹⁵⁵. In other words, Aurobindo suggests that the criterion of adaptation should be found in the Indian ethos itself. Yet Aurobindo is far from being too naïve. On the one hand, he stresses the difficulty of selectively appropriating certain values and leaving others aside¹⁵⁶. He seems to suggest that a discernment and a selective assimilation of Western values through the optics of an Indian worldview is barely possible since, by assuming a part, it is the whole that in fact is accepted. On the other hand, Aurobindo acknowledges that freedom to discern is limited due to the Westernisation which has already taken place. In "Indian Culture and External Influence", to

¹⁵⁵ Ghose 1997j, 38.

¹⁵⁶ "I would certainly repel the formula of taking the good and leaving the bad as a crudity, one of those facile formulas which catch the superficial mind but are unsound in conception. Obviously, if we 'take over' anything, the good and the bad in it will come in together pell-mell" (Ghose 1997j, 46).

which I referred earlier, Aurobindo argues that one should not have the illusion that India can return to the *status quo*, which predated Western dominion. The latter has produced changes that are irreversible, as irreversible as history itself. The Indian perception of reality has been affected by the things it has experienced, and even by those it has rejected. Would isolation be a solution? Aurobindo answers in negative:

we cannot be 'ourselves alone' [...], we must necessarily take account of the modern world around us [...], otherwise we cannot live. [...] The modern world is [...] dominated by [...] Western civilisation. We claim to set right this undue [Western] preponderance, to reassert [...] the Indian mind [...]. But [...] the Indian mind can only assert itself successfully by meeting these [Western] problems and by giving them a solution which will justify its own ideals and spirit¹⁵⁷.

Aurobindo demonstrates a great deal of realism—often absent among Orientalism's critics, who tend to imagine traditions as static and hermetic. I propose that there are three points here which can be extended beyond the Orientalism debate. First, it is impossible to live in isolation from other traditions. Second, the modern world is profoundly Westernised, and thus it is impossible to deal with modernity while remaining untouched by engagement with the West. Even the rejection of something already conditions the party that rejects. Third, this engagement—both acceptance *and* rejection—does not leave a tradition unchanged. Those changes are not always reversible.

I would like to suggest that Yannaras and other advocates of a return

¹⁵⁷ Ghose 1997g, 51-52.

to the 'Golden Ages' can learn from Aurobindo's highly realistic approach. Yannaras—like Florovsky—does not fail to acknowledge that the East has been profoundly touched and affected by the West. However, Yannaras goes further than Florovsky, and deplores modern Orthodoxy being "linked definitely and integrally to the cultural milieu of the West"¹⁵⁸. According to Yannaras not only the context, in which the Orthodox churches live, but their very mode of life had been profoundly Westernised. At the same time, Yannaras implies the possibility of a complete reversal and a return to a pure Orthodox ethos¹⁵⁹. Aurobindo's perspective suggests that a return to the past is an impossibility since, in the context of the asymmetry of the West, a rejection of modernity in favour of a 'Golden Age' cannot but be conditioned by what is being rejected. I would suggest that, in this sense, Yannaras' anti-Westernism—instead of being thought of as a mere continuation of tradition—could be best interpreted as that which comes after Westernism, a post-Westernism, as it were¹⁶⁰. Of course, as such, it still remains over-determined by the categories and constructs of the West, inasmuch as any attempt to move 'beyond' something arises out of some specific reflection on how that thing is deficient and is to be corrected. I do not wish to imply

¹⁵⁸ Yannaras 1972a, 144.

¹⁵⁹ See Yannaras 1972b, 214.

¹⁶⁰ In fact, some of the Greek meanings of the prefix *anti-* would allow such an interpretation. *Anti-* can be translated as "instead, in the place of". E.g., the Sunday after the Easter in the Orthodox tradition is called *Antipascha*, "what is in the place of Pascha". Cf. Liddell et al. 1994, 153.

by this that Westernisation should be passively accepted as a normative and inevitable *modus vivendi* of the non-Western traditions. I only suggest that, instead of advocating a return to the 'glorious past' more realistic and future-oriented ways of advancing tradition should be envisaged.

There is a sense, however, in which Yannaras' theology itself can be seen as an agent of Westernisation. I would suggest that his very articulation of the church as a 'political', rather than a 'religious' endeavour represents the perpetuation of the Western dichotomy of religious vs. secular. In chapter 3, I argued that Yannaras' argument that the early church conceives itself in continuity with the 'political' (as opposed to the 'religious') institutions of the classical world, is problematic insofar as in the period concerned such a dichotomy does not fully make sense. In chapter 4, I pointed out that this dichotomy appears only in Western modernity, partly as an instrument of the depoliticisation of religion. What Yannaras does—in claiming the political nature of Orthodoxy—to push the church from one part of the dyad to the other, i.e. from the religious to the political, but implicit in this manoeuvre is the reception of the dichotomy itself. I conclude that Yannaras perpetuates the dichotomy, as it has been formulated in the West, and actually does not offer a new and better framework.

'Essence' and secularisation

In what follows, I will start by addressing the question of whether Aurobindonian inclusivism can be interpreted as an instrument of secularisation. By secularisation I mean here the use of sacred symbols and narratives for profane purposes. Previously in this chapter, I pointed out that by arguing that experience is the essence of religion, Aurobindo overturns the terms of Western religiosity. Here, engaging primarily with Eric Sharpe, I would like to reflect further on the concept of the 'essence' of religion and investigate the possible secularising agenda behind it. I will then use Yannaras to articulate a theological approach to secularisation.

Sharpe is astonished at the way in which Aurobindo articulates Hindu nationalism as an eternal religion. In Aurobindo, on the one hand, Hinduism or *sanatana dharma* is identified with nationalism (the latter being considered a religious duty); on the other hand, however, Hinduism, in virtue of its being an eternal religion, is also conceived as universal¹⁶¹. From this second perspective, India is the keeper of a treasure which must be shared with the world. Sharpe suggests that, although the two perspectives—religious nationalism and religious universality—might seem to be in contradiction, in reality they are two sides of the same process, namely secularisation.

¹⁶¹ See Ghose 1996. Cf. Heehs 2005b.

Sharpe claims that the promotion of the idea of a universal religion has secularising effects. It introduces, so the argument goes, a new selective hierarchy, which devalues empirical traditions. In order to reach his conclusion, Sharpe draws a link between the idea of the universality of religion and the category of 'essence':

the concept of 'universal religion' [...] is closely linked with the phenomenon of secularization. [...] [A] religious tradition must in some way be detached [...] from the cultural matrix in which it has previously existed [...] if it is to be offered to [...] the world at large. [...] [The idea of] 'the essence of religion' [...] emerges from a context in which old-established religious [...] practices are being seriously challenged, usually by some secular force. [...] The best known examples of this development are [...] writers like Harnack and Leo Baeck [who], under the pressures of secularization, stated that the 'essence' of their respective traditions consisted in the affirmation of certain moral values [...] [and] were able [...] to bypass all those observable factors which gave their traditions their distinctiveness, or at least to relegate them to positions of comparative unimportance¹⁶².

As a Hindu example of such an approach, Sharpe cites Radhakrishnan who, not unlike Aurobindo, combines Hindu nationalism and universalism. Sharpe criticises the former for treating 'Hinduism' "in a totally un-phenomenological manner", that is as "an ideal and an essence, to which actual living Hindus measure up very poorly"¹⁶³. Sharpe argues that, for Radhakrishnan, "in order to be a universal Hindu one must cease to be an actual Hindu. But was this not precisely the direction in which the process of secularization was leading[?]"¹⁶⁴. Sharpe's critique is, to a certain degree, applicable to

¹⁶² Sharpe 1976, 40-44.

¹⁶³ Sharpe 1976, 48.

¹⁶⁴ Sharpe 1976, 48.

Aurobindo's inclusivism and predilection for ideal Hinduism, as opposed to the 'real-time' Hindus.

There are several important implications of Sharpe's position. First, the hierarchical division between essential and secondary features of religion is considered to be a product of secularisation. Second, it is implicitly suggested that, in this process of hierarchising, the ethical principles are radically prioritised, to the detriment of cultic and doctrinal ones. Third, the search for 'essence' leads to the rejection of the particular religious traditions, as they exist empirically and locally.

Before engaging constructively with Sharpe's intuition about the existence of a crucial link between inclusivism and secularisation, let me express a reservation, which concerns Sharpe's interpretation of the detachment of 'essence' from a given cultural matrix. One could argue that this process is not exclusive to secular modernity. Something similar to that which Sharpe describes in relation to Harnack and Radhakrishnan occurred, to various extents, in pre-modern times. Consider Christianity's *exodus* from Judaism, with the Gospel discussion about the "greatest commandment"¹⁶⁵, St Paul's reflection on what should and what should not be imposed on the gentiles, or the apostolic and patristic translation of the words and deeds of Jesus of Nazareth into the Hellenistic linguistic and conceptual framework.

¹⁶⁵ Cf. Mt. 22:36-40.

Can these examples be regarded as illustrative of debates on a supposed 'core' ethical principle, which assume an understanding that some aspects of the whole are essential and others are secondary? What was this if not "bypassing" the "distinctiveness" of one's tradition, to use Sharpe's vocabulary? These questions lead to an answer which recognises a hierarchy within different elements which constitute a tradition and thus the possibility of describing what is indispensable in terms of 'essence'. Within such a semantic framework, the distinction between 'essence' and 'cultural matrix' represents the very possibility of missionary expansion, rather than an instance of secularisation.

At the same time, one could list a series of moments, when the 'essence' discourse appears to be theologically risky. First, we would be dealing with an instance of secularisation, if by detachment of essence we understood the articulation of 'religion' as an autonomous sphere of human life; the denial of its holistic nature; and its reduction to something like a Sunday worship club. Second, we could perhaps speak of secularisation where religion is reduced to a set of ethical propositions. According to Yannaras this happens when the church understands its mission in terms of "social utility" to the nation—manifested, e.g., in the preservation of language and culture, the "preaching of morality", and the promotion of charity and education—as a consequence of which the church becomes an

object of “political exploitation”¹⁶⁶. The reduction of religion to ethics can also be done in order to ‘re-invent’ religion in a manner acceptable to modernity. In fact, identifying ethics as the essence of religion can be interpreted as a part of religion’s strategy for survival in a context created by modern secular rationality: religion becomes *ancilla politicae*, a morality marshal to the modern nation-state. Third, a reference to religious ‘essence’ could be used by nationalists, or by the state, in order to impose their own understanding of religious beliefs. The way in which the ‘essence’ discourse can be subordinated to the nation-state secularising project is exemplified by Gyanendra Pandey, who points out how the distinction between rational ‘essentials’ and divisive ‘non-essentials’ within Hinduism and Islam was used to promote the Indian nationalist agenda¹⁶⁷. Moreover, such an attitude can be seen in the way a state takes upon itself the task of deciding what is essential for a given religion, and what is not¹⁶⁸. The distinction between ‘essential’ and ‘non-essential’, as Ronojoy Sen rightly observes in relation to India, allows civil authorities “to fashion religion in the way a modern state would like it to be rather than accept religion as represented by its practitioners”¹⁶⁹.

¹⁶⁶ Yannaras 1976, 61, my translation. Such an “utilitarian” approach to the church’s mission is described as an element of “typically Western mentality” (Yannaras 1976, 61, my translation).

¹⁶⁷ Pandey 1997, 236ff.

¹⁶⁸ See some examples, see Minor 1999, 127.

¹⁶⁹ Sen 2010, 87.

I would suggest, however, that even taking into account the three points mentioned above, one should not accept Sharpe's general conclusion that the distinction between what is essential and what is secondary are necessarily consequences of the process of secularisation.

What is secularisation?

This brings us back to the question of what is secularisation, from a theological perspective, and whether a recognition of sacrality within the secular (and the perception of the unity of the sacred along the religio-secular border) constitutes religion's defeat?

Secularisation, as articulated by Sharpe, implies the loss by religion of the elements, directly derived from a given cultural and linguistic context, while still retaining its 'core' elements. I see the point, raised by Sharpe, and why he understands secularisation in such a way. However, the problem I have with his concept of secularisation, is that it presupposes that the very distinction between 'essence' and 'cultural matrix' is a way of yielding to the anti-religious forces of the secular world. I am unconvinced that this distinction *necessarily* represents a yielding, or constitutes a deformation of tradition. Instead, I would suggest that, from a theological perspective, it is keeping the 'cultural matrix', while losing the 'essence', that constitutes secularisation. At one point, Sharpe describes the secularisation of Hinduism

as “a process in which traditional symbols had lost their value and were being replaced by new ones”¹⁷⁰. But Neo-Hindu nationalists, like Aurobindo, continued to use the same symbols (*shakti*, *karmayogin*, *yajna*). What had changed was the ‘essence’, the meaning given to them. It now became connected with, and conditioned by, the Indian independence struggle. From being more or less important elements of the traditional religio-cultural framework, the symbols became—as in Durkheim—totems of the rising national identity¹⁷¹. I would argue that it is precisely such a usage that constitutes a theologically dangerous secularisation, i.e. where a theological content becomes jeopardised. On the contrary, secularisation, as described by Sharpe, may be a theologically innocuous enterprise, and not even an inherently modern phenomenon.

To put this in terms which I developed in chapter 3, the problem with Sharpe’s conception is that he identifies the sacred with the totality of religion—and thus reads the loss of religious forms as secularisation. Aurobindo and Yannaras help in avoiding this trap. Sharpe is right that certain ways of articulating the dichotomy of essence vs. cultural matrix may lead to downgrading empirical religious practice. However, this is not the necessary outcome. Aurobindo rightly insists that the impossibility of

¹⁷⁰ Sharpe 1976, 45.

¹⁷¹ Cf. Gold 1991, 578.

distinguishing between the essentials and, e.g., cultural conventions, with which religion became symbiotic, constitutes a serious problem. He argues that religion

has often supported a rigid [...] social system, because it thought its own life bound up with social forms with which it happened to have been associated during [...] its own history and erroneously concluded that even a necessary change there would be a violation of religion [...]. This error [...] has been the great weakness of religion [...] and justification for the revolt of [...] the ethical spirit of the human being against [religion]¹⁷².

This intuition can be further advanced by engagement with Yannaras. On the one hand, he shows that not only social forms, but virtually no religious discourse is immune to being profoundly profaned and used ideologically¹⁷³. On the other hand, he points out that many of religious forms have been taken from the secular domain in the first place. Moreover, Yannaras, in his reflection on the Westernisation of Orthodox theology shows that the 'essence' can change, while the forms remain unaffected¹⁷⁴. For instance, Yannaras argues that the early modern Greek theologians "tried to remain faithful to the letter of the Orthodox doctrine but were trapped within their Western presuppositions. Their 'Orthodoxy' differed from Catholic [...] theology only in details. They ignored the Church's experience"¹⁷⁵. This points out the risk for modern Orthodoxy of ceasing to be a mode of life but

¹⁷² Ghose 1997d, 177.

¹⁷³ See chapter 3 of this thesis.

¹⁷⁴ See Yannaras 2006, 74-75, 83-84. Cf. Florovsky 2009, 74.

¹⁷⁵ Yannaras 2006, 67. Cf. Yannaras 2006, 84; 1972b, 200.

still maintaining traditional “external forms”¹⁷⁶. This suggests that a mere observation of continuity or changes of the religious forms is insufficient for theological assessment of a tradition. One could conclude that without distinguishing between the ‘essence’ and the ‘forms’, we would be theologically unable to assert the transformations that the church experiences over its history¹⁷⁷. This is not to say that Yannaras himself distinguishes between ‘essence’ and ‘cultural matrix’ in a satisfactory manner. As I pointed out earlier, he is reluctant even theoretically to disjoin his ideal of salvific life from its Hellenistic matrix. On the other hand, however, the interpretation of anti-Westernism in terms of self-critique suggests that Yannaras is still capable of critiquing a given cultural matrix from the point of view of an ambivalently idealised ‘essence’.

To sum up, building on what I argued in chapter 3: if we conceive religion and the secular as not coextensive with the sacred and profane respectively, but rather as both including simultaneously the sacred and the profane—then the abandonment of some religious forms (and acquirement of the secular ones) does not constitute a betrayal of what can theologically be considered to be sacred. However, such a betrayal would take place if the

¹⁷⁶ Yannaras 1991, 162.

¹⁷⁷ Cf. Cyril Hovorun’s distinction between the ‘nature’ and the ‘structure’ of the church. The latter is referred to by Hovorun as ‘scaffolds’, an image Aurobindo uses to express the temporal and instrumental nature of the dogmatic and ethical principles (Hovorun 2017b). Cf. Ghose 1997a, 179.

theological sacred were to be abandoned in exchange for the secular profane. But to know the difference, one needs a criterion of distinction thus something not unlike the idea of the essence or, if one wishes, an understanding of what is theologically sacred and what is not. A mere phenomenological analysis, asserting a passage from a form which has been traditionally considered religious to a form conventionally considered secular, would not suffice.

Phenomenological vs. Non-Phenomenological Tradition

Notwithstanding the problems with Sharpe's position on secularism, he rightly critiques Neo-Hinduism for prioritising a non-phenomenological ideal, in place of an empirical tradition. This two-faceted Hinduism, as Sharpe explicates it, further complicates the picture, drawn for us by Aurobindo. I attempted to show earlier that Aurobindo conceives Hinduism both as an ideal eternal religion, and as the empirical tradition of India. Sharpe also points out a third semantic level on which Hinduism can be read—as an imagined common identity which intends to cover the totality of real-time traditions. Before starting my analysis of the nationalist dimension of non-phenomenological Hinduism, I would like to point out that a discrepancy between ideal and phenomenological Orthodoxy also takes place in Yannaras. His Hellenism is an ideal to which most Greeks do not correspond.

Defining 'Greekness'/Hellenism in terms of *zōon politikon*, Yannaras in fact makes the concept both so straight (by which I mean utopian) and so wide (anyone can potentially be a Hellene)—that the link between this Hellenism and contemporary Greek citizens seems to be a simple abstraction. Yannaras' articulation of Hellenism in terms of a "universality of civilization" which makes Greeks "citizen[s] of the world", as opposed to "parochial ethnicism" goes in the same direction¹⁷⁸. In a message to the Greeks of Australia, Yannaras argues that "[the] message of Hellenism and of Orthodoxy knows no national or racial boundaries; it is an ecumenical message, an invitation to life for every human person. Greece was never a place, it was always a way of life, with ecumenical dimensions"¹⁷⁹.

I will now return to the issue with Hinduism. An engagement with Sudipta Kaviraj and Ashis Nandy can help in seeing the secularist and nationalist implications of conceiving religion in an idealised and non-factual manner. Kaviraj suggests that the more inclusive and minimal the religious 'essence' is, the wider the population it can claim to represent¹⁸⁰. Kaviraj develops his argument through a distinction between *thick* and *thin* religion. *Thick* religion is anchored in "metaphysical beliefs, religious customs, beliefs governing social conduct and regarding ethical life"; it is called "*thick* in the

¹⁷⁸ Yannaras 2011a, 147.

¹⁷⁹ Yannaras 2011f, 83-84.

¹⁸⁰ Kaviraj 2010. Cf. Kaviraj 2014b, 172ff.

sense that its internal contents are vast"¹⁸¹. On the contrary, *thin* religion is "loosely defined" religion, "entirely indifferent to the sectarian practices of everyday worship; its primary purpose is to make them redundant"¹⁸². The theological criteria of religion thus understood are reduced to a minimum and are "vague", which makes it suitable "for easy inclusion" and therefore for "a vast expansion of numbers belonging to this unified religious identity"¹⁸³. For Kaviraj, Bengali Vaishnavism would be a *thick* religion, while Hindutva would be a *thin* one¹⁸⁴. How does this distinction relate to the question of secularisation? In line with Zavos' conclusion, mentioned earlier, Kaviraj argues that a desire to 'enlarge' a religious community, to make it as inclusive as possible, constitutes an adaptation to the demands linked to the rising of a democratic nation-state, founded on the idea of representation¹⁸⁵.

However, the question arises: Is a process of unification of various Hindu groups—even if performed in order to adapt to the new political situation—necessarily a 'secularisation'? Would any change, produced as a result of a new context or, as in this case, with novel ways of conceiving the political mechanism, be necessarily considered as a theologically dangerous secularisation? Religious traditions change throughout their history,

¹⁸¹ Kaviraj 2010, 345.

¹⁸² Kaviraj 2010, 348.

¹⁸³ Kaviraj 2010, 348.

¹⁸⁴ On Hindutva, see Jaffrelot 1996.

¹⁸⁵ Kaviraj 2010, 347. Cf. Zavos 2001, 118ff; Jaffrelot 1994.

frequently pushed out by new social, cultural or political contexts¹⁸⁶. Ought changes of this sort to be interpreted as secularisation? Is this Hindu adaptation to the 'needs' of political expediency—is Aurobindo's emphasis on Hindu inclusivism—a theological 'betrayal'? Both Kaviraj and Sharpe suggest an affirmative answer to this question.

Kaviraj's analysis resonates with Nandy's emphasis on the radical difference between Hinduism *qua* religious and Hinduism *qua* religious nationalism. He argues that "Hindu nationalism, like other such ethnonationalisms, is not an 'extreme' form of Hinduism but a modernist creed that seeks to retool Hinduism, on behalf of the global nation-state system, into a national ideology and the Hindus into a 'proper' nationality"¹⁸⁷. Nandy emphasises that nationalists held in contempt the empirical Hinduism of India, and looked with admiration on the Abrahamic religions, considered "monolithic, well-organized, and capable of being a sustaining ideology for an imperious state"¹⁸⁸. Hence the phenomenon, referred to by Thapar as the "semitization" of Hinduism, which consists in organising Hindus according to

¹⁸⁶ For instance, in chapter 4, I referred to Boyarin's account of Judaism's evolution, following the appearance of Christianity, and to Balagangadhara's argument about the re-articulation of Christianity in the Hellenistic context.

¹⁸⁷ Nandy 1997, 157.

¹⁸⁸ Nandy 1997, 171. Cf. Zavos 2001, 118ff; Kaviraj 2010, 348.

the patterns of Christian and Muslim communities¹⁸⁹. Nandy concludes that “Hindutva will be the end of Hinduism”¹⁹⁰. The two cannot overlap.

I find Nandy’s and Kaviraj’s observations important, insofar as they point to the difference between traditional religion and its articulation in the hands of nationalists. It also suggests that religious symbols and actions can become profaned without losing their religious appearance. If an uncanny allegory would be allowed to illustrate this point, I would refer to Stephen King’s *Pet Sematary*: as those who have been buried in the old Micmac cemetery resurrect as demonic shadows of what they had been before their death, so is religion used by the nationalists—a monstrous copy of its former self.

I wonder, however, whether the difference between the two models (traditional vs. ideological Hinduism) is as straightforward as both authors try to present it. Kaviraj’s claim about the “revulsion” of a traditional believer vis-à-vis ‘thin religion’¹⁹¹ seems to be contradicted by Gould’s explanation of the usage of religious symbols by the secular Congress, mentioned earlier: these symbols speak to the population. In other words, they can touch popular imagination, and are capable of acquiring an additional meaning, *both*

¹⁸⁹ See Thapar 2016, 35. Cf. Jaffrelot 1993.

¹⁹⁰ Nandy 1997, 170.

¹⁹¹ Kaviraj 2010, 351.

religious and political—not unlike the symbols of Robert Bellah’s American civil religion¹⁹².

A further problem with Nandy’s and Kaviraj’s narrative, is that it tends radically to separate *religion* (Nandy) or *thick religion* (Kaviraj) from their politically and nationalistically motivated usage. This may constitute an exaggeratedly idealistic—or, perhaps, simply post-Enlightenment—interpretation of ‘traditional religion’¹⁹³. A comparison with Yannaras will help to make my point clearer. Both Indian scholars seem to make the same mistake, as does Yannaras when he projects religious/secular distinction into antiquity, in order to claim that both *polis* and *ekklēsia* were not ‘religious’ but ‘political’—as if that distinction made a lot of sense for the period concerned¹⁹⁴. Yannaras’ reflection on *religio imperii* suggests that the political usage of religions is much older than modernity with its representative democracy. This allows the formulation of a hypothesis (which would need to be tested on Indian sources), namely, that what Nandy and Kaviraj call ‘traditional religion’ may not be immune to political and ethnocentric usage, as both scholars imply. In other words, nationalist use of Hinduism may not be the first instance of political and ideological usage of Hindu traditions

¹⁹² Cf. Bellah 1967.

¹⁹³ As Gauri Viswanathan rightly points out, Nandy’s radical opposition between traditional religion and political interests “reasserts the split between private and public spheres and treats people’s beliefs and state ideology as essentially noninteractive and mutually exclusive” (Viswanathan 1998, 173).

¹⁹⁴ See chapter 3 of the thesis.

known in history.

To conclude: First, is Aurobindo promoting secularism with his articulation of the 'essence'? I would suggest that it is not the 'detraction' of an essence of Hinduism *per se* which makes Aurobindo's discourse secularising, but rather the fact that this essence risks being reductively articulated in a way which would best suit the political needs of an emerging Indian nation. In other words, it is secularising to the extent it is subordinate to a secular nationalist project. Second, ideas and symbols, to which Aurobindo has recourse are not only of religious but also of nationalist significance. As I argued in chapter 1, modernity is the age of the normativity of nation-states: it is the nation, and the nation alone which can be granted a state sovereignty. Aurobindo addresses this situation. He contributes to the creation of an Indian nation (and thus of a nation-state), and to the re-articulation of identity in a way required by the logic of representative democracy.

However, some questions remain, and they are all more difficult to approach in a framework that wants to be holistic: Can religious and nationalistic interests coincide? How ought we to distinguish whether an idea is theological, secular, or nationalistic? Can a nationalist project contain theologically 'sacred' elements? How can it be discerned whether a theological idea bears sacrality or has already been profaned, whether it

serves a nationalist agenda or simply coincides with it? To what extent is the symbiosis of religious and national interests justifiable in a holistic framework?

Yannaras' Hellenism

I would suggest a comparison with Yannaras can help us to approach these questions. Looking at Yannaras, can we find a similar intersection of theology, secularism and nationalism, to that described in Aurobindo's thought? I would suggest that the answer is affirmative. His ambiguous identification of salvific life with Hellenism seems to imply that the two cannot exist separately. In some aspects of Yannaras' thought, it is salvific life that takes pre-eminence and serves as the criterion of Hellenism, thus suggesting that the two are *per se* distinguishable. As in Hegel, for whom *germanische* and *deutsche* are not identical concepts¹⁹⁵, so in Yannaras, Hellenic sometimes does not equal Greek: "The fundamental difficulty", consists in grasping "the difference between civilization and folklore, differentiating Hellenism from Greekness"¹⁹⁶. Amidst various ways of linking Ancient Greece, Byzantium and Modern Greece¹⁹⁷, Yannaras' articulation of continuity does not go through ethnic, racial or strictly speaking religious lines, but

¹⁹⁵ Cf. Mowad 2013, 168.

¹⁹⁶ Yannaras 2011a, 146.

¹⁹⁷ For different attempts, see Smith 2003a, 200-04; Cameron 2014, ch. 3.

through the concept of communal verification of truth. In this Yannaras appears as an original and open thinker, attempting to save modern Greece from ethnic and 'religious' nationalism—by insisting on the moments which unite Hellenic culture with the rest of humanity.

On the other hand, however, it is Hellenism that becomes a criterion of salvific life. I pointed out already Yannaras' reluctance to discern salvific life in the contexts unconnected with the Hellenic *polis* or Greek Orthodoxy. Here I would like to point out two more instances of an ambiguous identification between what is Christian and what is national. *Firstly*, the tension between 'ecclesiastical' and 'national' is revealed by the way Yannaras approaches the issues of the separation of the church and state in Greece. He suggests that "[t]he consequences [of the separation] will be probably positive for the church, but the country will lose the only fundament for its [...] social and political life"¹⁹⁸. The logic behind this assessment resonates with Jean Daniélou's controversial defence of the 'Constantinian age' (and Christendom more generally) on the grounds that it allowed for the bringing of Christianity to the "poor", by which Daniélou means persons who do not belong to the intellectual elites (and cannot grasp theological details)¹⁹⁹. However, while Daniélou's defence comes from the needs of the

¹⁹⁸ Yannaras 1976, 64, my translation.

¹⁹⁹ Daniélou 2012, ch. 1. For a critical engagement with Daniélou on this matter, see Lonergan 2004.

church, and its interest in reaching everybody—elite and not—, in Yannaras it is the interest of the nation-state which matters. This suggests a moment of ambiguity—or even undecidability—between the religious and the political. The *second* insight comes from Yannaras' reflection of the involvement of the Orthodox clergy in the Greek war of independence. He argues that the bishops, priests and deacons, who fought the Ottomans' military,

knew quite well that violence was diametrically opposed to the truth of the Church [...], and that according to the Church canons they were [...] risking excommunication, risking the salvation of their souls. Yet what was paramount in their eyes was not their individual salvation but the salvation of the people, the liberation of its life from enslavement to tyranny—it was 'we' and not 'I' [...]. They therefore did not care if they themselves would be 'condemned'. Their struggle was a feat of ultimate self-denial, an extreme risk taken out of love, an act of freedom and communion²⁰⁰.

This passage should not be read out of its context. Yannaras is not making a case that Hellenism, or the freedom of Greece, is more important than the commandment of gospel. He rather reflects upon this episode as part of his critique of an approach which emphasises the need of "an *a priori*, objective theological safeguard in taking personal moral risks", and, in particular, his critique of an "objective" political or liberation theology. However, it seems possible to conclude that, from Yannaras' perspective, at least in this case, the interests of the Greek 'we' take precedence over the individual relationship between an 'I' and her God²⁰¹. If this conclusion constitutes an

²⁰⁰ Yannaras 1984, 216-17, n. 19.

²⁰¹ I wonder whether Yannaras would describe the opposite side, the Turks, fighting against the Greeks as "ultimate self-denial" and an "act of freedom and communion", and, if the answer is positive, how to characterise this kenotic mutual killing.

overstretching of Yannaras' thought (which I suggest it does not), then still one can consider this case as illustrative of the moment of undecidability between what is a Christian duty and what is a national one. And although we need not necessarily accept Yannaras' logic (which consists in asserting that you perform an act of *kenosis* by the very act of renunciation to a gospel principle), one can see that the dilemma, with which Yannaras attempts to deal, does not allow for easy solutions²⁰².

Both Yannaras' justification of the fighting of the Greek clergy and Aurobindonian inclusivism pose a question of whether salvific life, as fully political, can be clearly separated from the national preoccupations. Or whether, in modernity, national identity is an unavoidable element of holistic and political salvific life.

I argue that the question of whether Aurobindo's and Yannaras' thought is religious, secular, or national, may be more complicated than appears at first sight. Believers, secularists and nationalists may each give a different answer; people may perform the same actions with a different spirit. Theology should not be afraid to discern within cases, where various dimensions are intertwined in very complicated ways. Neither should it hurry to give easy answers, looking only at the 'religious', 'secular', or 'national'

²⁰² Regarding the rejection of 'objective' morality and possibility of the justification of violence, there is an interesting parallel with Aurobindo, who is critical of Gandhi's principle of non-violence, on the grounds that it claims "a universality which it cannot have" (Ghose 2011, 191).

surface. Rather, it should look for the sacred, however unfamiliar a form this may take.

Aurobindo's and Yannaras' respective projects are ambiguously and inseparably theologico-political, and it seems impossible to discern whether their ways of constructing their respective nations are a product of the sacralisation of the national, or rather of the nationalising of the religious. What, I argue, remains clear is the fact that the final outcome constitutes not only an ideal of salvific life, or a community of belief and praxis, but a nation, according to a peculiarly modern understanding; an entity which links the past, present and future, a body with its unique characteristics, a civilisation which wants to contribute to humanity at large.

Let me now draw two conclusions from the arguments, based on the analysis in this chapter, which touch on the role of the political within the religious thought of Aurobindo and Yannaras. The first regards the moment of ambiguity in the intertwining of the theological and the political; the second has to do with anti-Westernism as a *topos* of the political in a Schmittian sense of friend/enemy distinction.

Undecidability

One way of interpreting those elements which appear ambiguously religious and national (and sometimes secular) is through the approach

traced by Sharpe, Nandy and Kaviraj. They all suggest that religious symbols are 'secularised' through their usage by nationalists, and thus cease to be religious. This analysis resonates with the position of Geneviève Zubrzycki, drawn on her study of the Polish case of an intertwinement of religion and nationalism, which, I suggest, is of great interest for our discussion.

Zubrzycki argues that in Poland under Communism and in its early independence years,

it was not political institutions and symbols that were sacralized and became the object of religious devotion (following the French revolutionary model), but religious symbols that were first secularized and then *resacralized as national*. Biblical allegories, [...] pilgrimages, or simple participation in Sunday Mass were largely politicized as carriers of national identity [...]. In the place of religion yielding to nationalism or nationalism becoming a religion, here *religion becomes nationalism*²⁰³.

Not dissimilar to Nandy's assertion that Hindu nationalism leads to the extinction of Hinduism, is Zubrzycki's assertion that religion's vitality in Polish public life can be regarded as religion's "ultimate defeat—its instrumentalization and its reduction to the role of symbolic vehicle of national identity"²⁰⁴. In other words, what appears to be the resurgence of religion—thus a sign of a reversal of the secularisation thesis—actually represents religion's very secularisation.

I find Zubrzycki's account overall persuasive. It points out the use and misuse of religious symbols and actions by nationalism, and thus the

²⁰³ Zubrzycki 2006, 219-20, emphasis in original.

²⁰⁴ Zubrzycki 2006, 221.

polyvalence of their religious and nationalist meanings. This conclusion could apply not only to Poland and India, but also for other cases of religious nationalism, in particular to Greece²⁰⁵. It is also important for the general argument of this thesis, because it shows that religious symbols can stop being theologically sacred, while continuing to exist in their seemingly unchanged religious form. Moreover, Zybrzycki's analysis resonates with Yannaras' point that the event-church can be taken over by *religio imperii*, which is no less ideological than nationalism. In both cases Christianity is being used for civil purposes. The difficulty I have with Zubrzycki's argument is that, in explicating religious symbols as either 'truly' religious or (secularised) national, it fails to contemplate a possibility of the theologico-political, by which I mean something that can be regarded as sacred from both theological and political perspectives. Although she somehow seems to suggest that certain actions and symbols can be sacred *both* from religious and nationalist points of view, or, as she puts it, can be "sacred secular"²⁰⁶, her overall argument goes into a direction of *either... or*. This is clearly visible in the way she asserts movements which attempt to resist a politicisation of religion: the choice, contemplated by Zubrzycki is either "identity politics" or

²⁰⁵ See Kalaitzidis 2002; Kalaitzidis and Asproulis 2012.

²⁰⁶ For instance, Zubrzycki argues that "[t]he cross in Poland is [...] a *sacred secular* symbol. It is sacred not only because of its Christian semantics (or even in spite of them), but because it traditionally represents, since the nineteenth century, Poland" (Zubrzycki 2006, 221, emphasis in original).

“deepening of faith”²⁰⁷. The problem with such an articulation is that it a *priori* reduces religion to “belief”, and when religion exhibits some cultural or ‘national’ aspects, the latter are automatically considered an inconsistency, which needs to be ‘corrected’ by the privatisation of religion. Drawing on my analysis of Yannaras and Aurobindo, I would argue that Zubrzycki’s categorisation is too rigid. Apart from the domain of the ‘truly’ religious (if it has ever existed) and the domain of nationalism, travestied in forms of a conventional religion, there is a third possibility, namely of theologico-political, in which certain symbols and actions are contemporaneously religious and national, and can be considered as ‘sacred’ from both theological perspective and the point of view of nationalism.

West and Political agenda

Both Yannaras and Aurobindo construct their thought in clear opposition to the West. However, the ‘West’ they encounter and the context in which they live is different. Aurobindo is addressing the issue of the British colonial domination and is struggling for Indian political independence. One of the key issues at stake in this struggle is to show that India has a unified nation and that it has enough cultural potential to govern itself independently from the West. Yannaras’ Greece is already an independent

²⁰⁷ Zubrzycki 2006, 221. Similarly in Gellner 1997, 77-78.

nation-state, and what is at stake is rather cultural independence. His work should be read as a contribution to the liberation from the Western 'Babylonian captivity' of Hellenism, which went beyond theology into the ecclesial and socio-political life of Greece.

An important question which needs to be addressed is what 'East' and what 'West' are we dealing with in Yannaras and Aurobindo? Gavriluk, referring to the Russian Slavophiles and Florovsky, argues that the categories of the East and West that they depict are "multivalent, mutually defining symbols"²⁰⁸.

On the one hand, Yannaras chooses some extremely short periods of Greek history (Athenian democracy, pre-Constantinian Christianity), and in various ways identifies them with Hellenism-Orthodoxy-Greece as a whole. On the other hand, as Vasilios Makrides points out, Yannaras selects a single period of Western history (a period of 'Barbarity') and extends it onto the whole of Western civilisation²⁰⁹. Kalaitzidis, on similar lines, deplores the fact that the West, in Yannaras, appears in an "expired version", which "does not really exist"²¹⁰. A comparison between the selected periods on both sides is surely convincing, but a chronological and geographical extension of the

²⁰⁸ Gavriluk 2014, 58.

²⁰⁹ See Makrides 2014.

²¹⁰ Kalaitzidis 2017, 428. Moreover, as Kalaitzidis observes elsewhere, the West, with which Yannaras engages, is that of Augustine, Anselm and Thomas Aquinas, and not that of contemporary Western thinkers, who are often not less critical of the medieval theology than Yannaras himself (Kalaitzidis 2009, 505).

outcome of such a comparison of East and West as wholes, is much less evident. It is true that Yannaras does not engage exclusively with the European Middle Ages, but also develops a critique of subsequent periods of Western life, modernity included. In this regard, the 'West' appears to be relatively more empirical or factual than the 'East', in the sense that it is considered on a larger and historically more extended scale. This fact, however, is not sufficient to allow us to see East and West as equally 'real'. A similar critique can be extended also to Aurobindo, for whom the West is taken in a form which fluctuates between the empirical and caricature, while the East, on the contrary, is fluctuating in the opposite direction, from the empirical to the idealised. For Aurobindo, the only positive elements in the West are of Eastern origins, while anything negative in the East is due to foreign, in particular Western, influences. Therefore, not only the *self*, but also the *other* is imagined, albeit very differently.

I suggest that a parallel with the nationalism vs. patriotism binary, addressed in chapter 1, can be helpful in making my argument about East vs. West clearer. Let me quote Bauman again:

the patriotism [...] is the 'marked' member of the couple, the unsavoury realities of nationalism being cast as the 'unmarked' member: patriotism, more postulated than empirically given, is what nationalism [...] could be but is not. Patriotism is described through the negation of the most disliked and shameful traits of known nationalisms. [...] [W]hat is opposed here is not so much two options equally likely to be embraced, as a noble idea and an ignoble reality"²¹¹.

²¹¹ Bauman 2006, 174.

I draw two consequences from Bauman's citation with respect to our examination. First, the 'East' and the 'West' in Aurobindo and Yannaras, not unlike 'patriotism' and 'nationalism', do not necessarily constitute two equally existent alternatives: the 'West' appears to be more empirically grounded, while the 'East' tends to be less factual and more idealised. Second, the 'West' and the 'East' are mutually interdependent, in the sense that the 'West' serves as *topos*, where the 'East' can relegate its unwanted features, in order to appear in all its idealised purity.

My conclusion on the East vs. West opposition can be also formulated in terms developed in chapter 3. Looking at the logic behind the thought of Aurobindo and Yannaras through the lens of the sacred/profane distinction, it can be said that when dealing with their own traditions, both thinkers identify the *topos* of the sacred in the respective 'Golden Ages' and then tend to extend it to their traditions in their geographical and chronological totality, i.e., to identify their traditions—profane elements included—with the sacred. What I called a *pars pro toto* manoeuvre is happening here, in which the *wholeness* of profanity and sacrality of one's own tradition is ambiguously identified with the *momentous* sacrality of the past. An analogous *pars pro toto* exchange is achieved when Aurobindo and Yannaras deal with the West: a momentous profanity of the West is extended to Western religiosity and culture as a whole, so that any sacred within it is unnoticed or denied.

Yannaras is more explicit than Aurobindo in performing these two manoeuvres, but both move in a similar direction. This conclusion does not, in any way, intend to dismiss the merits of the critiques that both thinkers are exercising towards the West. It merely stresses the interrelation between their theological and political agendas, and notes one of the mechanisms of an oppositional identity-construction.

Another important point in this regard concerns the interpretation of Yannaras' rejection of the West in terms of a self-critique, which, to a large degree can be applied to Aurobindo. I suggest that in both authors the 'West' becomes a sort of shock absorber, which allows for the criticism of their respective societies and religious communities, without compromising the dignity and self-respect of the communities they represent. This aspect can be better appreciated through a reference to Charles Taylor's reflection on the reception of the ideology of nationalism by the countries outside the West²¹². According to Taylor, nationalism involves "the refusal of incorporation" into the metropolitan culture and "arises from the felt need for difference in the context of modernization, but [is] lived in the register of dignity, of an identity potentially threatened in its worth"²¹³. Returning to our discussion on Aurobindo and Yannaras, I would suggest that, firstly, the

²¹² Taylor 1997.

²¹³ Taylor 1997, 47.

projection of the negative aspects of their respective societies onto the ambiguous category of the 'West', and, secondly, interpretation of their own anti-Westernism in terms of a self-critique, allows both thinkers to be critical of the context in which they live, without threatening the self-esteem of communities. In this way, they create a particular framework for critique, which conserves the dignity of respective nations intact. Similarly, the national dignity is preserved when, as A. Smith puts it, the 'shameful' present is criticised in the name of the 'glorious' past²¹⁴. This tactic is all the more satisfactory, since in Aurobindo and Yannaras the 'shameful' present is actually explained through, and often identified with, the West.

By speaking, as it were, from the perspective of the 'glorious' past, both thinkers can look at the present condition of the respective traditions, from outside, and therefore criticise them with more freedom. One could perhaps even speak of defamiliarisation—achieved through situating different elements of the present context into various abstract constructs such as 'glorious' past, the 'East' and the 'West'—which allows both thinkers to see their traditions in a different light.

As I pointed out in chapter 2, any identity, national in particular, is engaged in the process of border maintenance and separation of 'us' vs. 'them'. I would suggest that, in the moment when the West is asymmetrically

²¹⁴ Smith 1971, 248.

omnipresent, a semantic extraction of any negative 'material' from the East, and projection of this 'material' into the 'rag-bag' of the West is an attempt to prevent the border between 'us' and 'them' from disappearing. This leads to the question of the relationship between East vs. West dichotomy and Schmittian concept of the friend/enemy distinction.

By rejecting modernity's exile of religion into an a-political private ghetto, and offering an alternative narrative of the church's political being, Yannaras (and to a minor extent also Aurobindo) unintentionally, and perhaps even unconsciously, fall into a trap of another 'political' reality: 'political' in the Schmittian sense²¹⁵. An articulation of the 'East' in opposition to the 'West' becomes the *topos* of a Schmittian "antithesis", through which salvific life is constructed as political²¹⁶.

²¹⁵ See chapter 2 of this thesis.

²¹⁶ Cf. Schmitt 2007, 37.

Conclusion

In what follows I will begin by providing a summary of arguments developed in various chapters; I will then relate them to the sacred vs. profane and the East vs. West dichotomies; finally, I will point out some ancillary contributions of this thesis beyond its primary focus.

(I) Summing up

This thesis attempted to deepen our understanding of the relationship between, on the one hand, religion (or theologically salvific life) and nation (or the political, as it is articulated in modernity) and, on the other hand, the sacred and the profane. I began by looking at these relationships from a non-theological perspective. Chapters 1 and 2 constituted an engagement with the approaches provided by scholarship in social sciences. In chapter 1, I pointed out two core ingredients of national identity construction, *selection* and *belief*. Nationalism carefully selects the criteria of belonging. One of the paradoxes of such a selection is that a nation might opt for defining itself in terms of universal human values. The importance of belief for identity formation is seen in sacralisation of the nation through the use of sacred symbols and narratives. I suggested the ways in which the process of appropriation by nationalism of religious narratives are related to

secularisation. I argued that one of the main sacralisation mechanisms of nationalism involves an appeal to sacrifice, *sacrum facere*, 'to make holy'. By appealing to (and imposing) sacrifice, nation posits itself as the master over life and death, as the highest value, as provider of meaning for human existence. I concluded by asking the question of whether recourse to sacrifice and ritual makes nationalism a religion. This led me to the question of what religion is. In chapter 2, I discussed a Durkheimian conception of religion which is based on a sacred/profane dichotomy. I pointed out how nationalism conceives of itself in terms of this dichotomy, and argued that one of the possible interpretations of this dynamic is the articulation of it in terms of a Schmittian friend/foe distinction. I opted for a more nuanced interpretation, in which the symbols and narratives of a nation are purely sacred, and set apart both from the profane of everyday life and from the impure sacred of the enemy. I picked up the argument of chapter 1 about conceiving national identity by reference to universal human values, in order to show that an attempt to define oneself in terms of humanity involves denying this status to the enemy, thereby degrading them to non-human status. My engagement with the research discussed in chapters 1 and 2 allowed for two important conclusions. First, nationalism draws on sources, which, from the perspective of the social sciences, are described as 'religious'; second, the meaning of this 'religious' differs from scholar to

scholar. N. Smart and A. Smith, for instance, tend implicitly to reduce religion to symbolism and doxology, while Durkheim's and Billing's 'religion' is a much more extensive domain, which tends to cover social life. In chapters 3 to 5, I addressed these issues from a theological point of view.

In chapters 3 and 4, I discussed Yannaras' and Aurobindo's vision of salvific life as aimed at complete transformation of human existence in all its domains. In chapter 3, I examined Yannaras' conception of Christianity as a 'political' endeavour (in continuity with the Hellenic *polis*) by comparing it, on the one hand, to 'religion' and, on the other hand, to 'the pre-political' domain of individualism. I attempted to illuminate some aspects of Yannaras' thought by comparison with the Aurobindonian religion vs. spirituality dichotomy. Through engagement with Yannaras' concept of 'religionisation', I attempted to develop ways through which to approach both secularisation and nationalism. Thus, nationalism can be read as a transformation (or the second "secularisation", in Yannaras' terms) of Christian *religio imperii*, which, in its turn, is a transformation (the first "secularisation") of the event-church. Finally, I proposed a theological re-articulation of the Durkheimian sacred/profane distinction, in relation to a post-Enlightenment separation of the religious and the secular. I argued that the church should not be conceived as the sacred *simpliciter*, nor should the secular be conceived as all profane; but rather theology should attempt to discern both the sacred

outside the church's borders, and the profane in the church's midst. Chapter 4 also dealt with Yannaras' and Aurobindo's articulation of salvific life as a respectively political and holistic *mode of existence*. The focus, however, was different. While chapter 3 considered this *mode of existence* in relation both to religions and to the non-political/non-holistic, chapter 4 analysed salvific life through its opposition to the modern category of 'religion'. The chapter engaged in a systematic discussion of 'religion' as a category, set in terms of dialogue between religious studies, postcolonialism and theology. I argued that Aurobindo's and Yannaras' reluctance to define their respective traditions in terms of 'religion' constitutes a rejection of the modern binary opposition between the religious and the secular.

Finally, chapter 5 was concerned with demonstrating the untidiness of being both theological and political in a modern context, permeated by the normativity of nationalism and the asymmetry of the West. I argued that the theological thought of both Aurobindo and Yannaras is stretched between the need of their respective societies to articulate proper identities, and the normativity of Western assumptions about the theological and the political. This suggests that Aurobindo and Yannaras are tragic writers, in the sense that in their attempt to theologise—based on their respective traditions—and in their search for non-Western points of reference, they cannot but produce a framework that is already profoundly post-Western. Even Yannaras'

rejection of the Western category of 'religion', and the consequent definition of Orthodoxy in terms of the political, does not constitute a rejection of the Western religious/political dichotomy, but simply a 'jumping over' from one pole of the dyad into another. Yannaras carries forward the tradition of Orthodox anti-Westernism, but, at the same time, he provides a basis for challenging and problematising it, by transforming it into a tool of self-criticism. A comparison of Yannaras' anti-Westernism with anti-colonial critique of Aurobindo indicates that, to a large degree, the *other*, against whom the *self* constructs herself, is internal to the *self*. I then proceeded to address the question of what the analysis of specific elements of Aurobindo and Yannaras' thought can contribute to the general discussion on the correlation between the theological and the political, and the sacred and the profane. First, a holistic approach to salvific life may entail a situation of *undecidability* between the theological and the political. As engagement with the Aurobindonian articulation of inclusivism suggests, a given conception of the sacred, can be simultaneously religious, nationalistic and secularising, depending on why, when and for what reasons it is being proposed or defended. A similar conclusion could be drawn from Yannaras' identification of salvific life with the transhistorical ethos of Hellenism. What we have in both cases is not a sacralisation of a national symbolism (as in Smart), nor the secularisation of religious symbolisms (as in A. Smith), nor

even the “resacralization [of religious symbols] as national symbols”¹ (as in Zubrzycki). Rather what we have here is a moment of undecidability of the theologico-political, the impossibility to discern with certainty what is what. Second, in deciding to be political and incarnate in the social life, theology may become political in the Schmittian sense, of being grounded on the friend/enemy distinction, and constituted by rejection of the other. This is what happens with Yannaras’ (and to a lesser degree Aurobindo’s) anti-Westernism. Yannaras makes an important point in asserting the sacredness of the community, and in proposing the constant communal verification as a ruling out of both egocentrism and totalitarianism. However, one of the risks which the identification of community and the sacred entails, consists in the fact that choosing to consider the community—and not the sacred—to be the reference point and final criterion of truth, jeopardises the possibility of discerning the sacredness in the *other*.

(II) On mirrors and imitators

Religion’s ugly face

Unlike many other studies, which approach nationalism through a comparison with religious identity construction, this thesis not only reads nationalism through the lens of religion, it also suggests that the reverse can

¹ Zubrzycki 2006, 219-20, emphasis in original.

be done. In other words, in analysing nationalism, we can see certain things within conventional religion with a clarity which would be unattainable through an intra- or inter-religious comparison. This suggests that a theological study of nationalism can be reflexive and reveal much about religion itself. In this sense, nationalism may serve as a mirror, in which religion is able to see its own ugliness.

What is imitation (of religion by nationalism)?

I have proposed that, when nationalism imitates (both consciously and unconsciously) religion, it does so on different semantic levels. First, it imitates 'religion' understood as an autonomous sphere of doxology: nationalism imitates some religious symbols, rituals and narratives. Second, it imitates religion understood in terms of a holistic and social endeavour, which resonates with Yannaras' and Aurobindo's salvific life. In this sense, nationalism conceives itself as a new religio-political whole. Third, it imitates religion in Yannaras' sense of ideology, and a way of coping with fear and anxiety—the latter being religion's constant temptation. In other words, nationalism is what religion has often become.

Regarding nationalist 'imitation' of religious symbolism, I do not wish to over-emphasise the deliberate intentionality on nationalism's part in imitating religion. How intentional is this imitation, and what does it tell us

about religion and nationalism? I suggest that any answer to this question should take into account the two following facts. The first is that liturgy or symbolism does not 'belong' to religion, and the early Christian church borrowed many of its liturgical signs from the political domain². The second is that some of the nationalistic symbols and narratives are clearly modelled on religious patterns³. Now, I observe there is no simple explanation of this fact. Religious symbols are familiar to people; they speak to their imagination. Symbols are, by their very nature, as it were, poly-semantic. Symbols can express allegiance, gift of life, transcendence of death and other 'transcendental' things better than a signed contract. And in this sense, I consider it important that even nation-states which promote secularism and rationalism have recourse to various symbolic gestures and narratives, which (not a priori, but in their intentionality) bear transcendental and often clearly religious meaning.

(III) Sacred/profane and the problem of undecidability

There is a sense in which modernity's dichotomy of religious/secular and the conflation of the religious with the sacred, and the profane with the secular, makes things easier for theology: it provides clarity on what pertains

² Cf. chapter 1.

³ Mosse shows this in his examination of the symbolisms of the French Revolution and Fascism (Mosse 1989). Gould does the same in his research on India (Gould 2004).

to theology and what does not. Conversely, theology's independence from modernity's categorisations, makes things more intricate and complicated. Theology's independence from modernity's categorisations entails that not everything that the secular has appropriated is *ipso facto* profane. This means that religious concepts (which go from the idea of sacrifice to inclusivism and 'experience'), which nationalism has 'secularised', as Zubrzycki would put it, can still conserve theological sacrality. By becoming political, they do not necessarily cease to be theological. By this I do not wish to say that theological concepts always conserve their 'sacrality' when they are appropriated by nationalists. I only want to stress that the loss of 'sacrality' is not automatic. In other words, apart from 'theological' and 'political' there is also 'theologico-political' for the theological sacred within the domain of the secular world.

My argument challenges the theological absolutisation of the importance of the borders between religion and the secular. What is theologically relevant is to be aware of the profane within organised religion, and of the sacred outside organised religion. In which case, we would have the following kinds of the *theological sacred*: *religious sacred*—the sacred within religious borders, and *secular sacred*—outside those borders. The latter may coincide with the non-theological *nationalist sacred*, i.e., with the things considered sacred by nationalists. From a theological perspective,

thus, the nationalist sacred can be either theologically sacred, or theologically neutral, or even idolatrous. However, as my engagement with Aurobindo and Yannaras indicates, the discernment of various 'types' of sacrality is not an easy endeavour, and sometimes it is opportune for a theologian to abstain from judgement, accepting a situation of undecidability.

Aurobindo and Yannaras, on the one hand, offer resources for a better articulation of the sacred and the profane but, on the other hand, are susceptible to being criticised for making such an articulation incoherently, especially when they respectively conceive Indian and Greek identities over against the West. In fact, they often err by conflating their own traditions as a whole with 'sacrality', while relegating all the negative or 'profane' aspects into the category of the 'West'. This thesis can be considered a contribution to a better understanding of the East vs. West dichotomy, and to postcolonial approaches in theology in general. Let me elaborate on this point a bit further.

(IV) Eastern polemics in an asymmetrically Westernised world

In chapters 4 and 5, I pointed out that one of the problems regarding Eastern theologising is the asymmetry between the West and the Rest. The West is all-pervading, and even a discourse which comes from the East—be it

India or Greece—is, in a certain sense, also Western, or, as I called it, post-Western. One pervasive feature, is the normativity of the nation-state, and of such a relationship between nation and religion (which differs in various contexts), which makes the rise of the nation-state possible in the first place. Drawing on my analysis of Aurobindo and Yannaras, I argue that this fact has overwhelming consequences for theology, especially inasmuch as theology seeks to be holistic and to transcend a religious/secular division.

Aurobindo and Yannaras provide significant examples of a holistic theologising in an asymmetrically Westernised and ‘nationalised’ world. Both clearly want to reject the modern separation between the religious and secular. Both struggle to balance the theological and ethno-cultural elements of their thought, leaving their readers with an impression that the balance they achieve is wanting in many regards. In chapter 5, I argued that ‘East’ and ‘West’ in Yannaras and Aurobindo are articulated in an asymmetrical, mutually defining way. This characterisation resonates with Durkheim’s sacred/profane dichotomy, which has been criticised for being semantically void in the sense that the ‘sacred’ is defined solely by its opposition to the ‘profane’⁴. Similarly, not unlike the Durkheimian sacred and profane, which are asymmetrical in that the sacred is all-powerful, while the profane is a ‘rag-

⁴ Cf. chapter 2.

bag' of everything undesirable, Aurobindo's and Yannaras' 'East' is powerful and ideal, the 'West' appears to be but a polluted 'East'.

Since Yannaras claims that Orthodoxy has been religionised and is "radically and unhappily Westernized"⁵, one would expect from him a comparison of an empirical, 'religionised' West, and an empirical, 'religionised' East. Instead, Yannaras offers an ambivalent contraposition of an *ideal* Orthodoxy vs. a *factual* West, the former described in terms of the event-church, freedom and communion, while the latter is identified with 'religion' and 'ideology'. It is on this basis that the superiority of the East is constructed. Both Yannaras and Aurobindo agree on Eastern superiority vis-à-vis the West but, in both cases, such an outcome is accomplished through an ambiguous identification of the *idealised* Hinduism/Orthodoxy with the *empirical* Hinduism/Orthodoxy. The West is not given a similar opportunity to appear in an ideal form. Thus, it can be said that the *mythos* of the 'East' and *mythos* of the 'West', to use Gallaher's expression, are not symmetrically mythical.

Dangers of polemics

The arguments advanced in chapter 2 suggest yet another sense in which polemics is one of the key tools of identity formation: to construct and

⁵ Yannaras 2006, viii.

to sustain an identity, a community necessitates the *other* against which to imagine itself. In a post-colonial context, this *other* is easy to find. A comparison between Yannaras and Aurobindo in chapter 5 indicates that they not only articulate their thought in what is conceptualised as a rejection of the West, but also that the act of this ‘construction against’ leads them to ‘forget’, to set aside parts of their respective traditions. In fact, the parallels between these representatives of modern Orthodoxy and Neo-Hinduism are due not so much to the genealogical resemblances of the first-order religious beliefs and practices, as to the fact that the second-order theological traditions imagine themselves against the common *other*, the West.

Aurobindo and Yannaras—despite their critique of the West and, more importantly, because of this critique—are to a large degree conditioned by the West, both as it exists and as they conceive of it. In chapter 4, drawing on Aurobindo, I argued that one who engages with the ideas of other traditions is conditioned and determined in her very attempts at understanding, and even in rejection of those ideas. The *topos* of this conditioning is provided by the encounter, enabled by modernity (which coincides with Western political and cultural expansion).

Which political?

I argued that the articulation of the East in opposition to the West, resonates with the Schmittian friend/enemy distinction as the basis of the political. There are two important aspects to this. First, the theology of Yannaras—and to a certain degree of Aurobindo—is political, but not necessarily in the sense of being non-‘religious’ (free from dogmatic principles or ethical objectivity), nor in the sense of being a community-centred alternative to individualism (the ‘pre-political’), but in the Schmittian sense of creating an “antithesis”⁶, providing an enemy identified with the West. The second Schmittian political moment discernible in Aurobindo and Yannaras has to do with their respective articulations of inclusivism and holism. In fact, Aurobindo describes Hinduism as inclusive of every other religious and humanistic tradition. Yannaras, on his part, describes Hellenism in *tout court* political terms (recall that for Yannaras, Greek means political animal). I suggest that to define respective traditions in so widely holistic terms on the one hand, and to present such an articulation as antithetical to the West on the other hand, is reminiscent of what Schmitt refers to as the usurpation of humanity. In chapter 2, I suggested that, when a state claims to act in the name of humanity it actually implies its own monopoly on (the definition of) humanity, and denies this status to others. From this

⁶ Cf. Schmitt 2007, 37.

perspective, one can conclude that Yannaras and Aurobindo—by defining their traditions as respectively a “synthesis of all spiritual worship and experience”⁷, or simply ‘political’—actually usurp the salvific life as such, thereby denying it to other traditions. The latter aspect is clearly visible in both Aurobindo’s argument that the modern West did not need to separate the religious from the secular, because its religion was already “a secular institution”⁸, and in Yannaras’ description of the West almost exclusively in terms of ‘ideology’ and ‘religion’—as a defence mechanism for human ignorance, anxiety and fear of relation. In brief, salvific life can be usurped just like Schmittian humanity. I suggest the following relevant lesson can be learned from this: by trying to overcome modernity’s religious/secular dichotomy, theology should be cautious not to embrace uncritically any theory of the political. The new demon can be worse than the previous (cf. *Lk.* 11:24-25).

Playing with difference pieces: On dichotomies

Modernity often leaves us with two alternatives: religion as political and violent vs. religion as private, spiritual and peaceful⁹. Yannaras seems to be following the same line. This line is not unproblematic conceptually. For

⁷ Ghose 1997a, 193.

⁸ Ghose 1997a, 139-40.

⁹ See Fitzgerald 2011, 18.

example, he insists that early Christianity has chosen as its self-description the term *ekklēsia* from the political and secular domain, instead of borrowing a religious or cultic vocabulary¹⁰. Now, this observation is very thought-provoking, however, Yannaras' argument is based on a clear separation between the political and the religious projected onto first centuries CE, which, as scholars of the Greco-Roman world convincingly point out, did not exist in that period. To a certain extent, all Yannaras' thought revolves around this dichotomy between the 'religious' and 'political'—when dealing with the early church, East vs. West, and mode of life vs. ideology. In a way, the choice of alternatives, with which Yannaras engages is limited to these two elements. The problem is that this dichotomy itself is, to a large extent, a product of a modern Western configuration of power. By opting for the 'political', instead of 'religious', Yannaras merely reverses the choice made by the West. But, most importantly, he implicitly accepts the Western dichotomy, and does not transcend the options provided. To demonstrate this with an image of a chess game, I would say that Yannaras, while sitting to play chess with the Western paradigm, refuses to play with a black set and insists on playing with white pieces. But he is still playing chess; he is not changing the game. By perpetuating the Western dichotomy, Yannaras does

¹⁰ Others, e.g., Agamben have extended the list of the political terms used by the early church. See Agamben 2012. Cf. chapter 3 of this thesis.

not produce an alternative 'Eastern' framework, but rather polemically opts for a mirror opposition of the 'Western' one.

Westernisers or original thinkers?

A question that arises from the recognition of the post-Western dimension of Aurobindo and Yannaras is whether this renders them irrelevant or less 'authentic'. Nicholson, reflecting on an "indirect" and "sublimated" "political" dimension of Meister Eckhart's mysticism, argues: "I cannot accept the notion that an acknowledgment of the ideological dimension of a text or practice negates its value and truth. A capacity to live with ambiguity, in fact, may well be a mark of intellectual and religious maturity"¹¹. This would be true not only concerning Aurobindo's and Yannaras' respective articulations of salvific life as holistic and political, but also would apply to various elements of their criticism of the West. This thesis did not aim to assess this critique positively (in the sense of discerning how their dealing with individualism or rationalism can be fruitfully related to the situation in the Western societies), but this does not mean that their criticism should be dismissed on the grounds of its polemical nature.

¹¹ Nicholson 2011, 195.

Fruits of comparative theology

I argue that the method of comparative theology used in this thesis has helped to discover aspects of Yannaras' thought which would not otherwise have been clear outside a comparative framework. The first point, which deserves mentioning, is the concept of 'religion'. Read alone, Yannaras' criticism of 'religion' seems to elevate the Orthodox tradition beyond other religious traditions, whether Christian or not. A comparison with Aurobindo suggests that, although this initial assessment may be correct, something more is going on here. Comparison indicates that part of the problem has to do with 'religion' as a category, i.e., with the presuppositions inherent in this concept, of which both Yannaras and Aurobindo are aware, independent of the recent criticism of this category. Secondly, Yannaras' 'theological is political' approach, considered independently, seems to be a continuation of the pre-modern Byzantine paradigm of *symphonia* between church and state¹². Read in parallel with Aurobindo, one grasps much better the post-Western significance of the theologico-political thought proposed by Yannaras. Moreover, through comparison with the Aurobindonian holism, one can fully acknowledge the extent to which Yannaras' particular way of transcending the religious/secular

¹² Cf. Runciman 1977. For some recent engagements with the topic, see Papanikolaou 2012, chapter 1; Hovorun 2017a.

separation remains non-holistic, i.e. exclusive of instinctual and rational elements.

Pars pro toto

In chapter 1, I referred to Dumont's image of medieval religion as the mantle of Our Lady that embraced every dimension of human life¹³. The mantle represents a totality, which includes and gives meaning to the partiality of every dimension of existence. The tension between religion and nationalism, both throughout modernity's history (ch. 4) and in the works of Aurobindo and Yannaras (ch. 5), is a struggle over who has this mantle, who is the *pars* and who is the *toto*. It is a struggle about *inclusion* and *sacrality*. Firstly, Aurobindo's (and to a certain extent even Yannaras') articulation of inclusivism and holism sheds light on one of the characteristics of modernity, which consists in the competition concerning which identity—religious or national—is included in, and directed by, the other identity. Secondly, it is about sacrality, in the sense, that both spheres compete on who should have the right to define what is sacred and what is profane, and who should have the last word on human life and death.

¹³ Dumont 1971, 32.

(V) Secondary contributions

Let me delineate some ancillary contributions of this thesis beyond its principal field of interest.

Postcolonialism applied to Yannaras

I attempted to develop a new approach to Yannaras, based on what could be vaguely described as a post-colonial critique. I argued that looking on Yannaras through the lens of postcolonialism helps one appreciate the extent to which his thought is conditioned by the West, even while the latter is polemically rejected. I suggest that such an approach could be fruitfully employed with other anti-Western Orthodox thinkers.

Read alone, Yannaras seems to be a polemical anti-Western author, in line with the millenarian tradition of the Orthodox anti-Latin controversy. Read in parallel with the anti-colonial Aurobindo, one sees more clearly that Yannaras' thought is a daring attempt to theologise in a context permeated by a Western worldview. Here the separation of the sacred and secular is normative, and where every effort to propose a theological position which articulates the sacred and secular differently, is *ipso facto* an alternative to the norm—and inevitably polemical and necessarily anti-Western.

Compared to a traditional Orthodox tendency to approach other Christian denominations through the concept of *heresy*, Yannaras' anti-

Westernism appears to be much more radical. While classical thought presupposed that once the West adjusts certain specific doctrines it can re-join the salvific life of Orthodoxy, for Yannaras the West seems wrong in its very mode of life. This is partly due to the general configuration of the religious vs. secular in the West, which goes deeper than a propositional disagreement, and affects the understanding of the religious fact as such.

'Saving' Aurobindo

I would hope that my engagement with Aurobindo has succeeded in both showing his relevance to post-colonial reflection—in particular to the discussion of the category of religion—and in bringing him out of an esoteric closet into a relevant academic discourse.

Aurobindo's assertion that, by engaging with an idea—even if critically—a scholar remains conditioned by the material and method one is considering, points to a 'modern' dimension of theologies which claim to be 'traditional', especially in countries politically or culturally colonised.

Comparative theology as method

I suggest that certain considerations, based on Yannaras, contribute to the debate on the method of comparative theology. Scholars who engage in this discipline disagree on the extent to which the approach should be

confessional¹⁴. Yannaras' reflection on 'religion' has some insights which could be useful for comparative theology. In fact, an approach to the other traditions, which can be suggested based on Yannaras, is at the same time confessional and non-confessional. It is confessional, in the sense of an awareness that a given tradition is expressed in terms of a specific epistemological paradigm, and therefore may be incomparable to the terms of another paradigm¹⁵. But it is non-confessional in the sense that Yannaras rejects 'propositional' attempts to define his tradition, considered as an 'ideological' defence mechanism of human anxiety, which obfuscates the apophatic nature of truth. The two approaches may seem contradictory but, in fact, they express what can be referred to as a double allegiance: to one's tradition (understood as the transmission of experience from one generation to another) on the one hand, and to the unspeakable God on the other hand¹⁶. This double allegiance exists in a tension, but an attempt to get rid of one of two parts of the tension would lead either to a theological individualism (and absolutisation of one's own criteria), or to a theological fundamentalism (and ideological absolutisation of one's cultural paradigm). What does this tension imply for the way comparative theology is

¹⁴ For various positions on this issue, cf. Ward 1994, 40; Clooney 2010a, 36, 157-58; Drew 2012, 1043-50; Papathanasiou 2014, 107-14.

¹⁵ Hence the "The Non-sense of Comparative Religion" (Yannaras 2011e, 60-67).

¹⁶ Cf. Papathanasiou, who, on the one hand, defends the confessional nature of comparative theology while, on the other hand, interprets the possibility of learning from other tradition in terms of apophatic theology (Papathanasiou 2014, 108-09).

understood? First, it would imply the deficiency in a comparative endeavour in which the individual thinker overlooks the tradition of her own community. Second, this also entails that a theologian who approaches the other tradition with the conviction that his own tradition possesses the absolute way of speaking of God, and thus becomes *a priori* unable to learn from a 'foreign' tradition, would also fail to be doing comparative theology.

Ecumenical and inter-religious dialogue

Yannaras' insistence on the political core of the event-church and his rejection of 'religious' criteria of identity, if pushed further, has a vast potential for the elaboration of a more nuanced Orthodox approach to other churches and religious traditions. If ecumenical dialogue is congested due to the lack of agreement on the *understanding* of propositions, perhaps looking for common experiential *knowledge* can be a way out of the impasse. If the experiential knowledge acquires priority over propositional agreement, then a new way of discernment of the *semina verbi* within other religions is opened. Yet, such endeavours are not without risks. The discourse on experience is, on the one hand, not immune to exclusive cultural appropriations, nor, on the other, to a transformation in a secular instrument

of the depoliticisation of religious traditions, as, e.g., discourse on 'essence' or rationality¹⁷.

¹⁷ Cf. Nicholson 2011, ch. 2.

Note on transliteration of names

In transliterating Greek and Russian names, the established (most frequent) English usage is followed. This is true also in the cases where English-language publications (or publication in any other language using Latin characters) with Greek or Russian authorship names have been transliterated in a different manner. Thus, for example, Χρήστος Γιανναράς will always be spelled/transliterated as “Christos Yannaras”, and not as “Chrēstos Giannaras”; Ιωάννης Ζηζιούλας as “John Zizioulas”; Николай Афанасьев as “Nicholas Afanassieff”, etc.

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