

Language, ethnicity and religion: a complex and persistent linkage

WILLIAM SAFRAN

University of Colorado, Boulder, CO, USA

ABSTRACT. Among the markers of ethnonational identity, language and religion have figured with equal prominence. In many cases, religion has been the bedrock of nation-building; and even today, it is difficult to separate a number of national identities from their religious matrices. Religious identity is based on, and perpetuated in, narratives expressed in a specific language. Language and religion are related; in our secular age, however, that relationship is no longer consistent. The two may feed upon one another; language may substitute for religion; or religion may trump language. This article explores the varying relationships between language and religion.

KEYWORDS: clergy, diaspora, liturgy, nation-building, secularism, vernacular.

Neither religion nor language is coextensive with an ethnonation. A religion and a language may spread over more than one ethnic group; conversely, members of an ethnic group may adhere to more than one religion or contain more than one language community. Yet among the markers of ethnonational identity, language and religion have been of equal importance. They are not merely used to instrumentalise more ‘rational’ demands; they are not always the determining factors in ethnic behavior and ethnic political demands; and not all communities based on a religion or a particular language wish to attain ‘nationhood’. Nevertheless, the nexus between religion and language is important enough not to be dismissed.

Language and religion are related; both have deep structures and both are regarded as constitutive aspects of ‘primordialism’ in the sense that individuals are born into one, the other, or (in most instances) both. The relationships between religion and language have varied with time and place, and the causal direction between the two has been complex. Religion and language may be clearly associated and feed upon each other; language may be a substitute for religion; or religion may trump language.

Historically, religions have preceded the nation-state; have served as the basis of the collective consciousness of the nation and the foundation of sovereignty; and have been major institutional supports of the state. Examples are numerous and are not confined to ‘established’ religions. Religious identity is based on, and perpetuated in, narratives expressed in a specific language. The Old Testament served as the depository of Jewish nationhood

and as a 'portable fatherland'; the Bhagavad-Ghita, as the fount of the Hindu religion; Luther's German translation of the Bible, as a crucial instrument in forming the idea of a German nation; and the Arabic Koran, as a vehicle of *umma al-'arabiya*. Sacred narratives, which recount the traditions and essential elements of faith, are a matter of language in the same sense as secular narratives, which expostulate matters of nationalist ideology.

Commonalities

The ethnonation has much in common with religion. Both have a shared ideology, celebrate common festivals, hold shared symbols, acknowledge common saints, and are associated with a community. In short, the ethnonation is a secularised religion. Just as it is possible to opt out of a religion by conversion, so one may leave an ethnonation by leaving a country and adopting another nationality, although the process is complicated and often painful. Both language and religion are socially acquired, but early enough to provide the framework for the structuring of family relations, community cohesion, and ethnic identity. Moreover, they are often expressed in terms of each other. The medium is the message: Every speech community has its particular mind-set, which cannot be reproduced exactly in just any language. Similarly, the religious mind-set expresses itself differently in different ethnonational surroundings. And just as one may have dual nationality, one may be bilingual. Yet many more people have replaced one language by another than have converted to another religion, and diglossia, functional differentiation in language use, and language fusion are far more frequent than simultaneous adherence to more than one religion.

Ethnicity, religion, and language have this in common: all three have influenced the shape and context of the state, and, conversely, have been the object of diverse state policies. Religions, like languages, may be: (1) instrumentalised by nations, republics, and empires (e.g. the anointment of kings in the Holy Roman Empire; the construction of the 'Christian Coalition' in the United States; and the waging of 'holy wars' by Muslim leaders for political ends); (2) institutionalised and officialised (e.g. via established churches and state languages. Institutionalisation transforms a belief into a religion and a dialect into a language); (3) domesticated and reformed (e.g. the appointment of a consistory for Judaism in France in the nineteenth century and attempts to create a 'western' Islam in that country today, and the republicanisation of Catholicism in Western Europe); (4) neutralised; (5) privatised, ignored and otherwise depoliticised; and (6) banned.

Religion as the traditional bedrock of the nation

Almost all early national identities developed from religious consciousness. Loyalty to the nation was based on the belief that one's nation was 'God's

chosen people.' Their covenant with God made Jews a 'holy people'. The Bible, as interpreted by the various segments of the Christian world, helped to foster a variety of ethnonational identities. Thus, the homeland of the Russians was 'Holy Russia'; Spain, too, thought of itself as a 'holy nation', whose holiness was safeguarded by the monarchy and its mechanism, the Inquisition. The Scots believed that God had marked them for distinction; and Poland was especially favored by God as his 'playground' (Davies 1997). During the German wars of liberation, Schleiermacher, a Protestant, in a series of sermons, declared that 'Christianity demands attachment to the nation', and that he who did not feel the unity of the nation always remained 'an alien in the house of God' (Davies 1980).

For Hastings (1997: 35–65), the paradigmatic religion-based nation is England. Unlike Benedict Anderson, who has argued that English nationalism developed only with the growth of the British Empire, Hastings bases English national consciousness on Latin Christianity (in contrast to Liah Greenfeld [1992: 487], who traces it to the Protestant Reformation). To the extent that English nationalism – as opposed to dynastic loyalty – existed at all, it became identified with Protestantism only in the sixteenth century, with Henry VIII.¹ Irish ethnicity was, like Welsh and Scottish ethnicity, a *Celtic* identity; yet it diverged from the latter two because of religion.

The age of language and nationalism

The Peace of Westphalia reconfirmed the intimate connection between religion and the state by making the former dependent on the latter. The principle of '*cujus regio, ejus religio*' did not mean that religion was to be subordinated to the *nation* – it was not yet the age of nationalism – but rather that it should coincide with *political* frontiers. With the development of a secular collective consciousness sparked by the Renaissance, ethnic cultural, i.e. humanist, concerns became more important, and these were articulated in a language increasingly independent of religion. Religion was no longer needed to certify the legitimacy of the languages of France, Germany, England, or Italy.

The French Revolution introduced a new idea – that of secular nationalism and of the 'civic' nation, whose membership was defined neither by religion nor ethnicity, nor (at first) even language. Gradually, however, the state religion was replaced by the state language, which was associated with a 'civic religion'. The notion of '*cujus regio ejus religio*' was replaced by that of '*cujus natio ejus lingua*' (Lapierre 1988: 99).

In the nineteenth century, the religious qualification for membership in the national community was deemphasised, and it was widely accepted that political frontiers and ethnonational frontiers should be congruent. From the Wars of Liberation to the end of World War I, the primary marker of ethnonational collective identity was language. The efforts of Italy and

Germany at national unification and those of Greece, Bulgaria, and Montenegro, and subsequently of Serbia, Poland, and other eastern European successor states, at achieving political independence were based in each case on the recognition of a commonality of language. Modern, nineteenth-century nationalism was largely the invention of intellectuals, often literary figures like Herder, Fichte, and Palacký, who saw language as the main distinguishing feature of communities. They had in mind ordinary members of communities, not elites who spoke Latin and were engaged in transethnic communication. The emphasis on the common, or plebeian, language was an aspect of *democracy*, rather than being motivated by the need to promote industrial modernisation (as Gellner argued [1983: 10f.]).

Before the spread of literacy, only the clergy could interpret religion, and they used a sacerdotal language (Latin, Greek, Sanskrit, Ge'ez, classical Arabic) to which ordinary people did not have access.² According to Benedict Anderson (1991: 38f.), it is the printed word that contributes to the creation of an 'imagined community'. Until fairly recently, the most widely disseminated printed item was the Bible, and its particular linguistic version shaped an ethnolinguistically specific religious identity. Popular literacy, then, grew in step with a religion-tinged ethnonationalism.

Beginning with Martin Luther, the Bible was presented in the idiom of the masses. Inevitably, the appeal of religion had to be widened to include as many adherents as possible, and so the Bible was translated into a variety of 'vulgates'. Luther, in translating the Bible into German, wished to ensure that it was no longer the exclusive property of an alien, transmontane Papacy, but of the German people. He had direct influence on both the spread of Protestantism and the development of the German language (Kohn 1951: 143) but not – at least not yet, and not directly – on German nationalism, which was to develop several centuries later, and was based not only on language but on race as well.³

The religious element in ethnonational language construction

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

English nationalism is essentially Protestant nationalism, just as Russian nationalism is Eastern Orthodox and Zionism is based on Judaism. *The Canterbury Tales*, Slavic epic poems, and medieval Hebrew poetry all had religious motifs, and although not consciously promoting nationalism, these texts contributed to the spread of language, which was a major instrument for promoting ethnonational consciousness.

The combination of proto-Reformation and proto-nationalism is manifested in the person of Jan Hus (ca. 1369–1415), a precursor to Martin Luther. A priest of peasant origin, he preached in the Czech language, translated some of Wycliffe's writings into Czech, articulated Czech national aspirations, and fought against the abuses of the Catholic Church. He did not advocate the creation of an independent Czech state – it was too early for such an agenda – but he did stress national consciousness as independent of loyalty to the monarch, and he believed in a special mission granted to a linguistic community (see Agnew 1992). His folk-based proto-nationalism contrasted sharply with the collective identity of the upper class in Bohemia and Moravia, which was defined in terms of a territorially and politically based *Landespatriotismus* and expressed itself in German. Ethnic identity

... survived among the Czech-speaking lower and lower-middle classes; and it was the spoken idiom of those classes that Palacký and other intellectuals leaned upon to create a modern Czech language. Only some educated individuals, most of whom belonged to the Catholic clergy, combined state identity with the ethnic one (Hroch 1999: 320).

As for the Slovaks, 'the first attempt to create a Slovak literary language was made by the Catholic clergy in the 1780s, at the same time that the Hungarian Estates protested against the decision to introduce German as the language of administration throughout the Habsburg Empire' (*ibid.*: 321, 324, 326).

In the Eastern Slavic world, religion and language have been intimately connected. Cyril and Methodius, in bringing Christianity to the Slavic world, brought to it also the first Slavic alphabet. Several eastern Slavic nations claim that Cyril invented the alphabet for *their* languages. 'Ukrainians claim that the 'proto-Ukrainian (southern Rus)' group of dialects were already well developed before Cyril and Methodius codified their alphabet in AD 863, functioning alongside and then gradually penetrating Church Slavonic to create early medieval Ukrainian-Belarusian' (Wilson 1997: 193–4).

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

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

was instrumental in substituting the Bulgarian language for Greek in the churches and schools. In Ireland, 'Catholicism, the land, and language were prominent in the nationalist struggle' and in the effort to differentiate Ireland from England, '[n]ationalists fired by the desire for economic as well as cultural independence from Britain overemphasised Catholicism, the land, and Gaelic culture as defining elements of Irish identity' (Williams 1999: 269–70). It is well known that the Catholic clergy in Ireland was instrumental in creating an Irish literary language.

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

The nexus between religion and language can be seen outside of Europe as well. The Afrikaner identity that began to form in South Africa at the end of the seventeenth century was associated with a variant of the Dutch language as well as with the Dutch Reformed Church. Since that church was the only 'established' one in South Africa at that time, Protestant immigrants from France (Huguenots) as well as Germany adopted it together with the Afrikaans language. A similar connection between language and religion can be observed in the case of Pakistan. The Urdu language, which developed in northern India, is close to Hindi, but since its speakers are overwhelmingly Muslim, they opted for an alphabet based on Arabic (with some Persian influences) rather than the Devanagari script based on Sanskrit.

Proselytising religion and the use of ethnic languages

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

A founder religion, too, may have arisen out of a 'tribal' context and been informed by a specific ethnic experience, but it has a universal target. As such, it spreads its message in several languages. Originally that message was spiritual, but the global appeal of its languages has freed them from their

ethnic bounds and opened them up to the inroads of a variety of cultural influences as well as of secularism. Christian millennialism is similar to secular pan-movements, such as Communism, Pan-Slavism, and Jacobin popular democracy with respect to its disconnection from a specific language (Safran 1992).

Islam is a universal faith, not an ethnic one. It has a world-wide target, but it is closely associated with the Arab nation (*umma al 'arabiya*), which embodies the bulk of the *dar-al-Islam*. Islam is practiced by non-Arabs, too, but the Koran is read by many of the faithful in Arabic, and the interpretations by imams and mullahs are never far from the Arabic context. Classical Arabic is *the* language of Islam, because it is the language of the Koran, which has been invoked in the revival of *Arab* nationalism. Ordinary Iranian, Turkish, and Indonesian Muslims do not speak Arabic, but their clergy are familiar with it.⁴

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

Missionaries in the Third World, in their effort to spread the universal faith to heathens, had to make use of the appropriate ethnolinguistic idiom, and in so doing helped to 'create' languages by coining words, writing grammars and dictionaries, and establishing standards (Hastings 1997: 151–2), thereby sowing the seeds of later political claims based on ethnonational cultures. The role of Christian missions was particularly important in the graphisation and lexicalisation of African languages. For example, the Thonga language spoken in Southeast Africa was revived and turned into a written language by missionaries. The goal of these missionaries, who used that language in churches and schools, was conversion to Christianity, but the consequence was the transformation of a tribe into a Thonga *ethnicity*. (Harries 1988; Ranger 1999: 21).

Putting 'primordialism' aside

Modernity has been associated with a number of characteristics in which ascriptive relations have a drastically reduced importance. Among these are secularism; the replacement of *gemeinschaft* by *gesellschaft* as modes of social relations; the movement of large populations from one country to another; and the gradual eclipse of 'ethnic' nations by 'civic' nations, where criteria

other than language and religion are important in defining membership in the political community.

The Deutschian functionalist approach to the nation, which defines it in terms of communications within a given polity (Deutsch 1966), pays little attention to the ethnic dimension. Deutsch rebelled against the fragmentation of the population in the Austro-Hungarian Empire based on religious and linguistic differences, considering these as 'irrational' markers. To them, language is more an artifact than a cultural determinant; it is one of the mechanisms used by the elite for the construction of a nation; but the nation, once constructed, uses its political power and its institutions to reshape the language.

To many constructivists and instrumentalists, the use of this or that language is circumstantial and is much less important in shaping identity (including ethnic identity) than rational (e.g. economic) considerations. To the extent that a language like English is a supraethnic medium of global communication, its cultural content (e.g. Chaucer, the King James Bible, poetry) no longer matters. In any case, non-linguistic bases of national identity are more objective, such as territory, sovereignty, and political values. Territory, however, is porous; sovereignty has been weakened by globalisation; and political values have become increasingly transnational.

In recent years, the factor of language has been deemphasised by many students of ethnicity and nationalism for a number of reasons: the existence of transethnic languages; multilingualism within nations; the incommensurability of language and ethnonational identity; and the continued use of the languages of former colonial powers by newly independent states in their efforts at nation-building.

The language – religion nexus today

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

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

Religion had the upper hand until the Renaissance, and language from then until the present. Both religion and language continue to intersect with

nationalism, and with each other. This applies to the Lithuanians' fight against the Soviet Union; the Iranians' particular approach to Islam; the conflict between north and south in Sudan; and the efforts of the Bosnians in the former Yugoslavia, the Pomaks of Bulgaria, Muslims of Kashmir, and Sikhs of India to maintain their ethnonational identities. Even today, it is difficult to loosen Greek, Hindu, Israeli, Pakistani, Polish, Sikh, and Tibetan national identities from their respective religious and linguistic moorings.

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

The relationship to religion is weakest in transethnic languages such as English and French, and strongest in languages tied more closely to an ethnic community. Conversely, the religious element may sometimes be so dominant in a given language that it cannot easily 'desacralise' itself. For example, 'the secular liberal or secular socialist ideas in Urdu literature never reached the same level or acquired the same influence as in Bengali literature' and 'Urdu continues to be a major vehicle of revivalist and traditional Islamic thought' (Jawed 1999: 31). A similar situation applied to Yiddish. Used by secular Eastern European Jews, many of whom were socialist and anti-Zionist as well as anti-religious, that language was strongly suffused by religious and Hebrew elements. In Israel, Hebrew is the 'national' language, and most of its speakers are Jews, the majority of them secular.⁵

In the survival of Muslim identity in India, religion played important roles. 'Persian, and to a lesser extent Arabic, were the literary and religious languages of Muslim India' (Jawed 1999: 30), and when Pakistan became independent in 1947, regional Indian languages, specifically Urdu and Bengali, became dominant. It was language, not religion, that differentiated Bengali from Urdu speakers; and it was that differentiation that led to the establishment of an independent Bangladesh, despite the fact that the Bengali language had also served as a medium of Hindu rather than Muslim renaissance.

Which language – classical or vernacular – is to be used? In their standardisation attempts, some intellectuals tried to look to an idealised 'classical' period as the standard to follow – as reflected in the re-Latinisation efforts in eighteenth-century France and the revival of the Hebrew language in the nineteenth century – but with mixed results, since ultimately the classical language had to yield to the street. This question was relevant for the Jews, the Armenians, and the Greeks in their efforts at ethnonational mobilisation. The classical languages of these ethnonations were historical, respectable, and unifying in the sense that they were acknowledged by the varied

subcommunities of which these ethnonations were composed; but they were also sacerdotal and used by narrow elites, whereas the respective vernaculars were secular and popular, needing only standardisation and institutionalisation to establish their primacy. Thus, religion has been the mother of national languages, but, like children everywhere, they have outgrown her.

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

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

The coupling of religion and language can be clearly seen in the case of the Sikhs. Originally, the Punjabi language was used by all inhabitants of the Punjab, including Hindus and Muslims. In the sixteenth century, Guru Nanak engaged in ‘pious preaching in the local vernacular’ and his successors compiled a book of sacred scriptures in it, thus serving at once to institutionalise the Punjabi language and the Sikh faith and setting the stage for making Punjabi a fundamental part of Sikh identity (Tatla 1999: 17–8, 69). In the nineteenth century, under the *divide et impera* tradition of British imperial rule, the religion-and-language tandem was reflected in the establishment of separate schools for the different communities: Sanskrit and Hindi for Hindus, Urdu for Muslims, and Punjabi exclusively for Sikhs.

In order to use language as an instrument of modern nation-building, the elites of most ethnonational communities replaced the hieratic, classical language by a language based in the folk and understood by it (see Jusdanis 2001: 120f.). Thus, classical Greek was replaced by demotic Greek, which was no longer tied to religion, and Church Slavonic by various eastern Slavic idioms. Although language became an essentially secular medium, an important marker of ethnonational identity and, at least in principle, a criterion

of membership in the civic nation, it was never completely detached from religion in a number of modern nations. Because the modern vernaculars in Armenia, Greece, India, Poland, and Turkey are folk languages, they are impregnated with concepts, references, and turns of phrase that hark back to a cultural heritage that is to a large extent religious. To be sure, the abandonment of Arabic script by Kemal Atatürk was associated with a move to *laïcité*; yet the religious/kinship element was never completely eliminated. As one scholar has pointed out, the ostensibly secular vocabulary of Kemal's nationalism, in references to 'our Turkish and Islamic nation (united by blood, race, and religion)', was infused with Islamic language (Zürcher 1999).

The view of Elie Kedourie that nationalism is a strictly secular ideology (Smith 2005: 21) applies fully neither to the past nor the present. In Hindutva ideology today, in Armenian and Sikh nationalism, in Zionism, and in the nationalisms of Ireland, Pakistan, Poland, and Russia, religion plays an important role, and many ethnosymbols are religious in nature and/or inspiration.

The Greek nation has been ethnically, religiously, and linguistically defined – but this was in contradiction with the universalistic tendencies of the Greek Orthodox religion (Triandafyllidou 2005: 182). This, plus kinship and classical Greek culture and language, distinguished Greeks from the non-Christian peoples of the Ottoman Empire and from Southern Slav Christians. But the Greeks' insistence on the belief that Macedonia, although Slavic speaking, is part of their country, makes language and religion less important than a (presumed) common history and kinship. For Greeks, both religion and language are important elements of their ethnonational self-image – the Orthodox religion, because it is considered spiritually superior to the Roman Catholic variant, and the Greek language, because it reflects a continuity with classical Greek civilisation (Jusdanis 2001: 108–9).

Classical Greek civilisation, however, played a minor role in the development of modern Greek nationalism. In the second half of the nineteenth century, after Greece had achieved independence from the Ottoman Empire and was engaged in defining its political boundaries, it began to regard non-Greek-speaking inhabitants of neighboring Bulgaria and Macedonia as members of the Greek national community by virtue of their loyalty to the Orthodox Patriarchate. This approach to defining 'Greekness' was embraced in part to counteract the attempt by Russia to create an enlarged Bulgarian state based on linguistic criteria and including speakers of Macedonian as well as Bulgarian (Exertzoglou 1999: 78–9).

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

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

The situation is quite different in the former Yugoslavia, whose competing ethnonational identities were based on a combination of religion and language. In the nationalism of Tito's Yugoslavia, neither language nor religion played a role in defining ethno-federal consciousness. But under Slobodan Milosevic, the religious roots of Serbian ethnonational identity, manifested, *inter alia*, in the Eastern Orthodox monasteries in Kosovo, were emphasised and instrumentalised for political-territorial reasons, and language only incidentally. Croats, for their part, demarcated their nation in religious terms, to some extent in reaction to the Serbian redefinition of the basis of *their* ethnonational identity. In any case, the label 'Serbo-Croatian' was gradually replaced, respectively, by references to the 'Croatian' and 'Serbian' languages. In Bosnia, too, language has now become a major identifier in addition to religion, a development reflected in the appearance of new dictionaries of the Bosnian language.

Neither Slovaks nor Magyars consider religious differences to be important or think that religious belief should play a role in one's membership in a nation. Yet among Slovaks in Hungary and Magyars in Romania, religion is only slightly less important than language as a criterion of belonging to an ethnonational group, even after more than forty years of antireligious socialisation (Csepeli, Örkeny and Székelyi 2000: 35, 65–6). More surprising, however, is the fact that for a majority of both Magyars and Romanians in Transylvania, the *liturgical* language is still an important element of national identity (*ibid.* 110). Sometimes the linguistic and religious elements of an ethnic identity may be compartmentalised: thus the 'Saxons' in Brasov (Transylvania) speak Romanian at home, but the Lutheran church services they attend are in German. Often, the importance attached to language and religion is more symbolic than real. Most Magyars in Romania know the Romanian language, but for reasons of self-respect they insist on having bilingual signs in places where they are a clear majority (*ibid.* 49).

For Poles, religion, not language, has been the most important element of nationhood from the very beginning. To be Polish is to be Catholic ('*Polski to jest Katolik*'). National mythology has by turns invoked the notion of Poland as the bulwark of Christendom against the Turks; of Catholic Europe against the Orthodox Russians and (in the battle against the Swedes in the seventeenth century) against the Protestants; and later, of Western civilisation against Bolshevism (Davies 1980: 45–147). In the image of an arch-Catholic Poland, language did not seem to play a major role because the clerical language was Latin. Even for Adam Mickiewicz, one of the most important Polish literary figures, what counted most in defining the Poles' identity was the superiority of their race (against that of Russia) and their faith – that is,

their election by God to spread the Christian message (Mickiewicz 1925). This notion of collective identity was to embrace the Lithuanians, who spoke a language other than Polish. Obviously, Jews had no place in this scheme of things for reasons of religion. They were excluded from 'authentic' membership in the Polish nation for reasons of language as well, since the majority who practiced Judaism spoke Yiddish rather than Polish on a daily basis. Julian Tuwim, one of the most prominent Polish poets during the interwar period, was a Jew, and the Jews who survived the Holocaust and remained in Poland were overwhelmingly Polish speakers as well as secular; but the *memory* of their distinct culture and language was so strong that it inspired the antisemitism of the postwar era.

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

This is now a minority position, for by the end of the Third Republic, language had replaced religion in France. According to Weber (1976) and Braudel (1986), 'France is the French language' – and is no longer the 'eldest daughter of the Church'. Still, the religious ingredient never disappeared from language and culture, as attested by the Christian nature of most public holidays, the maintenance of Sunday closing laws, the cult of Joan of Arc, and even the cross on top of the Panthéon, the 'cathedral of the Republic' (Safran 2003: 54–9). Moreover, the synonymy of being French with being Christian is apparent in the frequent labeling of non-Christian French people in terms of their (non-French) provenance.⁶

In the United States, too, language is more important than religion, since there is no 'founder' church; thus, many states have laws specifying that there is an official language, but not an official religion. Yet in the eyes of many, American nationalism rests on Christian foundations. Several American national holidays are Christian; athletic events in state universities are often preceded by Christian prayer; and the US Air Force Academy openly engages in Christian proselytising. In short, while modern Western nationalism in all cases (except Ireland and Latin America) is tied to language, the language is in many cases the medium for the literary expression of the Christian elements of the national culture.

Absolute monarchs once determined the religion of their realms, and, in principle, their language. But in reality they saw no need to impose a common language on their subjects; unlike religion, the language spoken by the masses was of little concern to the rulers of the Holy Roman, Russian, and Ottoman

empires because they did not need to communicate with the masses. In France, the ordinance of Villiers-Cotterêts in 1539 required that all judicial acts be in French; but a common language was not imposed until the 1880s. This indifference left it to a number of ethnic subcommunities to manage their own affairs and run their own schools and thus served to perpetuate their own languages.

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

Such charges turned out to be unfair. In using language to preach the word of God to the common people, the clerics were unwitting agents of nationalism. This clearly applies to the role of the clergy in promoting the national language in east-central Europe; and a similar role performed by the clergy in spreading the French language – the very clergy that was being denounced for spreading obscurantism and hindering republican development; by the Catholic monks in the preservation and promotion of Irish Gaelic; and by the rabbis in keeping the Hebrew language alive in the diaspora.

Language and religion among minority and diaspora ethnics

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

In the United States, the language of white Christian immigrant ethnics was maintained for several generations in parish schools and church sermons. The parish schools of the Polish national church in the United States had a dual purpose: to impart religious instruction and to teach the Polish language.⁷ The use of ethnic languages in Roman Catholic services is now (theoretically) easier, since Mass no longer has to be sung in Latin. The victory of the hostland language, however, has been so decisive that sermons are increasingly given in English, which has become the preferred, if not the only, language of Christian ethnic minorities. Irish, Italian, and Polish Catholics and other members of white ethnic diasporas in the United States may continue to adhere to their old religion in a formal sense, but as a consequence of the waning use of their ethnic languages they are increasingly

identified in a 'hyphenated' fashion. Furthermore, attendance at church, once a major gathering place of ethnic minorities, has decreased.

For some diasporas, memory and/or folkways become substitutes for both religion and language as major foci of ethnic identification. The memory of the genocide of 1915 has played a role as an identitarian mechanism for Armenians in the diaspora, just as have the Holocaust for Jews and the Amritsar massacres of 1919 and 1984 for Sikhs. But memory fades (especially in settler countries marked by ahistorical cultures), and ethnically specific folkways become diluted and syncretic. Many diaspora communities maintain youth-oriented and philanthropic organisations, but without a serious effort at teaching the rudiments of their respective languages, the maintenance of ethnic identity is precarious. The most complete way to tell the ethnic narrative is in the homeland language, of course. But since that language is no longer current in the diaspora, the telling of the narrative in the hostland language may be more effective – but for what?

In the diaspora, Armenian, Jewish, Sikh, and Muslim religious rites conducted in the hostland idiom rather than the ethnic one are considered by many to be inauthentic. It would have been difficult for Sephardic Jews in Ottoman Empire to adhere to their Jewish faith if they had been speaking Turkish rather than Ladino, and for Ashkenazi Jews in Eastern Europe to perpetuate their Judaism if they had not used Yiddish in their religious instruction and daily speech. Classical Reform Judaism in the United States, which has largely dispensed with languages other than English, comes close to evolving into Unitarianism, and Armenian Apostolic church services conducted in English become increasingly less differentiated from standard American Catholicism. To be sure, a switch to the language of the host country, while tending to facilitate conversion to the dominant religion, does not guarantee it. Not all Indians settled in England were successfully subjected to Anglican missionary activities; and even among those who were, proselytisation was incomplete (Lahiri 2000: 162–3). Nevertheless, without the maintenance of language and/or religion, the dissolution of the ethnic culture is only a matter of time.

In the case of the Tibetan diaspora, the preservation of the language is particularly important, because the continuing Sinification of both the politics and the culture and language of Tibet imposes a special responsibility on the Tibetans in India and other democratic hostlands. As Tenzin Wangmo (2005) states,

A calculated destruction of the Tibetan people is under way. The indigenous people of Tibet might one day cease to exist because the Tibetan language is being submerged under the Chinese language . . . At the same time, those . . . living in diaspora are naturally being distanced from their culture . . . Tibetan cities like Lhasa and Shigatse are now being transformed into Chinese cities on the model of Beijing.

It is not enough to maintain Tibetan temples in diasporas in India, the United States, and elsewhere in order to continue Tibetan identity, especially among

the younger generation, many of whom no longer practice Tibetan Buddhism and are no longer fluent in the Tibetan language (Dowman 1997). In order to reverse this trend, a great deal of attention is devoted to the perpetuation of the Tibetan language in the diaspora. Thus the Tibetan Government-in-Exile in Dharamsala, India has been trying to teach the Tibetan language by means of eighty-five schools in India, Nepal, and Bhutan that cater to over 27,000 children. Similar efforts, which combine the teaching of Buddhism and the Tibetan language, are being made in the United States, but there it is more difficult due to the strong secular pressures and the enticements of modernity (Matsuu 1999).

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

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

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

The vestigial place of religion is particularly important in diaspora languages. Like the Yiddish-speaking secularists, who were unable to purge the language of its Hebrew terms and religious allusions, diaspora Armenian secular nationalism could not rid the Armenian language entirely of religious points of reference if it wished to perpetuate it as an ethnic marker (Panossian 2006: 194–200). In short, for maintaining ethnic identity in the diaspora, language as a functional medium alone does not suffice, for it cannot hold out for ever against the institutional superiority of the dominant language of the host country, as has been shown in the case of most white ethnic minorities in the USA. This explains why, among diaspora communities in many hostlands, the curriculum of many minority parochial schools includes both the ethnic

religion *and* the ethnic language. The number of such schools is now steadily increasing, in direct proportion to the growing preoccupation with ethnic identity.

A note of caution is in order. Religion must not be understood exclusively in terms of a church or a theological doctrine, but should be regarded in a wider cultural and/or historical sense, where narratives, poems, and songs play an important role – as in the case of the Judaism of the Zionist founders of Israel; the Sikhism of those who dream of the establishment of Khalistan; the Orthodoxy of the Russians and Bulgarians who thought of their church in pan-Slavic terms; and of the Roman Catholicism of the Poles during the Cold War era, for whom it was an anti-Communist counter-ideology.

Conclusion

The boundary that marks the terms in which an ethnic group expresses itself and makes political demands may be language or religion. The ethnic and religious boundaries may be congruent or divergent, but they may not have the same consequence for nation-building. Religion does not seem to be a factor where the surrounding population is of the same religion. Thus, the Basques and Catalans are nations because of their language; and the Corsicans, in order to prove themselves to be a nation, have been emphasising the importance of their language, albeit with limited success. The Occitanians have been attaching increasing importance to preserving their language, but have stopped short of claiming to be a nation.

In the case of religion, it is usually that of the ‘core’ ethnic (sometimes referred to as the *Staatsvolk*) that serves as the norm, and it becomes institutionalised. In the case of language, too, it is usually that of the dominant ethnic. A problem arises if there is more than one core religious or ethnic group, and if at least two are equally powerful, e.g. Roman Catholics and Lutherans in Germany or Anglos and Québécois in Canada. In the case of newly independent countries in the Third World, the dominant language is that of the elite of the former colonial power.

If a religion is not institutionalised, it is considered to be a mere sect, if not a superstition. If a language is not sufficiently institutionalised (with respect to its use in government offices or schools), it is often considered a quaint dialect. Where there is contact and synthesis, it tends to be unidirectional. The Breton language has many French words, but not vice versa; Sami has many Swedish and Norwegian words, but not the other way around (Reiterer 1999: 53). Similarly, minority religions tend to adopt elements of the majority religion.

Religion has nowhere been fully depoliticised, even in countries officially committed to *laïcité*. It may have ‘migrated from the public arena to the sphere of private conscience’ (Couture, Nielsen and Seymour et al. 1996: 614); but the majority religion is still conspicuously located in the public sphere and informs the national culture. Both language and religion are the cultural

materials used to shape a national identity. According to Kymlicka (1995: 111), there is no analogy between language and religion: All states have official languages (in the sense of their monopoly of use in the civil service, the army, and education), but today, many states do not have established churches. Nevertheless, adherents to minority religions are often not regarded as authentic members of the nation, even in settler states such as Australia, France, and the United States, although they may be fully at home in their national languages. In sum, the triumph of language over religion remains incomplete.

Notes

1 Note that Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*, a foundational work of English literature, is steeped in the culture of Roman Catholicism.

2 For Jews it was different, because literacy in Hebrew was the norm, at least among males.

3 There continued to be vestiges of the religion – language nexus in Germany: while the use of German in texts in schools and universities was becoming widespread in Protestant regions, 'Latin still remained dominant in the universities and secondary schools in Catholic regions' (Kohn 1951: 348).

4 A religious government official in Turkey recently suggested adding four letters to the Turkish alphabet to better accommodate Arabic sounds (Tavernise 2007).

5 In Israel, the identity of many Israelis is based not on religion but on the Hebrew language and the territory in which it is the major medium of communication. However, it is also increasingly the language of the country's Arab Muslim minority; conversely, the members of Jerusalem's *Neturei Karta*, Israel's most religious and anti-Zionist Jews, use Yiddish on a daily basis, reserving Hebrew for purely sacred purposes (Safran 2005).

6 Thus one speaks of French people of Maghrebi, Vietnamese, or Jewish, but never Catholic (or Italian) origin.

7 Note that the 'Polish National Church' was founded, not in Poland, but in the United States, in 1897, when there was no Polish state.

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