

Unholy Alliances

Religion and Pakistani Nationalism



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The idea of nation needs to be decisively unhinged from the idea of religion such that what it means to be a political subject, a Pakistani, a citizen, must not be conflated with what it means to be part of a particular religious community.

Pakistan's National Education Policy 2009 is out. Predictably, it has an entire chapter on Islamic education. Equally predictably, the liberal intelligentsia is raising Cain.

When work on the policy began in 2005 during former General-President Pervez Musharraf's tenure, the Ministry of Education decided to insert suitable references to religion in the preamble and be done with it. The Pakistan People's Party government, which has put out the finished policy in September this year decided, most say under pressure, to add the fourth chapter on Islamic education as the "duty of state and society".

Why has religion found its way into Pakistan's several education policies and curriculum development efforts over the years?

The Right says because Pakistan was begot as an Islamic state. Nonsense, say the liberals and point to Mohammad Ali Jinnah's speech to the Constituent Assembly on August 11, 1947: "You may belong to any religion or caste or creed," he said, "that has nothing to do with the business of the State."

The debate is unending and in recent years, because of internal threat from extremist Islamist elements, has acquired a new urgency. This urgency has given the liberal enclave the space to argue that the 'Islamic' be taken out of the *Islamic Republic of Pakistan*.

But can this be done in a deeply conservative society? Can we wipe the slate clean?

Separating mosque from state when people don't agree to such a distinction would be an exercise in administrative-bureaucratic control but would not resolve the fundamental dilemma: that the state itself, over five decades, has helped create a certain kind of mindset and, ironically, for reasons of nationalism. Critics identify the religion factor repeatedly as a fundamental, standalone problem while ignoring, for the most part, the relationship the state

has tried to develop between religion and nation; how it has consistently used religion as an instrument of national cohesion. If there was ever a case of the obvious becoming the obscure, this is it.

Why religion and nationalism are such easy bedfellows may be explained through what they have in common: a focus on an imagined community; reliance on the importance of symbols to provide shared meaning to members; concern with territory (though this aspect has to be qualified in the case of Islam); a belief system to assist members in navigating a complex world; and so on.

That be as it may, how did nationalism become the albatross around our neck?

When Europe moved from an agrarian to an industrialised society in the 17th to 18th-centuries, to a large extent, a shared culture, a shared language and shared education, became a statewide necessity. The need for a literate population and explicit, reasonable and precise communication fuelled the development of an education system. That system was grounded in the idea of the separation of church and state, another development that in fact preceded the idea of the nation-state itself. To that extent, Europe became secular even before it developed nation-states.

In Pakistan, as in several other parts of the world, the trajectory is different. Like most post-colonial states, Pakistan is still more a state-nation than a nation-state. Hence the state's emphasis, instead of increased levels of literacy and technical competence, is on religion as the primary marker of nationalism. Religious nationalism is the baseline and the standard medium of communication we have developed; the common conceptual currency required of members of society if they are to enjoy full and effective moral citizenship. And the national education system is one of the many tools through which the state has tried to establish this standardised medium.

But if it is accepted that religion has been used for cementing national identity, then we have to examine whether the state has used religion for nation-building, a secular project, by keeping religion subservient to the nation-state or allowed religion, wittingly or unwittingly, to penetrate the political, social and economic spaces and thereby dominate the state. The answer is not a simple one. Religion once unleashed in the public sphere, by its very all-encompassing nature, refuses to submit to any higher authority including, in this case, the state. And where Islam is concerned, which has not undergone the kind of deconstruction that Christianity has, the faithful do not accept the modern boundaries of a nation-state. Shared belief in this case exceeds territoriality.

The state says it is now embarked on a policy of making religion a private affair; but then there is this chapter in the National Education Policy that envisages Islamic education as the “duty of state and society”.

The bottom line is that years of using Islam instrumentally have taken roots in various sections of state and society and changing attitudes is a daunting task. Indeed, the problem today is that religious nationalism has moved from the margins of society to centre stage. And the state, which was decisive in ensuring this movement, is now the victim of its own ill-thought policy.

Education policy and curriculum development are among the many mechanisms through which knowledge is socially distributed and culturally validated. The crucial role that religion has played, through public education, and continues to, in forming the consciousness of the political subject in Pakistan and in the construction of the nation state itself, is a big piece of the problem. The specific experience of education at the public school can offer clues into the ways in which the state is responsible for creating fixed, unalterable identities and drawing clear, exclusivist boundaries to define selfhood, citizenship, nationhood, and community.

The state’s ‘instrumental pious nationalism’ is costing us heavily. It is not news that this equation of religious and national identity has alienated Christians and other minorities in the country and led to violent outbreaks on various occasions. The contradictory, exclusionary nature of religious nationalism works precisely thus: in promoting a sense of community and belonging, it simultaneously breeds intolerance and hatred by creating internal moralities that give preference to those inside the religious national community. Religious nationalism also appears to be an obstacle to democracy. Indeed, when the political is viewed as a struggle between divine truth and sin, there may be little room for compromise.

It is time, then, for a radical reimagining of the nation-state in Pakistan: the idea of nation needs to be decisively unhinged from the idea of religion such that what it means to be a political subject, a Pakistani, a citizen, must not be conflated with what it means to be part of a particular religious community. Religious nationalism is dangerous particularly because it designates the phenomena of collective piety; tries to lay down the law on *how* to be together in a particular grouping in a way that is acceptable, and sanctified; and prescribes beliefs, symbols, and rituals that sacralise the national community and confer a transcendental purpose to the political process.

The sanctifying tendency in religious nationalism is what makes it dangerous and intractable:

this contradictory tendency to place the nation above all else while also merging, and hence subordinating, it to a certain religious subjectivity.

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