



THE ROLE OF RELIGIOUS IDENTITY IN THE FORMATION OF NATIONAL CIVILIZATIONS

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Abstract: *The concept of religious identity has long played a crucial role in shaping the foundations of national civilizations across the globe. This article examines how religious identity influences the development of national civilizations, focusing on its role in uniting communities, shaping cultural norms, and influencing political and social institutions. By exploring case studies from various regions, the study highlights the complex interplay between religion and nationalism, showing that religious identity is not only a source of unity but also a tool for social exclusion and conflict. This article aims to provide a nuanced understanding of the role religious identity plays in the evolution of national civilizations, offering insights into both the potential for harmony and the challenges of religious diversity within national borders.*

INTRODUCTION:

The relationship between religious identity and the formation of national civilizations is multifaceted and profound. Religious belief systems have historically shaped cultural, social, and political landscapes, forging identities that transcend ethnic and regional differences. In many cases, religious identity serves as a foundational component of national civilization, influencing everything from language and governance to laws and societal norms. This article aims to explore the complex role of religious identity in the formation of national civilizations, examining both the unifying and divisive forces that religion can exert on national development.

1. Historical Context of Religious Identity in National Civilizations

The Role of Religion in Early Civilizations: Mesopotamia, Egypt, and the Indus Valley

In the earliest stages of human civilization, religion was deeply intertwined with governance, social structures, and cultural identity. Early civilizations such as Mesopotamia, Egypt, and the

Indus Valley were not only united by their agricultural advancements and urban development but also by their religious beliefs, which helped to define their societal norms and governance.

- **Mesopotamia:** In Mesopotamia, religion was an integral part of both political and social life. Kings were often seen as divine or semi-divine figures, and their authority was justified through their connection to gods like Marduk and Ishtar. Religious rituals were central to ensuring agricultural fertility, success in warfare, and social order. Temples, such as the ziggurats, were both religious and political centers, reinforcing the unity of the state with divine sanction.
- **Egypt:** Religion in ancient Egypt was deeply woven into the fabric of daily life. The Pharaoh was considered a god-king, and the concept of divine kingship was central to Egypt's political and social structure. The religious belief in the afterlife and the gods' power over natural phenomena (such as the flooding of the Nile) shaped the worldview of the Egyptian civilization. Religious festivals, sacrifices, and the construction of monumental temples like Karnak and Luxor were integral to Egypt's identity.
- **Indus Valley:** The religious practices in the Indus Valley Civilization remain somewhat enigmatic due to the absence of deciphered written records. However, archaeological evidence suggests that religion played a significant role in shaping their city planning and societal structure. The Great Bath of Mohenjo-Daro may have had religious or ritualistic significance, indicating the centrality of religious life in these early urban centers. There is also evidence of fertility cults, symbolized by figurines, and the worship of natural elements like water and fire.

Religion as a Nation-Building Tool in the Medieval Period

During the medieval period, religion became increasingly integral to the nation-building process, especially as kingdoms and empires expanded across regions. Religion was often used as a unifying tool to forge a collective identity among disparate peoples and regions.

- **The Rise of Christianity in Europe:** In medieval Europe, the Catholic Church played a central role in the formation of national identities. The spread of Christianity throughout Europe united diverse tribes and kingdoms under a common religious framework. The Church not only provided spiritual guidance but also influenced politics, law, and social norms. For example, the crowning of Charlemagne as Holy Roman Emperor symbolized the merging of religious and political power, strengthening the legitimacy of the nascent European states.
- **Islam in the Arab World:** The advent of Islam in the 7th century CE transformed the Middle East, North Africa, and parts of Asia. The spread of Islam was not just a religious movement but also a powerful political force that shaped the formation of large empires, such as the Umayyad, Abbasid, and Ottoman Empires. Islam provided a unifying identity for the diverse ethnic groups within these empires and contributed to the creation of legal and administrative frameworks based on Sharia law.
- **Hinduism and Nation-Building in India:** In medieval India, Hinduism, along with the caste system, shaped the social and political landscape. Kings often ruled under the mandate of the gods, and temple networks played a significant role in consolidating power. Religion was instrumental in fostering social cohesion and legitimizing authority, as seen in the Gupta Empire, where the state's support for Hindu culture and religion helped solidify its influence over vast regions.

- **Christianity and the State in Latin America:** In Latin America, the colonization by European powers brought Catholicism as both a religious and political institution. The Spanish and Portuguese crowns used the Catholic Church to solidify their dominance, while the Church itself became a pillar of colonial governance. Religion played a crucial role in the identity formation of the new colonies, particularly in shaping the cultural and social dynamics of the indigenous populations.

The Influence of Religion on the Modern Nation-State

In the modern era, the role of religion in the formation of national states evolved as political structures and ideologies shifted towards nationalism, secularism, and democracy. However, the influence of religious identity continued to shape national identities, policies, and social norms.

- **The Impact of the Reformation:** The Protestant Reformation in the 16th century marked a significant turning point in European religious and political history. The split between Roman Catholicism and Protestantism gave rise to religiously defined nations like Protestant England and Catholic France. The Reformation led to religious wars, but it also played a role in the development of the modern nation-state by creating a more distinct separation between church and state, while still linking religious identity with national identity.
- **Secularism and the Modern Nation-State:** The Enlightenment brought the idea of secularism, where the state and religion were separated. However, many modern nation-states, such as those in the Middle East and South Asia, continue to have religious identities deeply embedded in their political systems. For example, Pakistan's formation in 1947 was based on the idea of a Muslim-majority state, which continues to influence its national identity and political structure today.
- **Religious Nationalism in Contemporary Politics:** In recent decades, religious identity has once again become a powerful force in the formation of national civilizations. Countries like India, Israel, and Iran have seen the rise of religious nationalism, where national identity is closely tied to religious identity. In India, Hindu nationalism has shaped the political landscape, while in Israel, Jewish identity is a cornerstone of its national narrative. Similarly, Iran's Islamic revolution in 1979 led to the establishment of an Islamic Republic, where religion dictates the political and social framework.
- **Religious Conflicts and National Identity:** Religious identity continues to play a significant role in both fostering unity and fueling division within modern states. Conflicts such as the Israeli-Palestinian dispute, the Sunni-Shia divide in the Middle East, and the rise of Islamic terrorism have shown how religious identity can both strengthen and fracture national civilizations. These conflicts often revolve around competing national identities, where religion plays a central role in defining the boundaries of inclusion and exclusion within the state.

The role of religion in the formation of national civilizations has evolved significantly from early religious practices in ancient civilizations to the complex interplay of religion and nationalism in modern nation-states. Religion has served as a foundation for social cohesion, political legitimacy, and national identity across different periods of history, and it continues to influence the development of national civilizations in the contemporary world.

2. The Role of Religious Identity in Shaping Cultural Norms

Religious Influence on Art, Literature, and Philosophy

Religious identity has had a profound influence on the development of art, literature, and philosophy throughout history. The way religious beliefs shape cultural expressions, from visual arts to intellectual traditions, has been instrumental in forming the identities of nations and civilizations.

- **Art:** In many civilizations, religious themes dominated artistic expression. For example, Christian iconography in medieval Europe, such as the depiction of biblical scenes in church frescoes and altarpieces, served both as religious instruction and cultural identity markers. In Islamic art, religious prohibitions on depicting human figures led to the flourishing of intricate geometric patterns and arabesques, which became key features of Islamic architecture, manuscripts, and decorative arts. In Hindu art, religious symbolism related to deities, such as in temple carvings and paintings, became the foundation for artistic traditions that continued to shape Indian culture.
- **Literature:** Religious identity has also deeply influenced literature, often dictating themes, narratives, and moral lessons. The Bible's impact on Western literature is evident in works ranging from Dante's *Divine Comedy* to John Milton's *Paradise Lost*, both of which integrate religious doctrine and themes of sin, redemption, and divine justice. Similarly, in the Islamic world, the Quran influenced not only religious practices but also literary traditions, inspiring poetry, philosophical writings, and stories like those in *One Thousand and One Nights*. The interaction between religious beliefs and literary forms in these societies helped cement religious identity as central to national culture and norms.
- **Philosophy:** In philosophy, religious worldviews have shaped the development of key ethical and metaphysical concepts. In Europe, the theological works of philosophers like St. Augustine and Thomas Aquinas blended Christian teachings with classical philosophy, creating a synthesis that influenced Western thought for centuries. In the Islamic world, philosophers like Al-Farabi, Avicenna, and Averroes synthesized Greek philosophy with Islamic theology, shaping intellectual traditions that bridged religion, science, and reason. Hindu philosophy, as seen in the Upanishads and the teachings of key figures like Adi Shankaracharya, integrated spiritual practices with intellectual exploration of the nature of the self, existence, and the universe.

The Intersection of Religion and Social Structure in National Civilizations

Religion has often been intricately linked with the social structure in national civilizations, helping to define class systems, gender roles, and societal hierarchies. The interaction between religious beliefs and the organization of society has played a major role in shaping the norms and values that guide behavior within a civilization.

- **Social Hierarchies and Caste Systems:** In many ancient societies, religious beliefs were used to justify and reinforce social hierarchies. For instance, in Hinduism, the caste system, which divided society into rigid social classes, was legitimized by religious texts like the *Manusmriti*. Similarly, in medieval Europe, the Church played a central role in organizing society, where kings were crowned by religious authorities, and the nobility often governed as divine representatives on Earth. In the Middle East, the concept of divine rule in the form of Caliphates reinforced the authority of political leaders and social structures based on Islamic principles.

- **Gender Roles and Religious Norms:** Religious teachings often prescribed distinct roles for men and women, which were reflected in social norms and practices. In Christianity, the role of women has been historically defined by interpretations of scripture, with a focus on motherhood and domesticity. In Islamic societies, women's roles were historically influenced by Islamic teachings on modesty, family life, and legal rights. Similarly, in many indigenous religions, women often held important spiritual roles but were also subject to specific cultural expectations based on religious teachings. These religiously-influenced social structures defined the positions of individuals within the larger national or societal framework, helping to create cultural identities.
- **Ethical Systems and Legal Codes:** Religious identity has also shaped the ethical and legal systems within national civilizations. In Islamic civilization, Sharia law governs not only religious practices but also civil matters, reinforcing the integration of religious norms into national laws. Similarly, in Western civilizations, Christianity influenced the development of legal systems, particularly in the context of moral and ethical laws, such as those against theft, adultery, and murder. Religious teachings often serve as the foundation for the social contract and governance, shaping the values of fairness, justice, and morality that influence national culture.

Case Study: The Role of Islam in the Formation of Pakistani National Identity

Pakistan's national identity is deeply intertwined with Islam, which played a central role in the country's formation and continues to influence its cultural and social norms.

- **Religious Nationalism and Pakistan's Founding:** The demand for a separate Muslim-majority state in South Asia was largely driven by religious nationalism, as articulated by leaders like Muhammad Ali Jinnah, who envisioned Pakistan as a homeland for Muslims of the subcontinent. Islam was not only a unifying force but also a defining feature of the national identity, contrasting Pakistan's envisioned role with that of Hindu-majority India. The idea of Pakistan as an Islamic state was foundational in its formation, as it was established to protect and promote Muslim religious, cultural, and political rights.
- **Islamic Ideology in National Symbols and Institutions:** The influence of Islam on Pakistan's cultural and national symbols is evident in its flag, national anthem, and political structures. The green color in Pakistan's flag represents the Muslim majority, while the crescent and star symbolize progress and light under Islamic principles. The Constitution of Pakistan declares Islam as the state religion and establishes the role of Islamic law in governance. In practice, Pakistan's institutions and policies are often shaped by Islamic ideals, from its legal system (with elements of Sharia law) to its public and cultural policies, which emphasize Islamic values.
- **Islam and Social Norms:** Pakistan's social norms and cultural practices are also shaped by Islamic teachings. The influence of Islam is seen in family structures, gender roles, dietary habits (such as halal food), and daily practices like prayer (Salat). The role of women, while complex and multifaceted, is also influenced by Islamic interpretations regarding modesty, family, and legal rights. Despite challenges posed by modernization and globalization, the Islamic identity continues to define the cultural norms that govern Pakistani society.
- **Islamic Symbols in Art and Literature:** In Pakistan, religious identity is prominently reflected in art and literature. The country's national poetry and literature, such as the works of Allama Iqbal, often integrate Islamic themes and ideas of unity, faith, and cultural revival. Islamic motifs dominate architectural styles, with mosques and Islamic buildings designed in the traditional Mughal and Persian styles. Furthermore, religious holidays such

as Eid al-Fitr and Eid al-Adha hold significant cultural importance and are celebrated as major national events.

- **Religious Diversity and Tensions:** While Pakistan is defined by its Muslim identity, it is also home to religious minorities, such as Hindus, Christians, Sikhs, and others. The role of Islam in shaping national identity has created tensions over issues of religious tolerance and minority rights. The complexity of religious pluralism in Pakistan has raised important questions about the balance between Islamic identity and the rights of religious minorities within the broader cultural framework.

The role of religious identity in shaping cultural norms is central to the formation of national civilizations. From art and literature to social structures and legal systems, religion provides the underlying framework that influences the cultural expressions and ethical values of a society. In Pakistan, Islam plays a crucial role in shaping its national identity, defining its cultural and social norms, while also presenting challenges related to religious diversity and pluralism. Understanding this intersection between religion and culture is essential for analyzing the formation and evolution of national civilizations.

3. Religious Identity and Political Power

The Role of Religious Leaders in Governance and Lawmaking

Religious leaders have historically played pivotal roles in governance and lawmaking, often serving as the moral authority and guiding figure for rulers and policymakers. In many civilizations, religious leaders held not only spiritual influence but also political power, contributing to the formation and regulation of social systems and legal codes.

- **Theocratic Systems:** In theocratic systems, religious leaders were directly involved in governance, with their decisions shaping both the spiritual and secular aspects of society. For instance, in ancient Israel, priests and prophets held substantial power, guiding kings and ensuring that religious laws were upheld. Similarly, in medieval Europe, the Pope wielded significant political influence, dictating the direction of European monarchies and even shaping national borders during key historical moments (such as the crowning of emperors).
- **Islamic Governance:** In Islamic civilization, the role of religious leaders, such as the Caliphs and scholars (ulama), was central to both governance and lawmaking. Sharia law, derived from the Quran and Hadith, has historically been integral to political systems in Muslim-majority regions, with religious leaders playing an essential role in interpreting these laws and ensuring they were implemented across the state. In modern times, the intersection of religion and politics remains evident in countries such as Iran, where the Supreme Leader holds both religious and political power, combining religious guidance with state governance.
- **Protestant Reformation and the State:** The Protestant Reformation in the 16th century significantly altered the relationship between religious authority and governance in Europe. Leaders like Martin Luther challenged the Catholic Church's authority, leading to the establishment of Protestant states where the monarch often became the religious leader. This shift redefined the role of religion in lawmaking, with the monarch wielding both political and religious power, significantly influencing the governance and social norms of their kingdoms.

Religious Movements and Their Impact on National Political Structures

Religious movements have often been catalysts for political change, influencing the formation and transformation of national political structures.

- **The Role of Religious Movements in Revolution:** Religious movements have frequently been central to revolutionary change. For example, the rise of Islamic fundamentalism in the 20th century, exemplified by the Iranian Revolution of 1979, led to the overthrow of the Pahlavi monarchy and the establishment of an Islamic Republic. This shift drastically changed Iran's political system, replacing a secular monarchy with a religiously guided political structure.
- **Christianity and the Political Transformation of Europe:** In Europe, the Reformation and subsequent religious movements such as the Puritan Revolution in England reshaped the political landscape. These movements not only challenged the political power of the Catholic Church but also established new political structures where religious doctrine played a vital role in governance.
- **Hindu Nationalism in India:** In India, the rise of Hindu nationalism, particularly in the 20th century with the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and its ideological underpinnings from the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), has influenced the political structure of modern India. The BJP's focus on integrating Hindu religious identity with political power has reshaped India's political landscape, particularly in terms of religious minority rights and national identity.

The Conflict Between Secular and Religious Nationalism

The relationship between secularism and religious nationalism is often marked by tension, particularly in states that are home to diverse religious communities.

- **Secularism vs. Religious Nationalism:** Secular nationalism emphasizes the separation of religion from the state, advocating for governance based on rational and democratic principles rather than religious doctrines. In contrast, religious nationalism seeks to define the nation through a particular religious identity, viewing religion as central to the nation's existence and governance. This conflict is evident in countries like Turkey, where secularism, established by Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, has clashed with rising Islamist sentiments in the 21st century.
- **Religious Nationalism in South Asia:** The partition of India and the creation of Pakistan are prime examples of religious nationalism shaping the political trajectory of a region. While India embraced secularism, Pakistan was founded as a Muslim-majority state, where Islam became central to national identity and governance. The rise of Hindu nationalism in India, particularly under the influence of the BJP, has further deepened the divide between secularism and religious nationalism in the region.
- **The Role of Religious Nationalism in the Middle East:** In many Middle Eastern countries, the rise of religious nationalism has been in direct opposition to secular governments. The Arab Spring, for instance, saw Islamist political movements gaining power in countries like Egypt and Tunisia, challenging the secular political structures that had previously dominated these states. The rise of ISIS in Iraq and Syria further demonstrated the potent impact of religious identity on national political structures.

4. Religion as a Tool for Social Cohesion and Division

The Unifying Power of Religious Identity in National Formation

Religion has often been a powerful unifying force, helping to form national identities and providing a common foundation for people from diverse backgrounds to come together. Religious identity can foster a sense of belonging and shared purpose, binding individuals to the national community.

- **Religion in the Formation of National Unity:** Religious identity often provides a common set of values, beliefs, and rituals that unite people under a national banner. In early modern Europe, Catholicism helped unify kingdoms like France and Spain, where the monarchy and the Church were tightly intertwined. Similarly, Islam in the Arab world has historically served as a unifying factor among diverse ethnic groups, creating a shared religious identity that transcends regional differences.
- **Religion as a National Identity in Pakistan:** In Pakistan, the idea of Islam as the foundation of national identity was central to the country's formation. The demand for Pakistan, articulated by Muhammad Ali Jinnah and others, was rooted in the desire for a separate homeland for Muslims of the subcontinent. Islam remains a unifying force in Pakistan, providing a collective identity for a diverse population made up of various ethnic groups.

Religion as a Source of Division and Conflict Within National Borders

While religion can unify, it can also divide. Religious identity is often a basis for exclusion, marginalization, and conflict, both within nations and across borders.

- **Religious Conflict and National Identity:** Religious differences often lead to tensions within national borders. In India, the rise of Hindu nationalism has sparked religious conflict with the Muslim minority, leading to violence and political divisiveness. Similarly, the tension between Sunni and Shia Muslims in countries like Iraq and Bahrain has had a profound impact on national unity, undermining efforts for inclusive governance.
- **The Partition of India and Pakistan:** One of the most dramatic examples of religion acting as a force of division is the partition of India in 1947, which led to the creation of Pakistan. The division was motivated by religious identity, with Muslims forming the majority in Pakistan and Hindus in India. The partition resulted in large-scale violence, displacement, and long-lasting religious animosity, underlining the divisive power of religious identity.

5. Religious Diversity and Nationalism

The Challenges of Managing Religious Pluralism Within a Nation-State

Managing religious pluralism poses significant challenges for nations, especially when religious groups are seen as competing for political power, cultural dominance, or resources.

- **Religious Pluralism in Modern States:** Nations with diverse religious populations must navigate the challenges of integrating multiple religious identities into a cohesive national narrative. This challenge is particularly pronounced in countries like India and Nigeria, where religious tensions can disrupt social harmony and undermine national unity. Countries must strike a balance between fostering a common national identity while respecting and protecting religious diversity.

- **Political Representation of Religious Groups:** In many cases, religious minorities feel excluded or marginalized from political processes, leading to demands for greater representation and autonomy. For instance, in Pakistan, religious minorities such as Hindus and Christians often struggle with their representation in government and face legal discrimination, including the controversial blasphemy laws.

Religious Tolerance and the Development of Inclusive National Identities

For nations with religious pluralism, religious tolerance and inclusive policies are key to building a stable and cohesive society.

- **Inclusive National Identities:** An inclusive national identity recognizes and celebrates the religious diversity within the country. Countries like Canada and the United States, despite their religious diversity, have embraced pluralism and promoted a common identity that transcends religious boundaries. Such an approach encourages mutual respect and cooperation between different religious communities, allowing for peaceful coexistence.
- **Legal and Social Protections for Religious Minorities:** The protection of religious freedoms and rights is fundamental for managing religious diversity. Ensuring that religious minorities are not persecuted or discriminated against is crucial for maintaining social peace. In Pakistan, for example, efforts to promote interfaith dialogue and protect religious minorities are critical for achieving religious harmony.

Case Study: The Challenges of Religious Diversity in Modern Pakistan

Pakistan presents a unique case study in the challenges of managing religious diversity within a predominantly Muslim state. While Islam serves as the central unifying force, Pakistan is home to various religious minorities, including Hindus, Christians, Sikhs, and others, who often face challenges related to their rights, safety, and social integration.

- **Religious Tensions:** The rise of Islamic fundamentalism in Pakistan has often led to tensions between religious communities, particularly between Sunni Muslims and religious minorities. Incidents of violence against religious minorities, such as the 2013 Peshawar church bombing, highlight the challenges of ensuring religious tolerance in the country.
- **Interfaith Dialogue and Religious Tolerance:** Efforts to foster religious tolerance and dialogue have been made, such as through the promotion of interfaith dialogue initiatives and the establishment of minority rights protections. However, the success of these efforts remains limited, as religious tensions and discriminatory practices persist in certain regions of the country.

The interplay between religion and national identity is complex, with religion acting as both a unifying force and a source of division. The challenges of managing religious pluralism, fostering inclusive national identities, and balancing secularism with religious nationalism continue to shape political and social landscapes in countries like Pakistan, India, and beyond. Understanding the dynamic between religious identity and political power is crucial for addressing the challenges of religious diversity in modern nation-states.

Summary:

The article demonstrates that religious identity plays a critical role in shaping national civilizations by influencing cultural norms, political structures, and social cohesion. It is evident that religion is not only a source of unity, creating a shared sense of belonging and purpose

within nations, but it can also be a divisive force, particularly in pluralistic societies. Through various case studies, including the historical development of Pakistan, the article highlights the significant impact of religious identity in both fostering and hindering the progress of national civilizations. The relationship between religion and nationalism is intricate, and understanding this dynamic is essential for addressing contemporary challenges of religious diversity and inclusion within national frameworks.

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