

The Decline of National Identity in Multiethnic Societies:

Religion and Nation in Iran and Belgium

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In explaining national pride as an indicator of subjective belonging to the national state, researchers have examined factors like occupational structure, economic discrimination, competition, and political recognition. However, the impact of religious factors and cultural factors has been relatively neglected. We argue that cross-cutting religious solidarity as the basis of nation-state formation can produce strong national identification that overcomes ethnic inequalities. In particular, religions that involve different ethnic groups in the same religious rituals and public identities can produce attachment to the national project even among relatively disadvantaged ethnic groups that are expected to oppose the nation-state.

Comparing the unusual cases of Belgium and Iran, we find that both Catholic and Shia cultures generate solidarity arising out of ritual life. This solidarity spills over into support for the nation-state and national pride. Religions based on intense, public rituals facilitate the formation of a confessional supra-identity, whereas rituals based primarily on personal piety fail to do so. Comparing Belgium and Iran, we develop a theory of interethnic solidarity that draws upon ritual processes. In Belgium, popular Catholicism forged cross-ethnic ties that fostered attachment to the national state despite the disadvantages experienced by Flemings. Although the relationship

between Catholic religiosity and national identity remains robust among the small minority of Belgians who remain intensely religious, national pride weakened over the course of the 20th century as the country secularized, leading to the rise of Flemish nationalism hostile to the Belgian nation-state. In Iran, practicing frequent interactive rituals that transcend ethnic boundaries increases Iranian national pride among Shia ethnic minorities and reduces the national pride gap with the dominant Persians.

We test the argument with data from two representative surveys, the European Values Survey and Values and Attitudes of Iranians, finding that communally intensive rituals help explain national identity in Belgium and Iran.