**Right-wing nationalism, populism and religion: what are the connections and why?**

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**Abstract**

This special issue focuses on right-wing nationalism,[[1]](#endnote-1) populism and religion, both theoretically and empirically, with a focus on the following countries: Australia, India, Turkey, and the USA. Although not the same thing, nationalism and populism are often closely linked (Stroschein, 2019). Nationalists may claim that there is but one ‘true religion’ – that is, their own and their followers’ – which helps focus their nationalist vision. They bring religion and culture into their arguments to encourage political changes in their favour. Nationalists identify and target those identified as “enemies of the people”, perceived as a serious threat to fulfilment of a nationalist future free from culturally “alien” influences. Linking nationalism with religion is not new. What may be more novel is the linking of religion, nationalism and populism.[[2]](#footnote-1) Many seek to build international networks of like-minded ideologues across national boundaries (Haynes, 2019). The constituent articles of the special issue explore these issues theoretically, conceptually and empirically.

**Keywords: nationalism, nationalists, populism, populists, religion, Islam, culture**

**Introduction**

Right-wing populist nationalists in the West typically identify their main ‘enemy’ as Islamist extremism, radicalism and terrorism (Haynes, 2019). Islam is vilified as a faith and Muslims are regarded with suspicion. Waever (2006) notes that it is fashionable to ‘talk of a “clash of civilizations” between the West and Islam’. Such talk has its origins in the events of 11 September 2001 (9/11), whose outcome was a continuing concern for the West’s social and political stability, leading to widespread securitisation of Islam. Waever (2006) adds that, as a result, the world may be ‘standing on the brink of a long conflict, perhaps a new “cold war” that features small-scale, but spectacular violence’.

Concern with escalating intercivilisational conflict between the West and the ‘Muslim world’ is unquestioningly one of the key reasons for significant electoral support in many western countries for right-wing populist nationalists. Populist nationalists have recently enjoyed electoral success in many countries around the world, including: Australia, Brazil, India, Turkey, the USA, and sundry European states (Schwörer and Romero Vidal, 2020). While they are not ideologically identical, they do share significant characteristics. On the one hand, right-wing nationalist politicians are strongly influenced by ‘nationally specific factors such as political history, system and culture’ (Greven, 2016). On the other hand, they work from the same ideological ‘playbook’: First, their main target is an allegedly corrupt incumbent elite political class, from which the mass of the ordinary people needs defending, and for which the right-wing nationalist politician claims to be the saviour. Second, they claim to champion the rights and legitimacy of the indigenous, culturally similar, ‘ordinary people’ against the ‘immigrant-loving’ self-serving business ‘elites’ who, they claim, want mass immigration for self-interested economic reasons: to flood the jobs market with ‘foreigners’ willing to work for comparatively low wages and undercut indigenous workers’ salaries for bosses’ profit. Huntington (2004, 268) contends that ‘these transnationals have little need for national loyalty, view national boundaries as obstacles that thankfully are vanishing, and see national governments as residues from the past whose only function now is to facilitate the elite’s global operations’. Third, in Europe, Australia, the USA, and India, right-wing nationalists vilify Islam as a faith and Muslims as a community. Fourth, right-wing nationalists seek to invoke the alleged splendours of their purportedly superior civilisations, whether Christianity (in Europe, Australia, Canada, and the USA) or Hinduism (in India), in their quest for political support and votes.

This opening article introduces the special issue. The first section looks at connections between right-wing nationalism, populism and religion both theoretically and empirically. Section two surveys interactions between religious and secular nationalism in the USA during the presidency of Donald Trump, which commenced in January 2017. Trump’s America is a key example of how a right-wing nationalist populist (Trump) is able to draw electorally on support both from conservative Christians and secular nationalists to win the 2016 presidential race over the favourite, Hillary Clinton. The third section introduces the five articles that comprise the remainder of the special issue. The final section draws overall conclusions in relation to the relationship between right-wing nationalism, populism and religion.

**Right-wing nationalism, populism and religion: theoretical and empirical observations**

The term ‘nationalism’ is widely interpreted as both dogma and political movement. It emphasises that a nation – conventionally understood as a group of people of indeterminate but normally considerable size often in the context of a country, who believe themselves linked by significant community ties – has the political right to constitute itself as an independent, sovereign political community, both because of a shared history and a perceived common destiny. For nationalists, it is only right and proper that state borders should dovetail, as precisely as possible, with the boundaries of the nation. In extreme cases, such as that demonstrated in the ideology of Nazi Germany, the state regards the nation as *the* supreme facet of a person’s identity, which can override all other relevant concerns, such as religion, class or race.

Today’s right-wing nationalists are typically both anti-immigration and populist. Some have recently either won power, or achieved a significantly increased share of the vote without gaining power, in various countries. They comprise: the USA, Australia, India and numerous European countries, including: the Czech Republic, Denmark, France, Germany, Hungary, Italy, the Netherlands, Poland, Slovakia, and Sweden. It is however the Donald Trump administration in the USA which has probably gained most sustained attention from political science, including those with an interest in relationships between religion and politics. Trump’s election as president in November 2016 both symbolised and manifested the rise of populist nationalism. Achieving power, Trump quickly made plain his anti-immigrant, especially anti-Mexican and anti-Muslim, views, rapidly enacting a policy to prevent Muslims from named countries entering the USA while promising to build a ‘big, beautiful’ wall to keep out ‘Mexicans’, identified by Trump as rapists and criminals (Haynes, 2020). During the 2016 presidential election campaign, the issue of immigration was central to political debates between presidential candidates. The focus, on the one hand, was on illegal immigration into the USA from Mexico and central America and, on the other hand, there was the question of some immigrants’ loyalty to the USA. Trump and several other Republican candidates openly questioned the loyalties of American Muslims, of which there are more than three million in the USA. Both issues centre on whether specific groups of people – that is, ‘Mexicans’ and Muslims – are to be fully trusted by Americans. Do they demonstrate ‘sufficient’ and ‘acceptable’ levels of nationalist loyalty, commitment and identity to the USA?

This theme – can immigrants and foreigners be trusted? – was not the sole domain of Trump. Other populist nationalists, such as Hungary’s Viktor Orbán, also refer to ‘the’ people in a specific way and with a certain understanding of what the term implies: they do not mean *all* their country’s citizens. They are referring to ‘our’ people, that is, certain groups: white-skinned Christians, not ‘swarthy’ Latinos or religiously beyond-the-pale Muslims. Marchetti refers to this linking of culture and religion with nationalism as ‘civilizationism’. He explains that ‘the civilizational model is centred on the primacy of the cultural and religious bond… *Within the political and economic context of globalization, characterized by a high degree of political and economic exclusion, the perspective of civilizations offers grounds for a conservative rejection of global transformations’* (emphasis added; Marchetti 2016, 122) ‘Key factors contributing to conflict principally relate to the fact of irreducible cultural differences’ (Marchetti 2016, 123).

‘Irreducible cultural differences’ are what principally animates populist nationalists in, *inter alia*: the USA, Russia, India, Myanmar, Australia, Canada, and numerous European countries. In these contexts, Muslims are the Other, the main target of populist nationalists. It is not however especially important if there are really ‘irreducible cultural differences’. The key issue is a political consideration: can the populist nationalist politician persuade sufficient voters that such differences exist and that they are so important that they will cast their ballots for them? Buzan and Waever remind us that ‘limited collectivities (states, nations, and as anticipated by Huntington, civilisations) engage in self-reinforcing rivalries with other limited collectivities and … such interaction strengthens their we-feeling.’ Because this ‘involves a reference to a “we”, it is a social construct operative in the interaction among people. A main criteria of this type of referent is that it forms an interpretative community: that it is the context in which principles of legitimacy and valuation circulate and within which the individual constructs an interpretation of events.’ (Buzan and Waever, 2009: 255). In other words, vote for me and I’ll save you from the bad guys. Who are the bad guys? Anyone sufficiently different from “us” to warrant the term and thus warrant our suspicion.

Marchetti’s (2016) ‘global transformations’ are multifaceted. They involve momentous political, social, economic and technological changes since the Cold War ended three decades ago. An important manifestation of these changes is an increasing focus on identity, involving various religious and cultural – that is, ‘civilisational’ – configurations. In the early 1990s, political globalisation focused on how to bring about widespread liberal democracy and improved human rights. Today, we see their derailing, characterised by widespread democratic backsliding and pervasive attacks on human rights. Right-wing populist nationalists are currently riding the crest of the wave of these developments; and many are benefitting electorally. According to Brubaker (2017), they seek to benefit from ‘two sets of decades-spanning structural trends’, involving four ‘transformations’: ‘party politics, social structure, media, and governance structures.’ They promote ‘a generic populism—a heightened tendency to address “the people” directly—and the demographic, economic, and cultural transformations that have encouraged more specific forms of protectionist populism’. These changes interacted from the mid-2000s with a ‘conjunctural coming-together of a series of [security] crises’: ‘the security crisis’, consequential to a succession of terror attacks by Islamist extremists since 9/11, ‘the Great Recession and sovereign debt crisis’ in 2008, and ‘the refugee crisis’ of 2015, stemming from Syria’s tragic civil war. They occurred ‘in the context of a crisis of public knowledge—to form a “perfect storm” that was powerfully conducive to populist claims to protect the people against threats to their economic, cultural, and physical security**’ (**Brubaker, 2017: 369). This is the backdrop for the political efflorescence of right-wing populist nationalists and references to alleged cultural and religious differences which fuel their bid for votes.

The relationship between religion and nationalism is not however axiomatic or inevitable but often indistinct and contentious.Many acclaimed writers on nationalism do not include a discussion of religion in their analyses, including Ernest Gellner (1983) and Eric Hobsbawm (1990). Instead, they highlight the significance of various secular historical and economic factors in the growth of nationalism in recent times. Increasingly, however, it is recognised that to arrive at a comprehensive understanding of the development of modern nationalism around the world, we should consider both the direct and indirect influence of religion in its contemporary development and practice. Anthony D. Smith is a key authority in this regard. Discussing the relationship between ‘religion’ and ‘nationalism,’ Smith claims that ‘perhaps more detrimental than anything to our understanding of these phenomena has been the general trend to dismiss the role of religion and tradition in a globalizing world, and to downplay the persistence of nationalism in a “post-national” global order’ (Smith 2003: ix). Smith’s 2003 book, *Chosen Peoples*: *Sacred sources of national identity*, argues that the relationship between religion and nationalism is highly important. For Smith, ‘even’ secular nationalism, often thought of as an archetypally irreligious ideology, typically draws on religious understandings of the world. In support of Smith’s claim, it be very difficult to understand American nationalism both historically and today without considering formative Christian – actually, mainline Protestant – beliefs and values (Green, Rozell, and Wilcox, 2003).

When the relationship between religion and nationalism is clear and sustained, then we may fuse them into a hybrid term: ‘religious nationalism’. Religious nationalism signifies a demonstrably close, even synonymous, relationship between two concepts ‘religion’ and ‘nationalism’, which are not inevitably ideologically close. Religion fits in in this context when it is a defining component of what a nation is said to comprise, helping to forge a collective ethos of identity and belonging expressed in a collective culture. Religious nationalism’s ideological importance is clear in various political and cultural contexts.For example,when the state, as in present-day Iran or Saudi Arabia, or in Afghanistan under the Taliban (1996–2001), claims to derive its political legitimacy from popular adherence to religious not secular doctrines, then western political science calls it a theocracy (Haynes, 1998). This derives from the belief that the state’s ideology is dominated by religious values, beliefs and ideals.

Religious nationalism is not solely a modern phenomenon, as it has also appeared historically. For example, it was a pivotal ideology in relation to events in the early twentieth century. This was the time of nationalism’s burgeoning in anticolonial struggles in many parts of then-colonised areas of the world, including Africa, Asia, and the Middle East (Haynes 1993, 2005). During its control of much of the global south, Western powers sought to develop modern secular regimes, which, however, frequently had an unintended outcome: anticolonial, indigenous, religion and culture-inspired, opposition movements. In the decades around World War I, many colonies underwent political upheavals, within which various religious expressions – including, Hinduism, Buddhism, and Islam – dovetailed with expressions of secular nationalism, to produce a hybrid ideology: religious nationalism, characterising many movements of anti-colonial opposition. For example, Pakistan was explicitly founded as a *Muslim* state in 1947, religiously and culturally distinct from Hindu-dominated India, following the withdrawal of British colonial rule. Buddhism was of great political importance in various Southeast and East Asian countries, including Burma/Myanmar and Vietnam, in the context of their struggle for liberation from, respectively, British and French colonial rule. After World War I, the rise of nationalism in the Middle East and North Africa was strongly associated with Islam – both as religion and culture – which coalesced as the key component of militant, anti-colonial ideology demanding renewal and reassertion of national, religious and cultural identities (Haynes *et al*, 2017).

As already noted, links between religion and nationalism are not only of historical interest. Following anti-colonial struggles, Little asserted in the early 1990s that many recent and then-current nation-building projects were ‘deeply infused with religion’:

Whether the issue is building, restructuring or maintaining a nation, the process is, all over the world, deeply infused with religion. How else are we to understand Northern Ireland, Israel, Lebanon, the Sudan, Sri Lanka, or Iran? Or, more immediately, how else are we to understand former Eastern European satellites like Poland or Bulgaria, or the so-called ‘Soviet Nationalities,’ such as the Ukraine, Lithuania, or Azerbaijan and Armenia? Nor, for that matter, are the developed countries altogether exempt from the effects of religious nationalism. The influence of the Moral Majority and related movements on American public life during the 1980s left no doubt about that. (Little 1994:84)

At the time that Little wrote these words, novel expressions of ‘religious nationalism’ were manifesting themselves in, for example, former Yugoslavia, which were consequential to the end of the Cold War and the multifaceted impacts of globalisation. Now, more than 25 years later, what are the key factors behind today’s coalescing of right-wing populist nationalism and religion? To answer this question, we turn next to look at the USA during the Trump presidency. We turn to this issue because the Trump administration is an influential right-wing populist nationalist regime and its examination will help us understand more about similar political expressions elsewhere (Haynes, 2019).

**Populist nationalism and religion during the Trump presidency**

The political and electoral appeal of right-wing nationalism is burgeoning. Both ‘elites’ and culturally-different ‘foreigners’ are targeted by vote-hungry populist nationalist politicians. Brubaker (2017) argues that right-wing populist nationalists in the USA and Europe have a ‘Christian civilisationist’ worldview. This views ‘Islam’ as the main threat to the indigenous society’s ‘civilisational integrity’. The proposed remedy is to counter the perceived threat to national integrity by use of a novel ideology: ‘Christianism’, a self-conscious counterpoint to ‘Islamism’. Christianism is characterised by overt, often extreme, anti-Islamism. It can include apparently liberal views on issues of gender and sexuality. They are used to seek to distinguish ‘enlightened’, secularised European civilisation from allegedly regressive and repressive Islamic culture. This approach was adopted successfully by several prominent Dutch politicians, including the assassinated Pim Fortuyn, his ideological successor, Gert Wilders, and France’s former president Nicholas Sarkozy. According to Dehanas and Shterin (2018, 178), the ‘same dynamics of Christian civilizationism are mirrored in many cases throughout Europe and in the U.S.’

The recent rise and increasing political salience of right-wing nationalism is a global phenomenon, both manifested and exemplified by President Trump’s administration. That is, the Trump presidency both stimulates and encourages Trump ‘wannabes’ around the world, not only in Europe, such as Viktor Orbán in Hungary, but also elsewhere in the world, including: Narendra Modi in India, Brazil’s president, Jair Bolsonaro, and the prime minister of the UK, Boris Johnson (Whitehead, Perry and Baker, 2018). Ideological links between these leaders encourage claims of a developing ‘nationalist international’. However, the nomenclature ‘nationalist international’ is at first glance an oxymoron: it purports to identify a group of like-minded, values-based, nationalist politicians in the USA, Europe, India, Brazil and elsewhere, united by shared dislikes: of Islam, liberalism, globalism, multiculturalism and cosmopolitanism (Haynes, 2019: 61-62). Yet, it is hard to see this as more than a negative unifying solidarity – linked to shared hatred and fear of a generalised globalism and international cooperation– without an intellectual or practical blueprint to galvanise putative members of the ‘nationalist international’ into more concrete expressions of cooperation. It is an oxymoron because today’s nationalists are inward looking, anti-internationalism, and focused on America First, India First, Brazil First, and so on. These are hardly the characteristics of any international grouping which by definition must work to cooperate to achieve their goals. On the other hand, President Trump is held in high esteem by many populist nationalist leaders, including India’s Narendra Modi, Brazil’s Jair Bolsonaro and Andrej Duda of Poland. It is clear that Trump’s ideas about immigration and the necessity of keeping certain foreigners out has struck a chord. For example, Sebastian Kurz, Austria’s chancellor, has thought out loud about a ‘Berlin-Rome-Vienna’ axis to fight illegal immigration, and Richard Grenell, US ambassador to Germany between 2018-2020, has sought to encourage Trump-style populist nationalists in Germany and other European countries (Stewart, 2020).

In the USA, the Trump administration has closely linked populist nationalism with conservative Christian values and beliefs. Trump is electorally dependent on the combined political support of (secular) right-wing nationalists and conservative Christians – that is, the ‘Christian Right’. Trump’s electoral slogan - ‘Make America Great Again’ (MAGA) – found favour with both Christian and secular supporters. MAGA brought together both strands of Trump’s support in a yearning for the perceived halcyon days of a White conservative Christian America. The desire was to ‘return’ to a time when the ‘American dream’ seemed eminently realisable, buoyed by strong and persistent economic growth, continually rising prosperity and the triumph of get-up-and-go dynamism. MAGA also implied an extended fight against the allegedly corrupt administrative/bureaucratic system, that is, the ‘deep state’ aka ‘the swamp’. For the Christian Right, MAGA included a strong social and political influence for their preferred brand of Christianity: conservative, Protestant, and evangelical. In this worldview, women know their place both in the workplace and at home; ethnic, religious and racial minorities know their place in the social, political and economic order and should not try ‘too hard’ to improve their existential positions via ‘affirmative action’; and the USA is safe from both internal and external attack, including the baleful influence of ‘foreign’ ideas, especially Islamism and globalism. Finally, MAGA involved Trump in myriad, mostly unresolved, trade wars – with China, the European Union, Canada, Mexico, and Turkey. Trump’s justification was that the USA’s trading partners had swindled America for years in unequal trading relationships, while America haemorrhaged well-paid and skilled jobs abroad. According to Trump’s populist nationalist rhetoric, successive administrations, were run by incompetent or malicious chief executives, who willingly entered into multilateral agreements which ran counter to US interests, while limiting America’s ability for unilateral action and ruining the country’s economy. Overall, Trump’s electoral success in 2016 can be explained by his ability to attract sufficient votes from two main constituencies: secular white nationalists, attracted by Trump’s electoral promises: anti-globalism and making America ‘great again’, economically, politically and diplomatically, in accord with most of America’s conservative Christians (Haynes, 2020).

This is not to suggest that the political rise of Donald Trump came in isolation or was unique to America. Many other countries have also seen the rise of similar populist nationalists who employ religious and cultural arguments to try to achieve political power. What these countries share is the experience of 9/11. Its aftermath included a generalised suspicion of Islamist radicalism and terrorism seen as a severe security threat to Western countries. This was a key factor stimulating the widespread rise of populist nationalism in the USA and elsewhere

In conclusion, Donald Trump’s election in the November 2016 presidential election is representative of a wider development: geographically widespread rise of right-wing populist nationalism, which is anti-globalisation, anti-immigration, and anti-refugee. The type of political coalition that brought Trump to power – comprising conservative Christians and secular right-wing nationalists – was also highly political influential in several other Western countries, including: Italy, Hungary and Poland.

**The articles**

The remainder of the. special issue comprises five articles. First is John Rees’s ‘Populism and the Dynamics of Religious Nationalism’. His article identifies and examines conceptual linkages between populism and religion through the framework of nationalism. Rees applies these linkages to analyse selected contexts of right-wing populism in the West. To achieve this goal, Rees employs three sequential arguments. First, using the arguments of Anthony D. Smith, Rees argues that nationalism can be understood as a complex phenomenon into which religion can be specifically rather than generally situated. Second, Rees draws strong correlations between Michael Freeden’s examination of the ‘populist core’ and Smith’s concept of the ‘sacred properties of the nation’. Third, applying the work of Scott Hibbard, Rees argues that correlations between religion and populism are either exclusive or closed versions of religious nationalism, that is, ideological forms that can theoretically be countered by inclusive or open versions of religious nationalism. To illustrate his argument, Rees draws on empirical examples of what he calls ‘right-wing religio-populism’ – and religious voices which oppose such a view – from Britain, Europe, the United States and Australia.

In her article, ‘We the People: Interplay between Religious and Political Community’, Cesari also examines interactions between religion and populism. She argues that connections between religion and populism can be explained by the competition or intersection of the religious, national, community and the ‘people’. This does not imply, however, that followers of a dominant religion are necessary populist or that a religious community dominates the political community. Cesari argues that focusing on the collectivity which populist politicians claim to defend may facilitate identification of when and how religion is a significant feature of such movements, albeit without defining religion *a priori*. This examination sheds light on possible combinations between: the ‘people’, national belonging, religious belonging and behaviour. Overall, Cesari makes the case for a three-dimensional approach to understanding religion in populist nationalism (that is, behaving, belonging, believing).

Following Cesari, David T. Smith presents an article entitled: ‘The Christian Right in Australia and the United States: symbolic religious national identity and religious influence over right-wing politics’. Smith’s article examines the Christian Right in Australia and compares it with its ‘more powerful’ counterpart in the United States. Despite Australia’s greater degree of secularism, the country’s Christian Right had significant political influence in the early years of the 21st century. It was able to benefit from a symbolic nationalist identification of Australia as Christian to the exclusion of the Muslim other. But while in America, the Christian Right continues to enjoy much political clout during the Trump presidency, in Australia the political significance of the Christian Right significantly waned - even though exclusion of Muslims continues to play a key role in national politics. Smith’s paper shows how Australia’s culture wars of the early 21st century pushed conservative Christian actors into right-wing partisan coalitions that ultimately weakened them, while at the same time, as Australia continued to secularise, many Australians’ identification with Christianity diminished. Smith presents a key example – the 2017 legalisation of same-sex marriage following a popular vote – which effectively redefined the place of conservative Christianity in Australia. Overall, Smith’s article seeks to explain both within-country and between-country variance in the relationship between the symbolic and the substantive promotion of Christianity in right-wing nationalist politics.

After Smith’s focus on Australia, Sandal turns attention to Turkey.Her article – ‘Religious Populist Parties, Nationalisms, and Strategies of Competition: The Case of AK Party in Turkey’ – is a case study of religious populism and nationalism. Her article focuses on Turkey’s ruling party: *Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi* (Justice and Development Party – AK Party) and the leadership of Tayyip Erdoğan. She examines how Erdoğan and the AK party were able to achieve unparalleled political dominance in Turkey via its assiduous use of religious populism. She explains how the AK party was able politically to beat its rivals, including those with relatively conservative ideologies and understandings of nationalism. Sandal analyses how the AK Party, which she labels a ‘right-wing religious populist party’, was able to dominate Turkey’s political landscape in competition with other mainstream and conservative Turkish political actors and movements, and their respective nationalist ideologies: (a) the secular political establishment (including the Kemalist *Cumhuriyet Halk Partisi* [Republican People’s Party]), (b) the tradition(s) the AK party was originally part of: *Milli Görüş* Movement [National Outlook Movement]), (c) other popular religious movements seeking power (such as Gülen or Hizmet Movement), and finally (d) ultranationalist segments and parties (*Milliyetçi Hareket Partisi* [Nationalist Action Party]), each of which has their own interpretations of citizenship and nationalism. Overall, Sandall explores and contextualises the AK party’s four key strategies to achieve and keep power against these different rivals: ‘Outbidding’, ‘Replacement’, ‘Securitization’ and ‘Co-optation’.

The final article – ‘Digesting the “Other”: Hindutva, Religion and Nationalism in India’ - is by Giorgio Shani. He explains that in recent years, the ‘idea of India’ (Khilnani, 1997) as a ‘secular, sovereign, and democratic republic’ has been challenged by the rise of Hindu ‘nationalism’ as advocated by the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), the political wing of the *Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh* (RSS). The BJP is committed to the articulation of an explicitly Hindu nationalist discourse centred on *Hindutva* (‘Hindu-ness’). It represents a fusion of conservative right-wing nationalism and religion which has proved highly successful at the ballot box. However, the very concepts of ‘Hindu’ and ‘Hinduism’ upon which it relies are themselves colonial constructions; a legacy of nineteenth century colonialism and Orientalism. Shani identifies and explains the historical context of Hindu nationalism in India today. He identifies the partition of India into India and Pakistan in 1947 as a pivotal moment and event. Over time, the RSS was able to build a counter narrative to that of the ruling Indian National Congress (INC) to reimagine India as a *Hindu Rashtra* (state). In this state, Muslims occupy an ambiguous position as an ‘other’ to be either assimilated or excluded. The re-election of Prime Minister Narendra Modi and his authoritarian populist agenda in 2019 further marginalised the Muslim minority leading to fears that they may be ‘digested’ in a *Hindu Rashtra*, which makes religion the basis of citizenship.

**Conclusion**

The aim of this special issue is to explore links between religion, populism and nationalism both generally and within and between selected countries. The constituent articles indicate that these connections should be understood in the light both of historical and more recent developments. Put another way, we cannot hope to understand the political importance of leaders and parties who espouse political sentiments and goals based on religious, populist and nationalist appeals for votes without considering a variety of factors. Contributors to the special issue note the importance of events over the last few decades to help explain the political importance of populist nationalism in many parts of the world. The late 1980s and early 1990s were notable for three epochal developments: the end of the Cold War, the collapse of two multi-national communist entities (Soviet Union and Yugoslavia), and the intensifying impact of ‘globalisation’, an array of multifaceted cross-border interactions (Haynes, 2005). As we have already noted, post-Cold war globalisation is profoundly important for explaining the rise of populist nationalists and their appeal for votes based on religious and cultural issues. Post-Cold War globalisation fundamentally affects state autonomy and associated governmental ability to rule according to national preferences alone, as well as governmental capacity to deliver preferred political, economic, social and cultural outcomes (Haynes, 2005).

It was once widely thought that globalisation was an uncontrollable force, a *tsunami* that sweeps all before it, effectively rendering powerless governments, societies, communities and individuals. It is now clear however that globalisation interacts with local contexts, histories and outcomes, leading to what the sociologist, Roland Robertson (1994), calls ‘glocalisation’. Glocalisation refers to ‘the simultaneity – the co-presence – of both universalizing and particularizing tendencies in contemporary social, political, and economic systems’. It ‘represents a challenge to simplistic conceptions of globalization processes as linear expansions of territorial scales’, reflecting how the ‘growing importance of continental and global levels is occurring together with the increasing salience of local and regional levels’ (,). In other words, globalisation interacts with local factors and actors to produce glocalisation, characterised by ‘the growth of local and regional identities and loyalties’ (Richardson, 2012).

How does glocalisation inform our undemanding of the current widespread political prominence of populist nationalism? Samuel Huntington’s ‘clash of civilisations’ paradigm expressed the view that after the Cold War, increasing international conflict was highly likely, especially at the fault lines between cultures and civilisations. Contrary to Huntington’s (1993, 1996) expectations, however, recent years have seen civilisational frictions and conflicts mainly *within* countries, as a result of the coming together of global and local issues: glocalisation. For example, the defining issue in both the USA and many European countries is the (to many people unwelcome) prospect of large-scale and continuous foreign emigration, especially from contiguous countries and regions. For the USA, this is Mexico and Central America, while for Europe it is Muslims from the Middle East and North and sub-Saharan Africa.

Immigration concerns are central in many explanations of the recent rise of populist nationalism in both the United States and many European countries, fuelled by both internal and external factors (Harrell, Soyoka, and Iyengar, 2017). In the USA, pre-exiting concerns about emigration from the country’s southern border were augmented after 9/11 by fears of Islamist extremism and terrorism. For some Americans, it is the ‘enemy within’, that is the USA’s three million Muslim residents, who pose a significant security threat which, allied with concerns about foreign Islamist terrorism, encourages a belief that Islam is ‘anti-American’. In relation both to the USA and Europe, the fear is that large-scale or – worse – ‘uncontrolled’ emigration would lead to irreversible undermining of established cultures, while encouraging the risk of terrorist outrages. Some European countries have a pronounced fear of ‘flooding’ of other cultures, especially from ‘waves’ of Muslim emigrants from the Middle East and North Africa. Such concerns coalesce into an extensive European fear of malign Muslim migration, which would bring, many Europeans fear, increased Islamist extremism and terrorism. This is glocalisation in action: pervasive fears of widespread, destabilising, globally-orientated Islamist terrorism interacting with local perceptions of desecuritising and economically-undermining concerns of local effects of widespread Muslim emigration. However, while such developments are useful in explaining the rise of populist nationalism in the USA, Australia and many European countries, it does not help much to explain their political potency in some non-Western countries, such as Turkey and India. In the latter, concern with Islamist extremism and terrorism dovetails neatly with the goals of *Hindutva*: to make India great again by lionising Hindu gods and culture. It is this which enables us to understand the current vilification of Muslims by the Modi government and its Hindu nationalist supporters. In Turkey, there is a different set of factors at work: clearly anti-Islam cannot be a potent rallying cry of populist nationalists in Turkey, a country which has a Muslim-majority population. Instead, the long-term political appeal of the AK party is based on a canny mix of religion, nationalism and populism, employed by President Erdoğan to his political benefit and to the vexation of his challengers.

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1. The constituent articles of this special issue are all concerned with what I refer to as “right-wing nationalism”. It is a political ideology which combines right-wing politics with conservative views about the nation and which citizens are thought of as nationals of a particular country. References to “nationalism” in the introductory article and in the special issue more generally imply “right-wing” rather than “left-wing” nationalism, which has its own particular characteristics (See Weyland, 2013) [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. In this article, I refer to ‘populist nationalists’. Populist nationalism is a political ideology combining right-wing nationalist politics and populist rhetoric and themes. Rhetorically, it typically comprises anti-elitist sentiments, opposition to the perceived Establishment, speaking to and for the ‘common people’, and a pronounced dislike of ‘foreigners’, especially Muslims (Mudde, 2007; Weyland, 2013; Ekström, Patrona and Thornborrow, 2018). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)