3 Practicing the right to indifference

Secularism, toleration, and Islamophobia in Indian and American national subjectivities

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In December 2017, President Donald Trump retweeted videos posted by the British white nationalist group Britain First. Widely discredited, the videos supposedly portrayed Muslims in the United Kingdom committing crimes against other Britons. His unrepentant action led Prime Minister May to tweet an admonishment of the American president that was unprecedented in the past century. Trump's retweet represents but one small expression of the populist nativism that helped win him the highest office in the nation ("Trump Hits Out" 2017).

Meanwhile, for more than four years since his election to office, Prime Minister Narendra Modi kept a studied silence in the face of myriad assaults against – and even murder of – Muslims in locations throughout India. The religious chauvinism that his political party, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), and its mother organization, the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), have carefully cultivated over many decades helped propel him to power and – until his public condemnation in January 2019 of violence in the name of cow protection – he appeared prepared to silently condone discrimination in his effort to remain there.

India and the United States: two nations bound by the history of the British Empire and defined, in part, by ideals of secularism and tolerance. Yet each nation currently struggles with endemic Islamophobia and anti-Muslim sentiment that takes different expressions. Arguably, forms of discrimination have emerged in response not only to historically varying social circumstances but also to the distinctive nature of secularism, pluralism, and toleration in each country.

Drawing on the work of scholars of secularism, this chapter examines how current American and Indian nation-states seek to craft a normative nationalist subjectivity that, in principle, defines itself in part through principles of toleration yet, at times, facilitates intolerance toward Muslims and suspicion toward Islamic traditions. These notions of toleration often rely on a strategy by which many nations understand themselves, which balances the projection of a national ideal based on universal principles and the proclamation of a particularism defining the nation's citizens as collectively unique. Establishing a shared history, defining bodies of belonging, and positing certain shared values and practices all serve in the endeavor to imagine the exemplary national subject, as well as to define those who do not share their subjectivity. Although the derisiveness of discrimination appears inherent to nationalism, the assertion of a "right to indifference" from the state and fellow citizens may offer an avenue by which minority groups like

Muslims can escape the stereotypes used to justify their marginalization and side-step principles of toleration that often work against them.

Imagining nationalist universalisms and particularisms

Mayanthi Fernando, the late Saba Mahmood, and other scholars have recently outlined the dual, complementary sides of modern nationalisms. On the one side of the nationalist coin, any particular nationalism generates a set of universal ideals by which it defines the nation. This promotes the nation as exemplary in its expression and/or protection of these ideals. As Fernando points out in regard to France, this idealization centers on *Liberté, égalité, fraternité* (“liberty, egalitarianism, fraternity”). Officially instantiated as the national motto, these terms offer a touchstone for national self-definition or, put another way, as a center counteracting the centrifugal forces of national discord found in varying degrees in practically every nation. Popular sentiment – supported and promoted by the state – holds these as universally applicable ideals (Fernando 2014: 51).

Instances of such state promotion of universal ideals for formulating the Indian nation can readily be found on the government of India’s National Portal of India. Through this extensive website, the central government apparently intends to provide both Indians and foreigners information about a breadth of subjects regarding the nation. Readily accessed from the homepage, the “Community” section features subheadings with information for specific demographic groups such as “businesspersons,” “sportsperson,” “women,” and “Non-Resident Indians” [*sic*]. In contrast with this recognition of social division, an image of three white-clad men is prominently positioned in the top center of this page. Arms flung ecstatically wide, they look gleefully at one another in a seemingly shared celebration. Although the *pagari* (turban), skull cap, and *bindu* (forehead mark) each dons, respectively, identifies them as Sikh, Muslim, and Hindu, each also has the national colors of green and saffron adorning his face. Thus, on a web page inviting Indian users to pursue information pertinent to their specific demographics, an image of Indians sharing a universal and joyful *bhai-bhai* (“brotherhood”) promises to ameliorate the religious communal divides responsible for some of the country’s worst public violence since its independence from British rule in 1947. As though resisting any counterpoint to this assertion of unity – and despite a link for “Scheduled Tribes/Schedule Caste” [*sic*] that touches on a web of major social fault lines – the “Community” page’s subheadings suggest no information regarding religious groups except for one titled “minority community.” Few of the links cited in this subheading explicitly reference religious groups (National Portal of India 2020b).

On the other side of the nationalist coin, most nationalisms also create a set of *particular* characteristics that differentiate its citizens from those of all other nations. After all, a nation defined by universal ideals alone could potentially include all humanity. In the case of many French, they define themselves as different from Britons and Moroccans, among others, based on a historical narrative in which the French language, a Catholic heritage, white racial identity, and the significance of certain historical events coalesce into a vital national character.

Hence, the national subjectivity thereby fashioned can have linguistic, moral, embodied, and mnemonic dimensions (Fernando 2014: 18–19).

The National Portal of India manifests this quality as well. For instance, following the “Know India” link from the homepage and clicking on the “My India My Pride” subheading leads the user to a page declaring that “India is one of the oldest civilizations in the world, spanning a period of more than 4000 years, and witnessing the fusion of several customs and traditions, which are reflective of the rich culture and heritage of the Country” [*sic*]. The text then describes the economic success of India following an era of “colonialism” by noting “more than anything, the nationalistic fervour of the people is the contributing force behind the culmination of such a development” (“My India, My Pride” 2020c). This projects a profile of Indians as sharing a remarkably ancient civilization that has cultivated a certain *mélange* of cultures over the course of its history. The page on the National Portal that describes India’s ancient history makes a more deliberate claim. “The history of India is punctuated by constant integration of migrating people with the diverse cultures that surround India” (National Portal of India 2020a). This metanarrative establishes a continuity created by an enduring Indian civilization that absorbs and makes arriving cultures part of itself, foregoing any sense of a more disruptive process of intercultural encounter. The conclusion for the page “People & Lifestyle” sums up the particularism implied in these narrations: “The beauty of the Indian people lies in their spirit of tolerance, give-and-take and a composition of cultures that can be compared to a garden of flowers of various colours and shades of which, while maintaining their own entity, lend harmony and beauty to the garden – India!” (“People & Lifestyle” 2020). These lines emphasize the particular qualities of tolerance and pluralism as defining “the Indian people” who cumulatively comprise “India”: a theme developed by certain early pre-independence nationalist leaders such as Mohandas Gandhi.

In contrast with the official National Portal of India, the webpages of the US government’s USA.gov website – which provide a parallel introduction to the demographic and historical qualities of the country’s citizens – offer no such direct statements of national qualities yet nevertheless lead the user to intuit certain universalisms and particularities. For instance, although the “American History” section of the “U.S. History and Historical Documents” page eschews any overarching narrative, the list of nineteen significant events it provides offers a trajectory in which voting rights are more equally applied and Black Americans increasingly overcome racist obstacles. The history of the nation’s people, this implies, is defined, in part, by universal values (albeit, not uniformly realized) of democracy and equality. Simultaneously, this selection of events suggests a particularity as well. It indicates that Americans have increasingly realized these values through a redemptive teleology of successful struggle and political progress beginning with the American Revolution and ending with “the first African American to be elected president” of the country. Meanwhile, other particular qualities of Americans can be assumed from considering the two other themes – technology and war – that thread throughout the unconnected events listed on the “American History” page (US.gov, n.d.). Specific events describing the Industrial Revolution, the Wright Flyer’s milestone, the use of atomic weaponry,

and the Apollo 11 moon landing all emphasize a people seemingly successful in the development of technology. In 2017, the timeline began with the American War of Independence and ended with the operation that killed Osama bin Laden, depicting a people frequently involved in war, usually overseas, and not always successfully. By 2018, the timeline had been altered to omit the bin Laden assassination and end instead with the Obama electoral victory, demonstrating how the federal government carefully cultivates a national subjectivity (US.gov, n.d.).¹

The respective governments of India and the United States use official digital platforms to project an image of Indians and Americans that cannot be confused with that of Pakistanis, Bangladeshis, and Nepalis, or Canadians, Mexicans, and Cubans. Through the mutually reinforcing combination of universalisms and particularisms, the nation emerges as distinct and distinctive from its neighbors. Notably, neither government promotes religion as a prominent quality of the nation or its people. This silence loudly demonstrates the centrality of specific forms of secularism in Indian and American state imaginaries of their nations. These secularisms – operating within the rubric of “toleration” – allow both for the embrace of certain religious identities as part of a national subjectivity and for the exclusion of others as incompatible.

Toleration and religious liberty

An independent United States and India developed particular secularist ideologies, structures, and sentiments out of their earlier experiences as British America and British India. These secularities fostered state-developed understandings of religion that, in turn, molded acceptable forms of religion that “deserved” tolerance and liberty. They also helped establish the category of “religious minority” and created religious norms in defiance of which certain groups would appear to be threats to the secular order. These groups might not only be excluded from certain formulations of a nationalist subjectivity, they might also be used to negatively define that subjectivity.

Toleration, as a European concept, emerged as a result of the chaotic centuries following the Protestant Reformation as states with differing politically established churches convulsed the continent with myriad wars. Simultaneously, these states internally struggled with minorities – mostly Christian – who dissented from membership in the established churches. For instance, already strident Church of England distrust toward Catholics quickened with the 1605 Guy Fawkes’ conspiracy to blow up Parliament. Later, Enlightenment thinkers such as Voltaire and Thomas Jefferson speculated on how to best maintain social stability given the potential for riotous religious provocations. When he wrote *A Letter Concerning Toleration* in 1689, John Locke drew on the painful national memory of England’s seesaw travails with established churches as Queen Mary prosecuted Church of England dissenters of the Roman Catholic Church and her successor Elizabeth replied in kind toward Catholics. Meanwhile, other dissenters – Presbyterians, Baptists, Quakers – also suffered occasional oppression. Indeed, Locke wrote his *Letter* while in exile during the rule of the Catholic James II. Hence, Locke advanced “toleration” as a key concept (McKinnon 2006: 7–8).

In the British colonies of North America, this concept had particular resonance. While the original thirteen British colonies diverged from one another in regard to which church establishments they created (if any), they also differed in their religious demographics. For much of their pre-independence history (1607–1775), Puritans firmly controlled colonial Massachusetts, Quakers ruled Pennsylvania, and dissenters of all sorts made Rhode Island their home. But in all, substantial Christian minorities existed as well, and how they should be treated, what should be their tax burden, and whether they could hold public office proved nettlesome issues. Of course, all these colonies also had populations of Jews, non-Christian Native Americans, and recently enslaved Africans, but these featured little in the discourse on tolerance, which focused at first only on Christians. Indeed, even Catholics seemed beyond the pale of consideration in the eyes of most Anglicans and Protestants who often refused them consideration as “Christians.”

During the eighteenth century, a variety of social and religious changes occurred that moved increasing numbers of Anglo-American colonists away from mere toleration of Christian dissenters to, ultimately, an ideal of religious liberty for all. As ideals of individualism grew – especially influenced by Calvinist theological commitments to self-determined belief – a notion arose that all individuals had the “right of private judgment.” This divinely granted right meant that no Christian should be punished for the dictates of their own conscience in terms of their choice of belief and practice. Hence, dissenters from established churches should not be merely tolerated without punishments meted out by a disapproving state, but they should be respected for a choice that was rightful. Ultimately, this led to decreasing social acceptance for the public disparagement of specific Christian denominations. In the century before, condemnatory sermons and tracts commonly emerged from church pulpits and printing presses that targeted rival churches and condemned their divergent views. In a growing consensus about civility in public life, mid-eighteenth-century colonists embraced an acceptance of diversity beyond tolerance (Beneke 2006: 80–87).

All these dynamics coalesced most materially in the crucible of the American Revolutionary War. As men left farms and furnaces, law offices, and dockyards to take arms together against the British Empire, and as women bore the added burden of caring alone for those fields, businesses, and families the men left behind, the perceived differences dwindled along with the willingness to disparage. Even Catholics found acceptance during this period. The perceived right of private judgment and freedom from public slander eventually gave way to religious liberty, as colonial elites like Jefferson, Benjamin Franklin, and James Madison developed first the ideological justification for rebellion against King George III and, then, the constitutional guidelines for establishing a new, democratic government. Increasingly, Americans abandoned toleration as inherently intolerant since it signified a religious superiority that was growing unpopular. The first article of the Constitution’s Bill of Rights made any church establishment illegal and protected the free exercise of religion from legal restriction, while the Sixth Article guaranteed that no religious test could disqualify a candidate from public office (Beneke 2006: 136–137, 153–154, 167, 175). While toleration suggested an impermanent condition of forbearance that the state could withdraw,

American notions of natural rights made religious liberty inalienable to each citizen. Although Catholics as well as other non-Christians such as Jews and Indians still faced discrimination in many of the new states, the foundation of religious liberty had been established and gradually was exercised more firmly and equally (although not fully, even as of yet).

These developments simultaneously helped construct an ideal, nationalist subjectivity defined not only by white bodies, “Christian” values, and a shared British heritage but also by a certain *practice* of religion defined by Anglo secular and Protestant standards. To wit, as Talal Asad (2004: 190–191) has repeatedly demonstrated, secularist ideals such as those instantiated in the US Constitution were as much a product of the Protestant Reformation as Protestant sensibilities were shaped by secularism. In other words, the popular American subjectivity that emerged as a result of the revolution modeled certain religious and non-religious practices in public life that may have hewed to the notion of toleration yet, nevertheless, could lead to intolerance.

Like those of British colonial rule in America, the centuries of British imperial rule of India saw changes in how the state managed religious diversity. With its ascendance to political and judicial power in Bengal following the Battle of Buxar in 1764, the East India Company sought to emulate as many Mughal policies and laws as possible. Until English Evangelicals complained long and loud enough, this included continuing previous Mughal patterns of state patronage for Hindu, Muslim, and other religious groups’ institutions such as temples, mosques, and *dargahs* (Sufi tombs). Meanwhile, although chartered by the English crown – which also served as nominal head of the established Church of England – the company forbade missionaries from entering India until, again, Evangelicals forced the issue using political pressure in the 1830s (Carson 2012: 3–4). However, even with the termination of company patronage to religious institutions and its admittance of missionaries, Company Raj can no more be considered to have promoted an established church than the British Indian Raj that succeeded it. The governmental attitude toward religious diversity in either period had no name but was inherently governed by a tendency to avoid inviting antagonism to British rule that might imperil profits.

However, in the nineteenth century, as Indian elites began to mobilize for resistance to foreign rule and to organize for self-governance of a self-determined democracy, they first had to imagine their nation and promote a nationalist subjectivity uncongenial to overseas control. Of course, they did not do so *ex nihilo* but rather drew on both indigenous and British concepts to realize a nation and a model national subjectivity. Because Britons had since their earliest years of rule defined Indians as instinctively religious and, thus, as inherently divided – particularly between Hindus and Muslims – their imaginary was defined by religious diversity. The earliest of British knowledge projects attempting to understand the human contours of the lands they had recently acquired made religious identity one of the salient categories of interrogation, viewing “Hindu” and “Muslim” as mutually exclusive species of Indian who, for reasons explored later, were also inherently antagonistic to one another. Despite myriad changes in British Indian rule, these sentiments endured throughout most of its nearly

two centuries. Only at its end, when the furies of communalism threatened to consume South Asia, did the government desist in emphasizing religious difference, even as their censuses and other empirical studies continued to collect data on religious demographics (see Gottschalk 2012). Meanwhile, Western-educated Indian elites considered European models of democracy and secularism as they slowly attained more opportunities for self-rule and gathered increasing support for self-determination.

As C. S. Adcock has described, the nationalist movements of the early twentieth century projected two models for managing India's religious diversity in terms of secularism. While Jawaharlal Nehru proposed a Western model, Gandhi promoted what he viewed as an indigenous tradition of tolerance based on respect for all religions. Gandhi gave voice to his model during the 1920s' debate regarding the Shuddhi Campaign of the Arya Samaj that he described as an effort to convert Muslims to Hinduism. He judged proselytization as manifestly intolerant because of the presumption of religious superiority apparently motivating it. The Indian National Congress report on the 1931 eruption of Hindu-Muslim violence in Kanpur demonstrated how persuasive Gandhi's views were with its portrayal of both the "ancient" (Hindu) and "Mughul" (Muslim) periods as characterized by religious toleration and political balance. The report held the Arya Samaj's *shuddhi* ("purification") endeavours as ultimately responsible for the current conflict. But, as Adcock shows so thoroughly, these conclusions helped deflect attention from the Congress's own Hindu-oriented strategies and their alienating impact on Muslims while promoting Congress as successfully secular because of its tolerance ideal (Adcock 2014: 6–13).

Instead, Adcock insists, *shuddhi* involved caste identity far more than religious identity, while Congress's emphasis on religion helped reaffirm that – and not caste – as the principle quality among Indians. Gandhi wrestled with B. R. Ambedkar in part to assure that those viewed as low castes remained in the fold of "Hinduism" (Adcock 2014: 13–15) at a time when he and most of the Congress leadership relied on Hindu themes, symbols, and motifs to help build and attract that largest Indian constituency possible: Hindus. "Tolerance," therefore, became yet another of these Hindu characteristics. However, as in colonial America, "tolerance" required a state or (as in this case) a majority who demonstrated forbearance and a minority that required it due to their dissent from joining or mirroring the majority. In colonial America as in Europe earlier, toleration provided protection for minorities from state persecution. However, despite the endeavors of British and Hindu nationalist historians, few examples can be found in South Asia of premodern states – Muslim-led or otherwise – religiously persecuting significant populations. In this situation, then, Gandhi's promotion of "tolerance" as a Hindu trait that should be demonstrated in the political moment provided yet another example of how Congress portrayed Hindus and their supposed traditions as peaceful, accepting, and absorptive of invaders. This formulation required an x-factor. If the need for tolerance was predicated on the threat of intolerance and if tolerance was an essential Indic quality, then those requiring tolerance perforce were non-Indians who represented a threat. In other words, despite differences in their messaging and declared attitudes toward Muslims,

leaders of the Indian National Congress and of Hindu nationalist organizations like the Arya Samaj and Hindu Mahasabha formulated a normative nationalist subjectivity using “Indian qualities” that they most associated with Hindus.

Indian Islamophobia and anti-Muslim sentiment

Since India entered its first phase of nationalist self-imagination in the nineteenth century, there have been some Indians who have similarly sought to negatively define the nation relative to Muslims. Although we should not discount the possibility that some pre-independence Indians had interpreted certain social tensions as caused by differences between Hindus and Muslims, neither can we discount the impact of British Islamophobia and anti-Muslim sentiment on Indian attitudes.

From the start of their rule, the British relied on a metanarrative of Muslim invasion and Hindu subjugation that derived from European medieval encounters with Muslims. Throughout this story ran a theme of Islamic persecution and Hindu victimhood that had not existed in any pervasive manner in South Asia before the eighteenth century. Although Indian nationalists today project a very different history, Muslim sovereigns who might have had an interest in oppressing non-Muslim subjects usually faced considerable social and financial risk in doing so, as the Mughal emperor Aurangzeb discovered when protest derailed his 1679 effort to impose the *jizya* tax (Faruqui 2009: 41).

Nevertheless, British-written historiography often took Hindu–Muslim antipathy as foundational to South Asian society and politics. This narrative simply transposed long-standing European stories of Muslim incursions into the Christian Holy Land (today’s Palestine/Israel) in the seventh century and Europe (through Iberia and Byzantium) in the eighth to fifteenth centuries, drawing on similar themes of an essentially malicious “Islam”-driving fanatic heathens. In early modern publications, Christian Europeans continued medieval themes of a sex-crazed, material-mad Muhammad who acted as a prophet “imposter” to satisfy his desires. Alternatively, medieval and early modern authors viewed him as a Christian heretic, driven to split the church for his own benefit. Yet others considered him working in league with Satan.

As the subject of such extreme views of a normative threat to Christian European social and theological orders, Muslims became the obvious choice as foils for negatively defining those orders. The Britons serving in both company and, then, British Indian rule brought with them sentiments shaped by centuries of anti-Muslim animus. While published – and often fantastic – portrayals of the Ottoman sultans’ “debauchery” and “despotism” may have served as the most frequent foil for British morality and good governance in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, many Britons in India encountered Muslims face-to-face. The books, essays, and sermons written by some of them proved popularly influential not only among Britons and other Europeans but among many Indians as well. For some, however, their personal interactions challenged the presuppositions with which they had begun their Indian service.

Given the lessons of the British-informed historiography that coalesced in the nineteenth century regarding “Muslim invasions” and “forced conversions,”

Muslims could not but appear as foreign, intolerant, and ideologically non-Indic to many Western-educated Hindu elites. The “tolerance” theme of Gandhi – and the Arya Samaj – played into and reinforced this portrayal of Islam by bifurcating religions into those that proselytized and those that did not. According to the Samaj’s argument, the former demonstrated intolerance because of their presumed superiority while the latter reflected an acceptance of others. In the faulty logic of stereotypes, what was supposedly true of “Islam” was true of all Muslims, who necessarily could be viewed as condescending, intolerant, and, therefore, antagonistic. Hence, British and Hindu historians of the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries often portrayed the incursions of Western and Central Asians into South Asia as “Muslim invasions” with “Islam” as a motivating ideology that led to temple despoilment, monastery sacking, and forced conversion. Despite his close associations and even alliances with Muslims in his South African and Indian campaigns, Gandhi’s (1983: 398) autobiography often rehearses the theme of implacable Hindu–Muslim conflicts common to British accounts.

The demands of the Muslim League (led by the alienated former Congress leader Muhammad Ali Jinnah), its Direct Action campaign, and the horrors of partition provided more proof for many post-independence Hindu chauvinists regarding Muslim difference and intolerance. It is true that the assassination of Gandhi by former members of the RSS led to a deep unpopularity of this, one of the foremost Hindu nationalist organizations in pre-independence India. However, persistent antagonisms with Pakistan helped to maintain certain Islamophobic and anti-Muslim sentiments until the RSS rehabilitated itself and began its slow ascent to national prominence and political dominance beginning in the 1980s. Members of the RSS and its offshoots in the Sangh Parivar (“the family of organizations” branching out of the RSS) also targeted Indian Christians. They often repeated the complaints made by Arya Samajis a century earlier regarding “Western” missionaries of intolerant religions seeking to foist their supremacy on Hindus by denigrating them before converting them.

The Constitution of India – finalized in 1949 and promulgated the next year – guaranteed that “all persons are equally entitled to freedom of conscience and the right freely to profess, practice and propagate religion” (Parthasarathy 2015: 100). This positive freedom is complemented by a constraint established in Sections 153A and 295A of the Indian Penal Code that proscribe, respectively, “promoting enmity between different groups on grounds of religion, race, place of birth, residence, language, etc.” and “deliberate and malicious acts intended to outrage religious feelings of any class by insulting its religion or religious beliefs.” Today, Sangh Parivar members attempt to outlaw proselytization to “protect” Hindus and Hinduism (which they portray as an “Indian religion”) from predatory “foreign” Muslims and Christians.

American Islamophobia and anti-Muslim sentiment

For centuries, Muslims and Islamic traditions have represented foils by which Americans periodically have defined their nation, values, religions, and citizens. Although instances of Islamophilia and Orientalist romanticism have

occasionally appeared, since at least the revolutionary era Muslims have played a similar, occasional role in non-Muslim American² imaginations as they did in early modern British ones. British publications found eager readers in the colonies and then the new republic. Intellectual and political elites such as John Adams, John Quincy Adams, and Benjamin Franklin all negatively referenced Muhammad or Muslims in their public writing, clearly anticipating their readers to understand their references (see Spellman 2014).

During the debates in constitutional conventions for the individual states, as well as the one for the new nation, political statements favoring religious liberty often mentioned Muslims as foils for debates on religious tests. For instance, Jefferson (1853: 45) recounted in his *Autobiography* that as the Virginia legislature debated how to formulate their state constitution “a great majority” “meant to comprehend, within the mantle of its protection, the Jew and the Gentile, the Christian and Mahometan.” Meanwhile, in 1776, Jefferson’s fellow Virginia statesman Richard Henry Lee said, “True freedom embraces the Mahomitan and the Gentoo as well as the Christian religion” (Madison 1985: 65). However, these statements evidence less an inclusive respect than a reiteration of Muslims as foils. Lee was not any more likely to anticipate that “Gentooes” (a contemporary term for “Hindus”) lived in North America than he was that Muslims did. Muslims had for so long served as foils to European and Christian values that they could serve as markers of absolute alterity. Jefferson and Lee could just as readily have said, “We intend our laws to protect *even* Muslims.” Even if only intended to include hypothetical Muslims, however, the inclusive intent is clear since few of the republic’s founders likely recognized that Muslims lived among them.

American antipathy toward Muslims was not improved with the first international war that their new republic fought. The new century soon brought conflict as President John Adams refused to pay tribute to a group of states on Africa’s Mediterranean coast. The “Barbary pirates” earned the ire of many Americans as they took hostage for ransom fellow citizens widely described in the popular press as “Christian men and women.” Although other Berbers allied with American forces and helped win some of the eventual US victories, the nation’s enemies were popularly denigrated using stereotypes of them as “Ottoman,” “infidels,” and “Muhammedans.” In later antagonistic moments between Americans and those who happen to be Muslim, many of these stereotypes have resurfaced to service new diatribes against “Arabs,” “Turks,” and other putative Muslims (see Allison 2000). By no means did these stereotypes remain the same, and by the middle of the century onward, racial inflections meant that some of the stereotypes relied less on Islamophobic than anti-Muslim sentiment as they focused less on a fear of the religion, *per se*, and more on the denigration of Muslims as a perceived race and/or ethnicity.

The demise of the Soviet Union as a Cold War nemesis and the somewhat coincidental ascent of insurgent groups utilizing violent Islamic ideologies has meant a more public resuscitation of Islamophobic and anti-Muslim sentiment than seen before 1979. In that year, Iranian students seized American embassy staff during a revolution in which Shia leaders played a prominent (but not sole) role. “Political Islam” had purportedly toppled one of the United States’ most steadfast

allies in Central Asia: one who served as a bulwark against “Soviet expansion.” Although the United States also supported the *mujahidin* against the Soviets in Afghanistan and had partnered with the Wahhabi-legitimated Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, the inability to co-opt many Islamists stoked anew American fears of Islamic traditions. Meanwhile, less than two decades earlier changes in immigration and naturalization law – culminating in the Immigration and Nationality Act (or Hart-Celler Act) of 1965 – allowed for the first time non-whites to migrate and become citizens without restriction. As the Cold War gave way to the War on Terror and as a new wave of nativism currently sweeps the country, various Islamophobic provocateurs, many Republican politicians, and some members of law enforcement have viewed the rising numbers of Muslim Americans (most of them non-white, some of them foreign-born) as potentially threatening, leading to surveillance, detention, deportation, and harassment. For many of these public actors, the demands of national security apparently have outweighed the rights of religious liberty.

Implicitly, Americans supportive of these developments have questioned the suitability of Muslims to fit the normative American nationalist subjectivity they presume to inhabit. Allegations of Islamic “intolerance” and “fanaticism” connote the suspicions cultivated over centuries that Muslims cannot be true Americans because their religious traditions interfere in the practice of secularity. Not without reason have physical markers of Muslim “difference” – such as hijabs and mosques – come under attack (literally and figuratively) with crimes justified, paradoxically, in the name of protecting a tolerant society.

The right to indifference

Given the intersections of nationalism, secularism, and pluralism, it becomes clear that the struggles against Islamophobia and anti-Muslim sentiment and for religious liberty in twenty-first-century India and the United States rely on an awareness of the history that shaped conclusions that Muslims and Islamic traditions represent an imminent threat to the nation. Today, significant populist-nationalist ideologies attempt to harness enduring yet variable Islamophobia and anti-Muslim sentiment through a divergence of approaches that reflect the varied struggles each nation has faced in fulfilling its own ideals of pluralism, toleration, and secularism. But neither Prime Minister Modi nor President Trump, nor their supporters, represent a new phenomenon with regard to intolerance and threats to religious liberty.

To properly counter the chauvinistic movements each represents, it will not be enough to simply address the ideas informing their views but also the liberal, nationalist, and secularist structures that have helped give rise to them. As one political commentator has argued, because liberal democracies value diversity and complexity they create a threat to the norms by which nations understand themselves. After all, despite the universal ideals their nations supposedly represent, nationalists also define themselves according to a set of particularities. Those within the country or attempting to enter who do not share these qualities threaten the norm and, thus, the oneness of the nation (Edsall 2017). Since their

inceptions, India and the United States have simultaneously celebrated their integration of immigrants and harbored ideas and sentiments that created “foreign” Muslims as a normative threat usefully employed as a foil to elaborate and justify the nation’s imagined values.

Meanwhile, in various Muslim-minority countries, the projected history of Muslims and the nation inflected through the ideology of “toleration” suggests that the state and/or populace accede to a Muslim presence only conditionally, perpetually maintaining the right or ability to no longer tolerate Muslims should they prove intolerable. As New England Protestants realized in the antebellum period, toleration does not necessarily imply belonging.

One approach toward undermining this notion of toleration and religiously chauvinistic definitions of national belonging might be to embrace “the right to indifference.” Coined in the 1970s by French civil rights groups such as S.O.S. Racisme, *droit à la différence* promotes not simply a right to be different but also a right (or at least the respect) to have difference viewed by the state and/or citizens without interest or concern. Initially used in support of French persons with immigrant heritage, the right to indifference was later used by French gay communities to capitalize on the repeal of homophobic legislation and assert a place in society neutral in the eyes of their neighbours (Gunther 1999: 329).

In the United States, Muslims have asserted a right to indifference in various ways without calling it such. They – and other Americans – have urged government and law enforcement to focus surveillance on perpetrators of civil violence instead of on Muslim communities. Legal endeavours to protect certain Muslim immigrants from the Trump administration’s strictures against them also asserts a demand to be treated without distinction because of their religious identity. Ideally, American secularism protects both against state restrictions on anyone’s religious exercise, as declared in the First Amendment, and against a religious test for public office holders, as established in Article Six. Yet not only is no right perfectly observed in all instances, but popular practice also erodes these strictures. For instance, candidates for political office so commonly declare their religious identities (if they have them) that not doing so might compromise their candidacy.

In contrast with the American context, Indian secularism proves more complicated. As the differences between the two national government’s websites demonstrated at this chapter’s start, Indians often assert secularism through the celebration of difference among specifically named religious groups while American secularism abstractly promotes the pretence of equality among unnamed religions. The American state ideally practices a religious know-nothing attitude as reflected in the fact that its decennial census has never asked citizens to declare their religious identity. In contrast, the Indian state has continued the practice that the British inaugurated with their first all-Indian census in 1871–1872 of asking every citizen to declare their religious identity (Gottschalk 2012: 182–224). Hence, the National Portal of India (2020d) reports that 13.4 percent of the population are Muslims while the US website offers no such statistic. Meanwhile, Indian constitutional protections for the use of Muslim personal law instead of civil law, for instance, requires that the state both recognizes Muslim difference

and protect Muslim rights that differ from those of their Hindu, Christian, and Sikh fellow citizens.

Reformulating Indian and American national subjectivities so that the practice of indifference toward Muslim identity would mean that Muslim Indians and Muslim Americans would enjoy the condition in which neither their fellow citizens nor the national state see them first as Muslims or view their primary allegiance as to “Islam.” Only when their neighbors and governments practice indifference and not “toleration” toward Muslim identities and belonging will pluralism be self-determined instead of majoritarian- and state-established.

Notes

- 1 The line removed from the website between December 2017 and August 2018 read “Operation Neptune Spear is carried out on May 2, 2011 resulting in the death of long-time al-Qaeda leader Osama bin Laden.”
- 2 While recognizing the challenge of determining exact figures, Sylvia Diouf (2013: 70) concludes “that there were hundreds of thousands of Muslims in the Americas” in the colonial period because of the enslavement of Africans and traces their few traditions that appeared to have survived their brutal conditions.

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