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Scapegoated Muslims: How Christian and Hindu Nationalists Racialize Religious Minorities

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Introduction:

Nationalism permeates almost every aspect of life while living in the nation-states of today. The act of nationalism is often touted in broad historical strokes as the genesis of modernity, creating the world maps with their borders as we know it today. Phillip Gorski summarizes white American nationalism as, “loyalty to one’s tribe, but always at the expense of an outgroup, who are deemed un-American, traitors, and enemies of the people.”¹ However, nationalism can take on two different essences: separatism or ethnocentrism. While these are not mutually exclusive, the more insidious ethnocentrism is what this investigation will focus on. Ethnocentric nationalism has rebranded itself over time to become more and more palatable to the audience it serves and benefits the loud majority of these nations. In the United States, nationalism is built off of the white Protestant identity, branching from the English majority that initially colonized and settled in North America while staving off other colonizers and displacing Native Americans. While the identity centered in Christian nationalism has mostly stayed the same, white Christian Nationalism has recently taken on a more evangelical and pentecostal/charismatic character². However, the scapegoated population necessary for nationalism to exist shifts in time and place. This nationalism has catalyzed historic amounts of violence towards Muslim Americans, notably Palestinian Americans who have been targeted since the recent protests advocating against the ongoing genocide in Palestine. Furthermore, violence towards Muslim Americans has surpassed 9/11 numbers, increasing the immediacy that Islamophobia should fully be addressed in the United States³.

¹ Gorski, Phillip S. and Perry, Samuel L. *The Flag and the Cross: White Christian Nationalism and the Threat to American Democracy*. Oxford University Press, 2022.

² Ibid.

³ Melnitsky, Rebecca “Islamophobia Surges in the U.S. Due to Global and National Tensions,” *New York State Bar Association*, December 12, 2023, <https://nysba.org/islamophobia-surges-in-the-u-s-due-to-global-and-national-tensions/>.

While these systems were being created in the U.S., British colonialism was spreading itself all over the globe, with the “crown jewel” in the Indian subcontinent. It would be wrong to assert that there was not some form of nationalism in the subcontinent prior to English colonialism, however, the systems that were already in place by the Mughal empire were exacerbated and appropriated by the British to create a populace that was easier to rule and extract resources from. The scapegoat created by the British was the Muslim population of India, which was characterized as enemies to the State in similar ways to Muslims in the United States. Hindu Nationalism today also instigates unprecedented violence toward Muslims through the rise in cow vigilantism, the 2020 Delhi riots, the widely spread “corona jihad” conspiracy and the most recent events in Kashmir.

The shared aspect of British colonialism in both cases has created two different movements that are similar, yet very unique in their own rights. In this investigation, I would like to explore how Muslims in both countries are racialized by these movements both historically and today. This is an especially pertinent conversation to have with both Donald Trump and Narendra Modi in office, both prominently labelled as Christian and Hindu Nationalists respectively. It is significant to analyze these status quo parties because their rhetoric can be easily dismissed by those who are more critical of systemic violence as immature ramblings, but it is when their propaganda goes unchecked that it is more easily spread. The decoding of dog whistles is a constant battle taken upon by academics to problematize what can easily be taken for granted. As our world has globalized, Hindu Nationalism has also taken its hold on the United States with the creation of HSS USA, serving as a threat to both American Indian Muslims and lower caste Indians in the United States⁴.

⁴ *Hindu Swayamsevak Sangh (HSS)*, Stop Hindutva in America, 2024.
<https://www.stophindutvainamerica.com/hindutva-network/hindu-swayamsevak-sangh-hss/>.

Racialization, as a systemic issue, significantly crosses over with issues of gender and class which will also be addressed in this conversation, giving special attention to those who are the most disadvantaged. I will ask not only how Muslims are racialized, but how historical rhetoric has persisted and how we can begin to untangle this in the present. Muslims are the focus of this study because of the way that they are uniquely racialized based on their religious identity. While “Muslim” does not perfectly fit into the Western concept of what a “race” is, there is an argument to be made that the category of “Muslim” is different from calling someone Arab, Black or South Asian. This definition varies by cultural context, but a significant change occurs when comparing different nationalist ideologies against each other in their unique colonial contexts. In this paper, I will explore why racialization is significant to the category “Muslim” and why it does not necessarily have to do with self identification. This will be analyzed through looking at both the ideologies of Christian Nationalism and Hindu Nationalism since the 18th century and finally situate the racialization of Muslims today in both countries.

This investigation contributes to existing scholarship surrounding the racialization of Muslims and ethnocentric nationalism through not just the comparison between the United States and India, but also exploring how the rhetoric of nationalism itself perpetuates, instigates and justifies violence; and how ethnocentrism is rooted in colonialism. I will also be taking a critical lens to describe how religious and racial identities were constructed in the 20th century, and discuss the current ramifications of these ideologies, especially in relation to social stratification in the United States and India. This will beg the question of whether the act of racialization inspires ethnic based populism in society. If so, how do political leaders like Trump and Modi inspire violence towards racialized Muslims? Racialization theory will be vital to explore how this ideology materializes into social inequity. Furthermore, the comparison of these two specific

ideologies will situate how broad and all encompassing racecraft is cross continentally because of the continued legacy of imperialism.

Use of Language:

Both Christian and Hindu Nationalism relies on the use of dog whistles and stereotypes to spread its rhetoric. Some uses of language are much more obscure than others. Therefore, to have a meaningful discussion that does not fall too far into speculation, I will be utilizing mainstream news sources to discuss how racialization occurs through the media. Christian Nationalism will be analyzed through the Fox media company, known for not just for its conservative leanings but also for its use of dog whistles. Hindu Nationalism will be seen through the lens of OpIndia, a political magazine known for their conservative and Hindu Nationalist slant.

Dog whistles are used to signal controversial support from a specific group of people without provoking any opposition from the majority. These signals have been baked into politics in both countries under analysis. For example, in the United States, the Southern Strategy was a system of dog whistles and coded language used most notably by Richard Nixon to gain support from southern white voters by using the terms “states rights” and “law and order”, stoking the fears white southerners had around the Civil Rights and Free Love movements. H. R. Haldeman, White House chief of staff wrote about Nixon's political strategy as, “devis[ing] a system that recognized this [political issue] while not appearing to”⁵. Additionally, Nielsen et. al uniquely describe dog whistle politics in India as functioning to create a “du jure Hindu state” while preying off of the demographic anxieties that are present in India⁶. One of the most popular uses

⁵ Robin, Corey. *The Reactionary Mind: Conservatism from Edmund Burke to Sarah Palin*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2011.

⁶ Nielsen, K. B., Selvaraj, M. S., & Nilsen, A. G. (2023). *Hindu Nationalist Statecraft, Dog-Whistle Legislation, and the Vigilante State in Contemporary India*. *Kritisk Etnografi*, 6(2), 19–37. <https://doi.org/10.33063/diva-519033>.

of language that gets used as dog whistles is attaching the word “jihad” to anything including Muslims, a practice that was born from the language of British colonists in the subcontinent. For example, Chief Minister of Uttar Pradesh Yogi Adityanath used the term “love jihad” when referencing the creation of a law that prohibited interfaith marriages that would result in “unlawful conversions”⁷. However, the manner of the rhetoric used implied, especially to those familiar with Hindu Nationalist dog whistles, that Hindu women should be protected from Muslim men who are trying to convert them through marriage⁸. I use these examples to exemplify the necessity to read between the lines of language used by politicians because they can create genuine harm towards the people targeted. However, both Prime Minister Modi and President Trump have had their dog whistles turn into bull horns throughout their terms, so plain readings of their rhetorics are just as important.

The language in India needs to be understood in a colonial context, where much of our knowledge in English is not an accurate representation or translation of various languages from the subcontinent. The word “Hindu” itself flattens a very diverse and large group of spiritual traditions that are closely related to each other. In this investigation, I will use the term Hindu to refer to anyone from the subcontinent that follows what is widely considered in the West to be “Hinduism”, but will note special intersections of caste status and will also note when a person is Sikh, or Jain. The English term “Hinduism” refers to a large history of spiritual traditions and practices rather than a “religious” movement and is centered around the veneration of the Vedic texts. The diversity of these traditions cannot be understated as they contain elements of pantheism, polytheism, monotheism, atheism and much more. These practices are contradictory but not mutually exclusive and the Hindu identity has been in debate for many centuries.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid.

One of the more controversial and contended aspects of spiritual practices in the subcontinent is the beliefs around caste. While caste is an enormous topic and cannot be fully addressed in this paper, it is important to keep in mind that caste is a formal method of social organization informed by family ties, occupation, diet and gender which is often defended by its roots in different important religious texts such as the Rig Veda and the Manusmriti. Additionally, the belief in reincarnation is essential to Hinduism. The actions one takes in this life, according to the prescription by the caste they were born into, they may be able to improve their caste and their family's caste in the next life. Caste in India has been extremely complicated by British colonialists, who recognized the divisive power of caste discrimination/supremacy and, through their cultural imperialism, implemented white supremacy into modern conceptions of caste⁹. There has been significant activism and pushback in the Indian subcontinent to counter caste discrimination and later this paper will discuss how exactly Muslims fit into these conceptions of caste.

Throughout this paper, I will be referring to Hindu Nationalism by the term Hindutva, widely translated as "hinduness". This is meant to separate it from the practice of "Hinduism" as a religion. Instead, Hindutva refers to an ethno-religious sect, which is based in the rejection of other ethnicities and religious practices. Hindutva is based in caste supremacy, gender essentialism and discrimination as well as racial supremacy. It is being noted here as to not assume that these social ills are not a part of Hinduism, instead endemic to the Hindutva movement.

⁹ Narasiah, K. R. A. *How the British took advantage of a complex caste system*. The Times of India, 2018. <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/blogs/tracking-indian-communities/how-british-took-advantage-of-a-complex-caste-system/>.

Literature Review:

The Essentials of Hindutva:

“The Essentials of Hindutva” written by Vinayak Savarkar, widely considered the father of the Hindutva movement, was conceived in 1922 while Savarkar was held in jail in London after committing violence towards a British official in occupied India¹⁰. Once considered a freedom fighter against British colonialism, he was quickly convinced in London that the group of people actually preventing the liberation of India was that of Muslims. Conspiracies were abound that Indian Muslims wanted to create their own Islamic state in India similar to the Mughal empire. Learning about the term Hindutva, Savarkar wrote this piece of literature to delineate the definitions of Hindutva, Hinduism, Hindu, Hindustan, etc. However, it is important to note that the term “Hindutva” was not invented by Savarkar and was already gaining traction in occupied India. This book served as a call to action for Indians to take up the term Hindutva as an identity based movement, which inherently excluded Muslims and was founded on “taking India back” as a Hindu nation. Notably, Savarkar himself was not religious, but he was Brahmin (the high, priestly caste), giving him a more favorable socio-economic status in England and India. To Savarkar, Hindutva is a race of people, who have lost their self identification and history. It encompasses the whole “Being” of the Hindu race. Hindutva is just a section of Hinduism and the two of them should not be conflated, as Hinduism is more sectarian¹¹.

First Savarkar narrated a history that is mostly based in a fantasy to build his argument about the adoption of Hindutva. At the “dawn of history”, the Aryans supposedly came to the Indus river and lived in harmony with the nature of the subcontinent. They sang the Vedic hymns

¹⁰ Jaffrelot, Christophe, ed. *Hindu Nationalism: A Reader*. Princeton University Press, 2007.

¹¹ Savarkar, Vinayak Damodar. *Essentials of Hindutva*. Hindi Sahitya Sadan, 1923.

and cultivated the land, cut themselves off from the Persians and prevented India from being invaded from the west. They eventually wrote the Rigveda and created Hinduism as we know it. This is supposedly common knowledge of history and he points out how India itself was Hindu from the beginning and that Hinduism was instituted by the Aryan race. Significantly, this situates the country of India itself as an entity that is supposed to be separate from Persian influence, of which was very important to the previous Mughal empire.

Savarkar claims that India was a virgin land when the Aryans arrived except for a few tribes. He calls these tribes “Vidyadharas, Apsaras, Yakshas, Rakshas, Gandharvas and Kinnaras”. These are very notably inhuman beings from Hindu religious mythos from the Vedas, intentionally being used to refer to indigenous Indian people groups¹². He uses this to explain the linguistic and cultural diversity of India today, but always reminds the reader that the Aryans ruled the lands, with these inhuman beings ruled underneath them. Savarkar warns that it would not be wise for Hindus to move to countries outside of India and that they should create a stronger national identity within the borders of India itself. He also mentions that the diversity of India is a great thing, but that the significant co-mingling of races in northwest India is definitely negative and should be stopped. His notions of “good” diversity mostly lay in the promotion of other Vedic religions, as long as those people maintain an order of hierarchy based on caste and racial purity.

Furthermore, Savarkar promoted the possibility of India as an ethno-religious state based in Hinduism by marking the failure of Buddhist non-violence and Islamic invasion. He utilizes a somewhat semiotic analysis of the term “Hindu”, which already had its nuanced wiped under British colonialism. He states that this term was not placed onto the population of India by the “Mohammedans”, but is an ancient term that holds specific meaning to the geography of the

¹² “Adivasis in India”. Minority Rights Group. <https://minorityrights.org/communities/adivasis-2/>

Indian subcontinent. This is specifically mentioned to encourage the use of “Hindu” as a unifying and exclusionary term, an identity specifically for the people of India who have lived there since the “dawn of history” when the Vedic hymns were sung on the land. Savarkar calls back to the recently fallen Mughal empire and their use of the Persian word “Kafar” (meaning non-believer, or more severely, infidel) to refer to non-Muslims to explain why the term Hindu should now be used. He further mentions that the Persian use of the term “Hindu” could not have been used to mean “black” because Hindus were just as fair as Iranians and at some point and that the subcontinent was called “white India” in Persian. Sarvarkar claims that Hindus could not have been “brutes” and would never go so low as to insult a different people group by calling them “black”.

Additionally, he compares the current state of India to the Norman invasion of England. He points out how England and its people are still called “English”, but that it could have been called Normandy with French invasion. He calls for India to have that same amount of perseverance as to not fall into being called anything other than Hindustan or India. He then encourages Hindus to have “valor in their arms and purity in their souls” in the face of the dividing of India into many distinct people groups. Furthermore, Sarvarkar claims Hindus can also call themselves Aryans, but that should not give them more pride than calling themselves “Hindu” because they are one in the same, “Aryan” is just the foreign term dominating the culture at the time.

Finally, he expresses secularism in the essence of “Hindutva” and encourages it to replace the term “Hinduism”. Hinduism is a foreign category and makes no sense in the context of a national identity to Savarkar. He also states that many people do not want to identify as Hindu because they don't want to appear like they follow the vagueness of “Hinduism” or do not want

to appear dogmatic. However, he encourages people to adopt the term by pointing out that even some Jains refer to themselves as Hindus. Overall, Sarvarkar expresses that “Hindu” is used to refer to a people who claim India (previously Hindustan) as both their homeland and holy land. Additionally, he mentions the “fall” of Sikhs who have become too passive since the fall of the Mughal empire and continuously mentions Kashmir (primarily Muslim) and Nepal (primarily Buddhist) as places that are definitively Hindu, showing the expansionist nature of Hindutva.

A Warning to the Hindus

“A Warning to the Hindus” was written by Maximiani Julia Portas, also known as Savitri Devi Mukherji, an Axis spy who eventually settled in India after converting to Hinduism. It was during this time that she became convinced of the conspiracies of Western race scientists who believed that high caste Hindus were also the progenitors of the Aryan race. She contributed to discussions around Hindu Nationalism at the time and added the new layer of Nazi race science and Western influence. Portas also synthesized the more esoteric beliefs of Nazism with Hinduism, claiming that Adolf Hitler himself was an avatar of Vishnu. Despite being an unorthodox character, her contributions to the history of Hindutva cannot be understated.

The crux of Portas’ argument surrounds how Hinduism is the one true religion that is being threatened by Muslims living in India. She explains that the future for India will be grim if they embrace diversity and do not preserve their Hinduness. She specifically calls Islamic influence “alien” in India, both referring back to Savarkar and continuing to lean into the idea that Muslims do not “belong” in India¹³. Higher caste Hindus are explicitly closer to whiteness and an idea of purity in race. Muslims are racialized as the antithesis of this purity and are labelled, “black”, “alien” with no spiritual ties to the country they reside in.

¹³ Devi, Savitri. *A Warning to the Hindus*. Promilla, 1993.

Black Muslim Scare

The FBI was very concerned about Islam in America in the 1930's, a response to the growing number of Muslim American organizations. This was reflected in the legislature as well with the passing of the 1924 National Origins Act, wanting to reduce immigration from any non-white countries. This act particularly also reflected a fear that Americans, especially Black Americans, would unite with colonized people abroad through religion. Overall, all Muslims, except the few that were white Americans, were racialized in the federal government as non-white in the National Origins Act.

Additionally, Edward Curtis goes through the actions of many different Black Muslim leaders in the United States. First is Muhammad Sadiq who is considered the founder of the Ahmadiyya movement¹⁴. This is contentious because Sadiq was considered by some to be a prophet, but ultimately did have some connection with Sunni Islamic communities in the United States as well. Sadiq had an explicitly stated goal to reach out to Black followers of Garveyism for conversion. His teachings made a connection with traditional Islam and the fight to end colonialism and Jim Crow segregation. Furthermore, he created a narrative that Islam had a uniquely African past, which would be extremely influential to later Black Muslim communities. This was a very successful movement considering its somewhat niche ideas counter to popular culture and had about 1025 converts from 1921 to 1925. The FBI considered the Ahmadiyya movement to be the antithesis to the Ku Klux Klan, which was also growing in prominence at the time, but at a much higher rate.

¹⁴ Curtis, Edward E. (2013). *The Black Muslim Scare of the Twentieth Century*. In: Ernst, C.W. (eds) *Islamophobia in America*. Palgrave Macmillan, New York.

https://doi.org/10.1057/9781137290076_4.

From the Ahmadiyya movement, the Moorish Science Temple of America was led by Timothy Drew (Noble Drew Ali). This movement was Black, Islamic, but also combined Masonic imagery and traditions, incorporating other alternative religious movements. While this was one of the most popular organizations, it was also extremely contentious and considered by many to not actually be Islamic. Satti Majid, who helped create many multiethnic Islamic societies in the US, was also one of the first to seek foreign Islamic authority on the growing American movement. Curtis says that the criticism of the movement and organization did not gain much attention and was not widely circulated. However, he also states that this disagreement was important because it shows denominationalism in the US Islamic movements and that despite their differences they still coexisted in a shared political space.

J. Edgar Hoover, the FBI director at the time, called members of these organizations disloyal African Americans. Black Muslims at the time also heavily dodged the draft and allied with Japanese people both inside and outside the US leading up to WWII. A Holiness pastor, David D. Ervin, even encouraged Black people to move to Japan as an extension of pan-Africanism. To the FBI, it seemed that Black religion must always exist in opposition to the aims of the American government. This led to a consistent foreignness of Islam, which constituted that the followers could never be loyal to the United States.

Racecraft and Identity in the Emergence of Islam as a Race

This piece contains a wealth of information about the racialization of Islam in the United States since its inception, but I will be focusing on Choudhury's analysis post 1960's in order to focus on how racialization is linked to the material conflicts that the United States has with the Middle East in particular.

An important moment that Choudhury points to is the decoupling of Jewish and Muslim peoples. At the start of the 20th century, activism for identifying a Jewish homeland was linked with more acceptance of European Jews into whiteness, which no longer have an immediate association between Jewishness and Muslimness. In fact, a notion of Judeo-Christian values completely negated the ability for Islam to be seen as compatible with either religious identity. It is also noted that American whiteness explicitly tied in Indian ethnicity to the supposed oriental despotism identified with Islam. This can be seen even in the Disney movie *Aladdin* where a vague Middle Eastern and South Asian fantasy land is built. Ironically, Americans saw the consumption of products and spirituality from both places as signifiers of wealth, as seen in the popularity of “Eastern spirituality” among middle class white Americans in the 1960s¹⁵.

The formation of Judeo-Christian values is both racialized and understood as a way of life incompatible with Islam and Muslims. After WWII and the creation of Israel, Judaism and Christianity were seen as the religions and lifestyles that brought democracy with them. This idea especially fomented after the Iranian Revolution and Samuel Huntington’s “Clash of Civilizations” thesis that situated Islam as a force with “bloody borders” and always in conflict with its neighbors¹⁶. Choudhury points out that Islam replaced the international boogeyman of communism, and this has stayed the case ever since.

¹⁵ Choudhury, Cyra Akila. *Racecraft and Identity in the Emergence of Islam as a Race*, 91 U. Cin. L. Rev. 1. 2022. <https://scholarship.law.uc.edu/uclr/vol91/iss1/1>.

¹⁶ Ibid.

The Birth of Hindutva:

Islam has a much longer history in India than it does in the United States, however, the defining moment for the characterization of Muslims in India was the 1857 Indian Rebellion against the British Imperial forces¹⁷. Similar to the war on terror in the United States, tension between Hindus and Muslims was artificially created by the British colonial state. Racializing the Muslim population as masculine agitators and Hindus as feminine and complacent. Clearly this characterization is disparaging towards both groups of people, but this led the way for current social politics about Indian Muslims as internal threats to the security of the Indian state. Notably, the form and organization of the public papers at the time were organizations that were taken over from the Mughal Empire. In these papers, such as one by W.W. Hunter titled “The Indian Musalmans: Are They Bound in Conscience to Rebel Against the Queen?”, Islamic theology was pointed out as a justification for characterizing the group as always violent or always looking for an insurrection until they build their own Islamic republic in India¹⁸. Morgenstein Fuerst states that these characterizations of Muslims are both “minoritizing” and “racializing”¹⁹. Significantly, Muslims are racialized in their relationship to imperial power, bound both by the laws of their religion and their inherent disposition to be violent agitators against the State. This act is explained by Cemil Aydin with the Muslim World theory. The theory states that Muslims will always be pious and will reliably make decisions based on their religious beliefs²⁰. Not only does this mean that a Muslim population will be seen as predictable, but also easily controlled through their actions. This idea of cyclical predictability continues

¹⁷ Morgenstein Fuerst, Ilyse R. *Indian Muslim Minorities and the 1857 Rebellion: Religion, Rebels, and Jihad*. I.B. Tauris, 2017.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Aydin, Cemil. *The Idea of the Muslim World: A Global Intellectual History*. Harvard University Press, 2017.

today as Muslim majority areas, especially ones under military occupation like Palestine and Kashmir, are characterized as ticking time bombs in order to further the violence inflicted.

Furthermore, Edward Said describes how in an Orientalist framework, such as the one employed by the British intelligentsia, they will use their authority as “experts” in religion and politics to dictate the discourse surrounding Islam specifically²¹. Therefore, when the British say that Muslims are violent jihadists, this must be true. This framework does not just stay in the hands of the British, and will be adopted in different terms within the Hindutva movement.

While Savarkar makes several assertions about Muslims and Hindus, one of the defining factors is the difference between a homeland and a holy land. He states that India is both the homeland and holy land for Hindus, but that Muslims will never truly belong because of their connection to Mecca and Medina²². This may seem like an innocent observation, however, this point underpins the violent division between Muslims and Hindus in India. An ideology that states an entire group does not belong in a country, and that their existence may even be limiting space for more Hindus to live in their holy land, is what leads to large scale violence and wars such as the partitioning of Pakistan and Bangladesh and the occupation of Kashmir. This is a result of a racialization process which characterizes Muslims as eternal outsiders to India, and at the most extreme, a problem to be fixed.

Additionally, Savarkar goes to many lengths in his book to dispute Persian texts that used the term “black” to refer to Hindus. He does this by defending that the Parthians called India “white” and that referring to a black man means “thief” and has nothing to do with Indians or Hindus²³. This wording signifies that there is also a color relationship between Hindus and Muslims, ultimately defining what it means to “look” Muslim. However, this is probably most

²¹ Said, Edward W. *Islam Through Western Eyes*. The Nation, 1998.

²² Savarkar, Vinayak Damodar. *Essentials of Hindutva*. Hindi Sahitya Sadan, 1923.

²³ Ibid.

significant with the Afro-Indian Siddi people in Southern India. This Black population was brought to India during the Indian Ocean Slave Trade and are also majority Muslim. For them, they not only have been historically forcibly displaced, but do not fit in religiously or physically with Hindu Indians. Hindu Nationalists go to great lengths to separate themselves from Black people, just as many of the marginalized in the United States do. Additionally, Blackness and Islam are linked in India as well, showcasing nested oppressions as both “outsiders” for phenotypical and religious reasons. Savarkar's language was heavily influenced by his time in England and his desire for the continued British presence in India. Therefore, his scapegoat tactic of associating the struggles of a colonized India with a longer, deeper past of Muslim aggression and violence helps further legitimize British rule by dividing the masses and pitting them against each other.

This “problem” created by Hindutva is also conveniently solved by the movement as well. Hindu Nationalists create a failed promise between the ruling and ruled class where ascension up the caste ladder is promised through violence inflicted on other lower caste people²⁴. Media that presents this narrative is a simulacra of how lower caste individuals actually experience their day to day life in such a strict system. This creates a double consciousness for the people who buy into the promises of the BJP and the RSS. The social identity present while performing for Hindutva is that of a loyalist who will inflict violence and be complacent with the current social structure. This front does not have to be put up while in community with those who do not follow caste as strictly, or in community with other lower caste people. This is especially the case when living in a time in India where religious acceptance is low and violence is high. Megwanshi's autobiography details how the promise of societal redemption for being

²⁴ Megwanshi, Bhanwar. *I Could Not Be Hindu The Story of a Dalit in the RSS*. Navayana Publications, 2019.

born undesirable is an unattainable carrot on a string that is only held up by false promises. Caste supremacy never fully goes away while performing for the RSS.

Furthermore, the followers of these nationalist groups are simply using religion as a justification for their violence towards the marginalized. Membership in a nationalist organization is not a prerequisite to being influenced by their ideas. These are ideologies that seep into every aspect of our lives, first through politics and then to everyday conversation through the news cycle. The common denominator between these two is how Muslims are being scapegoated for violence and political and social instability in both countries. Often this is a distraction from the collective discrimination by the ruling class in both countries. Populism has controlled the modern discourse around the culture war and keeps people looking away from the actions of Trump and Modi. This comparison of Donald Trump and Narendra Modi is not just surface level, however. Their similarities are dangerous because caste discrimination continues with Indian migration to the United States. There are dozens of RSS locales around the country, which poses a real threat to Indian American Muslims. This is not to say that Indian immigrants in the United States are incredibly privileged by any means, but that this double layer of discrimination against Muslims is something to be aware and wary of.

The Creation of the BJP and RSS

Hindu Nationalism is very centralized with a dedicated paramilitary group called the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS). Hindutva can mobilize much more effectively than Christian Nationalists because of their centralization. Hindutva's demonstrations involve the use of violence such as the 2020 Delhi riots. This event was in response to an act passed by the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), the explicitly Hindu Nationalist party led by Modi, which granted Indian citizenship to Sikhs, Hindus, Jains, Parsis, Buddhists and Christians living in Afghanistan,

Pakistan and Bangladesh- notably excluding Muslims²⁵. After sit-ins and lengthy protests against the codification of this act, violence broke out in the streets with a counter protest where 53 people died, two thirds of them being Muslim. This also included the vandalizing and arson of Muslim-owned shops and mosques²⁶. Both Trump and Modi at the time gave lukewarm public responses, neither explicitly condoning or condemning the actions of these nationalist organizations²⁷. This act of reaching across to nations that have been partitioned through several violent conflicts to offer Indian citizenship while excluding Muslims, from Muslim-majority countries no less, serves to reify the ideology codified by Sarvakar: Muslims' true home cannot be in India. However, the modern Indian state allows for a certain amount of diversity among castes and various Vedic spiritual practices, while systematically denying Muslims from having self determination in their native land.

Additionally, the social and economic structure of India is informed by the caste system. This is significant because the RSS and the BJP want to uphold a strict caste system as it materially benefits them. Often, to encourage people of lower caste to join the RSS, there will be promises of a higher caste position if they inflict violence on Muslims and lower caste Hindus. Besides the incredibly insidious nature of this system, this is a completely empty promise which is explored by Bhanwar Meghwanshi in his memoir "I Could Not be Hindu: The Story of a Dalit in the RSS". He specifically recalls his realization of this empty promise when he would cook for his higher caste members, who would throw away the food behind his back²⁸. The airs of

²⁵ Jalali, Ujwal. *North East Delhi Riots: So, What Did They Do in 2020?*. The New Indian Express, 2024.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Ellis-Peterson, Hannah. *Delhi Rocked by Deadly Protests During Donald Trump's India Visit*. The Guardian, 2020.

<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/feb/25/delhi-rocked-by-deadly-protests-during-donald-trumps-in-dia-visit>.

²⁸ Meghwanshi, Bhanwar. *I Could Not Be Hindu The Story of a Dalit in the RSS*. Navayana Publications, 2019.

equality were put on in the RSS, but only to use these lower caste Hindus as tools to revive the mythical past of a pure Hindu India.

When attempting to deny caste discrimination, Hindu Nationalists will note that Narendra Modi himself is lower caste. In 2024, a debate arose about whether or not Modi was a part of a category labelled “Other Backward Castes” (OBC). Many members of the BJP went to great lengths to explain how his caste actually did not have a backward label and was actually a distinguished caste²⁹. Others, however, used this point to prove that the BJP is actually a modern, liberal party based on equality and diversity³⁰. This harkens back to the rhetoric of Savarkar, where a certain amount of diversity is considered acceptable, but nothing that truly disturbs the status quo. A Muslim or Dalit (untouchable) would never be seen as party leaders, much less the prime minister of India. Instead, Muslims must be expelled to make room for a Hindu India and Dalits can find work in paramilitary groups to do the work of violent expulsion. These caste debates achieve nothing to materially liberate India from a violent caste structure, nor does it actually prove an ideology or identity diverse ruling class.

However, Indian Muslims do not neatly fit into the caste system because Islam does not recognize caste, although it is still forced upon them in many ways. Caste largely manifests in occupation, and the majority of Indian Muslims work either agricultural jobs in rural areas or work as mechanics or shopkeepers in urban areas³¹. Additionally, Indian Muslims are the poorest of any other religious group in the country, making up only about 14% of the population, 31% live below the poverty line, they are the least upwardly mobile, and their attendance in higher

²⁹ *BJP Shares 'Truth' About PM Modi's Caste, Refutes Rahul Gandhi's Claim*. Livemint, 2024. <https://www.livemint.com/news/india/govt-fact-checks-rahul-gandhi-pm-not-obc-claim-report-congress-bjp-11707388722289.html>

³⁰ Shekhar Sen, Raj. *Caste, Bigotry, and the Apathy of Modi's Theory of Atmanirbharta*. NewsLaundry, 2020. <https://www.newslaundry.com/2020/05/21/caste-bigotry-and-the-apathy-of-modis-theory-of-atmanirbharta>.

³¹ All India Council of Muslim Economic Upliftment, 2007. https://www.aicmeu.org/Profession-wise_Indian_Muslim_Workers.htm.

education has decreased over the years³². Caste determinism has caused some Indian Hindus to convert to Islam, where most of those converts are Dalit and it is estimated that about 75% of India's Muslim population are considered untouchable³³. The unfortunate reality is that these people still experience caste segregation at school and work, but cannot receive affirmative action care that is given to lower caste Hindus because they are Muslim³⁴. This results in Indian Muslims being racialized as lower caste and experiencing even more undue hardship because of unevenly distributed resources from the BJP government. This racialization is present in the media, where if a Muslim is being characterized in fiction, they often speak Hindi in a very strong accent, work blue collar/agricultural jobs and are presented as unintelligent or needlessly violent³⁵. The economic reality of Indian Muslims was sparked by the ways that British colonizers' rhetoric was spread and how they shaped the material basis for the subcontinent. This has only been reified through caste supremacy from the BJP government and the systemic violence doled out by the RSS and is further cemented through the use of media depictions as well.

Additionally, one of the ways that physical violence is targeted at Muslims in India are cow lynchings. Usually, a cow lynching is when the consumption of beef is traced back to an individual and that person is killed. This act of violent is usually done by RSS members who are guided by Hindutva ideology³⁶. Often, this is just used as a front for the murder of people who are seen as Muslim, who are identified explicitly by their diet. However, recently there has been outrage around the practice after Hindus have been mistaken for Muslims either because of

³² Rashkit, Devrupa. *Why the Economic Marginalization of Indian Muslims Is Systemic*. The SWDL, 2023. <https://www.theswaddle.com/why-the-economic-marginalization-of-indian-muslims-is-systemic>.

³³ Biswas, Soutik. *Why are Many Indian Muslims Seen as Untouchable?*. BBC News, 2016.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Islam, M. (2007). *Imagining Indian Muslims: Looking through the Lens of Bollywood Cinema*. Indian Journal of Human Development, 1(2), 403-422. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0973703020070208>.

³⁶ Asrar, Nadim. *What Killing of Hindu Teen by India Cow Vigilantes Tells us About Modi 3.0*. Al Jazeera, 2024.

association or because they also consume beef³⁷. Diet is a very significant form for signifying social status in India, not only because the consumption of beef is extremely taboo, but higher caste individuals often eat a completely vegetarian diet and the “purity” of this food cannot be altered by it being prepared or shared with someone of lower caste³⁸. Schools and places of work are often segregated between those who eat a completely vegetarian diet and those who do not. Therefore, the consumption of beef is often how Muslims are racialized in India. Like most racecraft, this is not an accurate representation of how Indians eat. In the region of Kerala, people consume beef regardless of religion, and this area is where many of the cow lynchings take place³⁹. Kerala does have a larger Christian and Muslim population than other regions in India, but this is not the cause of the entire region’s eating habits as some Hindus also regularly consume beef.

Today, the most prolific way to spread information is to have a very rooted and serious social media presence. Hindu Nationalists, because of their power in the government, have many online newspapers that give their opinion on news and events happening in the subcontinent. Additionally, many politicians have notable Twitter accounts detailing their political and personal beliefs on many social issues. The government sponsored newspaper OpIndia posts daily news articles and op-eds, many of them discussing a culture war that is very similar to that of the United States. A particular theme of this news source is the characterization of Muslim men as a threat to Hindu women. Countless articles describe forced conversions, rape and violence from unnamed “organized islamicist groups”⁴⁰. Some of these articles use this theme of gendered violence to focus on the tensions between India and its neighboring countries by

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Jeevan, Pranav P. *Segregation of Eating Spaces: Modern Untouchability in IITs*. Sabrang, 2023.

³⁹ Tamayo, Richard. *Kerala Sidesteps India’s Beef Debate*. The Ground Truth Project, 2019.

⁴⁰<https://www.opindia.com/2025/04/west-bengal-bjp-tmc-islamist-violence-murshidabad-suvendu-adhikari-sreerupa-mitra-chaudhary/>.

discussing the crimes of “illegals”⁴¹. Additionally, there is a theme of discussing the lack of loyalty to India by Indian Muslims. All of these coalesce into a nature very similar to the writing of both Savakar and Devi, who discuss Muslims as perpetually “alien” and “foreign”. With AI generated pictures heading these dubious news stories (called dubious or false by the organization Hindutva Watch), these online news sites very clearly serve as a modern interpretation of the same beliefs put forward by Hindu Nationalists of the past⁴². The racialization in these stories is not just of foreignness, however. Discussion of nefarious organized groups of Muslims paints them as a people whose violence is intrinsic, immutable and intentionally impeding on the natural way of life of Hindu Indians.

Organizations such as Hindutva Watch have tried to reign in the hatred doled out by the Indian media and by individuals online. However, their visibility in India was limited in 2024 when the Delhi High Court claimed that their statements and fact checking was imbalanced and promoted Hinduphobia on a global scale. A staff reporter at OpIndia claimed that Hindutva Watch was directly funded by the Pakistani government, and that it was being used as a propaganda machine for left-wing politics⁴³. The Hindutva movement does associate itself with conservative, right-wing politics in most cases, and lumps anyone not fully on board with the movement, and especially Muslims, as progressive, communist, or left-wing in general. These claims continue the historical, colonial thread of characterizing Muslims as anti-establishment (regardless of whether or not this is true for any given individual). Furthermore, the politicizing of these identities functions on an international scale to both appeal to conservatives and liberals

⁴¹<https://www.opindia.com/news-updates/gujarat-hc-allows-demolition-of-illegal-construction-at-chandola-lake-hub-of-illegal-bangladeshis-rejects-muslim-partys-petitions/>.

⁴² From their website: *Hindutva Watch is an independent research initiative to monitor the reports of attacks on the members of minority and marginalised communities for their faith by the radicalised Hindus and the Hindutva militia groups in India.* <https://www.hindutvawatch.org/hatewatch/>.

⁴³<https://www.opindia.com/2024/09/x-supports-hinduphobic-fake-news-peddler-hindutva-watch-challenges-blocking-order-in-delhi-hc/>,

in the West. Claiming to be for traditional values, especially ones that rely on caste and social stratification, appeals to the status quo parties such as the Republicans in the United States. There is an incompatibility in this relationship that will be discussed later in this investigation.

The Birth of Christian Nationalism

The concept of “otherness” has changed significantly since the conception of the United States. Instead of using the racial terms that have been popularized today, otherness used to be distinguished based on religion, culture and nationality. The use of these terms in the 18th century were just as fluid as those used for race today, where the educated elite would debate whether or not Catholics were as “heathen” as Native Americans in the eyes of the British Protestants that colonized North America. Anything straying from the very specific Puritan identity of the colonists was significantly socially sanctioned. This even included other people of European descent, but especially those who were not. The term “Mohammadean race”⁴⁴ was used by Protestant Americans to refer to Muslims as the world began globalizing, and was used very derogatorily. Many accounts associated this “race” of people with infanticide, violent yet emasculated men, and women who needed constant saving⁴⁵. Additionally, many Muslims in early America were mostly of African descent who were forced into slavery during the Transatlantic Slave Trade. Being viewed through the lens of white Protestantism, they were still forced into slavery, but were often given higher social roles in the plantations because of their literacy as a result of their faith. However, there was still this notion that skin could pale⁴⁶ when

⁴⁴ Gin Lum, Kathryn. *Heathens: Religion and Race in American History*. Harvard University Press, 2022.

⁴⁵ *Ibid*

⁴⁶ *Ibid*.

converting to Christianity, hinting that these hierarchies were just as based in phenotype as they were in a perceived cultural adherence and was incredibly moralized.

As the European Enlightenment philosophy took over the American colonies, race became a pseudo-science that seeped into every aspect of life. This attempt to further taxonomize people is more or less how everlasting stereotypes have been ingrained into current language and beliefs. Race was now officially “measured” by phenotype and skin color, which privileged the white religious minorities and even more disadvantaged non-Europeans in the colonies. Stereotypes that many are aware of today about racialized groups, such as Black athleticism, Arab violence, or Asian intelligence were codified and written into official science textbooks with scientific “proofs” such as skull size or shape. These seemingly modern and advanced taxa never replaced the older religious forms of othering, however. Race was born out of religious and cultural othering, and they cannot be separated. This historical process not only sets the ground for Western racecraft, but these ideas were spread by Europeans through colonization. Later, this investigation will also showcase how these ideas spread to India specifically.

One of the most prevalent ways Muslims are racialized in the United States is how often they are conflated with Arabs, regardless of the religious diversity in Arab countries. The Naturalization Act of 1790 allowed citizenship to “free white people” in the country⁴⁷. By 1899, Syrians and Palestinians were categorized as “Caucasian”, which set them apart from other Arab populations. This decision was after lengthy deliberation about their proximity to whiteness. Their proof of whiteness was their Christian religion and proximity to the holy land⁴⁸. However, this decision was not made easily or as an effect of rising Arab immigrants. On the contrary,

⁴⁷ Gualtieri, Sarah. *Between Arab and White : Race and Ethnicity in the Early Syrian American Diaspora*, University of California Press, 2009. ProQuest Ebook Central, <http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/unc/detail.action?docID=837328>.

⁴⁸ Jarmakani, Amira, Pauline Homsy Vinson, and Louise Cankar. *Sajjilu Arab American: A Reader in SWANA Studies*. Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2022.

many Arab Christians had to separate themselves physically and ideologically as much as possible from Black Americans to avoid being categorized onto the less fortunate side of the American black vs white race dichotomy⁴⁹. Notably, other Arab nationalities were left out of whiteness because they were Muslim. This “honorary” Caucasian status in the legal system showcases not only the grey area that Arabs hold in the United States, but also how being Muslim is very explicitly not aligned with whiteness. This whole debate on race categorization for a group that is often just lumped with other “exotic” peoples shows first how Orientalism seeps into the legal and social systems in the United States but also how race and religion are necessarily intertwined. Christianity and national identity is strictly tied together in the United States. Citizenship was denied for Muslims seeking refuge or immigrating to the country because they were not Christian. When former United States president Donald Trump enforced a “Muslim ban” on immigration, it was directly targeted at Arab countries, further showcasing how the iron grip on Arab identity equating to Muslim identity has not gone away. Furthermore, this action specifically plays into the idea of a “Muslim world”⁵⁰. This is the notion that all Muslims come from the same place (the Middle East), follow their religion exactly and will always make decisions informed by their religion. This is important today specifically because of the continuing “war on terror” rhetoric espoused by Christian Nationalists. This fear mongering is ultimately rooted in the idea that there is inherent violence and deception in Islam which is followed exactly by Muslims.

In the 19th century, Christian Nationalism began identifying itself as a defined group and movement. The Second Great Awakening (1890’s) is seen as the origin for many of the

⁴⁹ Gualtieri, Sarah. *Between Arab and White: Race and Ethnicity in the Early Syrian American Diaspora*. University Of California Press, 2009.

⁵⁰ Aydin, Cemil. *The Idea of the Muslim World: A Global Intellectual History*. Harvard University Press, 2017.

characteristics and tendencies of Christian Nationalism today⁵¹. For example, this time period is often seen as the origin of fundamentalism, a tendency in Protestantism that sees the Bible as the literal word of God, where God takes on human characteristics and the Bible is seen as a roadmap for everyone's lives⁵². Many historians⁵³ have seen this movement as a reaction to the growing progressiveness of the American lifestyle- white rural farmers moving to the cities, Black families moving to the North, the increasing immigration and a general movement away from religion as a whole. The ideologies that prevailed from this refashioning is post millennial dispensationalism, a type of apocalyptic theological perspective stating that Jesus will come back for a 1,000 year reign before the end times. Many charismatic leaders came to prominence claiming that they could predict the end times, even stating that certain presidencies or the increasing immigrant population from non-European and non-Christian countries could trigger this end times prophecy. This fundamentalist and charismatic movement in American Christianity links the religion and reactionary politics in a way that did not occur before this shift. Furthermore, these ideas coalesce to signal how white racial anxiety is a huge factor that contributes to both white Christian politics and theology.

Both Hindutva and Christian Nationalism have a vision of Islam as not just a physical, bodily threat to their religious community, but a cosmic one that taints the purity of their holy land. In the case of premillennial thinking in Christian Nationalists, the growing population of Muslims ruin the chance for American Christians to bring about the reign of Jesus on Earth by purifying and Christianizing the space. This is one of the many reasons why Christian Nationalists tend to support policies that threaten the safety of Muslims. In India, following

⁵¹ Williams, Daniel K. *God's Own Party: The Making of the Christian Right*. Oxford University Press, 2010.

⁵² Ibid

⁵³ Ibid., Timothy Gloege, *Guaranteed Pure: The Moody Bible Institute, Business, and the Making of Modern Evangelicalism*. UNC Press, 2015., and Molly Worthen, *Apostles of Reason: The Crisis of Authority in American Evangelicalism*. Oxford University Press, 2014.

Hindu reincarnation beliefs, someone converting to Islam not only places a social taboo on them now, but will affect both their and their family's reincarnation as well. Dalits already have an immense amount of cosmic pressure on them to reinforce their own untouchability status, but many choose to convert to Islam despite the fact that it absolutely ruins their chance at a better karmic rebirth. For higher caste Indians there is not only a sense that their religion is being "replaced" by Islam through their high birth rates and Islamic conversion is rising, but that the balance of the cosmos itself is being tainted by the growing presence of Islam. Islam is currently the fastest growing religion in both the United States and India which, to these ideologues, not only threatens life on earth now, but also in the hereafter⁵⁴.

As the 20th century progressed, Islam became more popular among Black Americans, shifting notions yet again about the term Muslim as a racial category. Blackness and Islam were tied intrinsically for many people, especially as the Nation of Islam grew in prominence. Islam was seen as the religion for marginalized communities while Christianity was the colonizing religion⁵⁵. While Islam, specifically the very materialist version that emphasized the lived experiences of the marginalized, was used as a tool for radical acceptance of Blackness. It was also viewed by the Christian Nationalist government as a tool for domestic terrorism. Islam was used as a way for Black people to distinguish themselves from other Black Americans who suffered from both economic, social and spiritual poverty as Christianity was not seen as doing enough for the Black community. Later in the century, espionage was a tool used by the CIA and FBI to limit the actions of the Fruit of Islam⁵⁶ and eventually information about the corruption of

⁵⁴ *The Future of World Religions: Population Growth Projections, 2010-2050*. Pew Research, 2015.

⁵⁵ Curtis, Edward E. *Black Muslim Religion in the Nation of Islam, 1960-1975*. University of North Carolina Press, 2006.

⁵⁶ Hsu, Spencer S. and Johnson, Carrie. *Government Documents Reveal Improper Spying on Nation of Islam*. Washington Post, 2009.

the Nation of Islam's leaders led many followers to turn to more mainstream Sunni Islam⁵⁷. Civil rights leaders like Malcolm X helped identify Islam with the Black American experience, but this was distorted and hindered by a government informed by Christian Nationalism. Black Muslims were uniquely characterized as violent to the extent of completely overturning the existing social order and their own attempts at self determination with Black schools, stores and religious centers was mostly thwarted through intense surveillance⁵⁸.

Overall, Muslims have been in the United States since the colonies, however, they are perpetually grouped as outsiders. Constantly measured by the ruler of whiteness and Protestantism, Muslims in the United States are characterized as violent terrorists wanting to overthrow the existing power structures in the country and are often linked with Black and Brown bodies. This, of course, scares the average white, protestant American who may have little to no experience with Muslims because of their relatively low numbers compared to other immigrant populations⁵⁹. Additionally, Orientalism has influenced every aspect of the characterization of Muslims because of how they are equated with Arabs. This solidifies the specific idea of clothing, language and customs that Muslims in the United States follow, which is always exaggerated and homogenized. When Keith Ellison, the first Muslim to be elected to Congress was inaugurated in 2006, he swore on Thomas Jefferson's copy of the Quran rather than the Bible. This decision was heavily criticized and discussed in the media, immediately characterizing him as an outsider, despite his obvious commitment to American politics. However, a politician does not even need to be confirmed Muslim to be considered suspicious or threatening to the American social order, as seen by the immense paranoia around Obama's

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ Alimahomed-Wilson, Sabrina. *When the FBI Knocks: Racialized State Surveillance of Muslims*. Critical Sociology, 2018.

⁵⁹ *Demographic Portrait of Muslim Americans*. Pew Research Center, July 2017.
www.pewresearch.org/religion/2017/07/26/demographic-portrait-of-muslim-americans.

religion, place of birth and connection to terrorist organizations when he was first elected in 2008. Sara Palin in reference to former president Barack Obama, who had been tainted by his proximity to Islam stated, “this is not a man who sees America as you and I see it,” and then accused Obama of “palin’ around with terrorists.”⁶⁰

Finally, there is a concept of redemption in Christian Nationalism. White protestantism has always been the default existence for social acceptance in the United States, however, modern Christian Nationalism in particular has a very Evangelical and charismatic Christian identity to it. Both of these types of Christianity emphasize a personal relationship with God, but also the “born again” emphasis on conversion or renewed spirit in the faith. This means that often redemption in a social sense comes with redemption in a religious sense, and everyone can be seen as a conversion project⁶¹. This is most clearly seen in the “Moral Majority” movement in the 80s where most Americans were seen as conservative Christian’s whose faith just had to be sparked through some sort of outreach movement, but could also be spoken for through conservative politicians and religious leaders⁶². There is a sense in this movement that all Americans “want” what these politicians are advocating for, such as limited immigration, bans on abortion, divorce, and gay marriage, but they just do not know it yet. Of course, these policies also bolster their theological beliefs of premillennial dispensationalism. Furthermore, these Christian Nationalists offer a lifestyle alternative for these true believers. As fundamentalists moved from the social margins to more public facing positions, they brought with them their own homeschooling programs, creationist museums, Bible study programs and churches⁶³. For

⁶⁰ Robin, Corey. *The Reactionary Mind: Conservatism from Edmund Burke to Sarah Palin*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2011.

⁶¹ Gorski, Phillip S. and Perry, Samuel L. *The Flag and the Cross: White Christian Nationalism and the Threat to American Democracy*. Oxford University Press, 2022.

⁶² Harding, Susan Friend. *The Book of Jerry Falwell: Fundamentalist Language and Politics*. Princeton University Press, 2001.

⁶³ Ibid.

someone whose belief is “born-again”, they very easily can live parallel to the lives of average Americans and this can be a very convincing conversion project, because converts do not have to give up too much of their old lifestyles. However, to those who live a lifestyle extremely dissimilar to the average American, this conversion lifestyle can be a huge ask, and is not plausible for many. Therefore, Christian Nationalist redemption is only accessible for those who are closer to “Americanness”, and by extension, whiteness and Protestantism.

As Muslims are one of the biggest ways fear is put into the minds of Americans, do they always have to convert their religion to be seen as a “good Muslim” in the eyes of the average American? Christian Nationalism is not an ideology that only conservatives or Republicans follow, it is only a part of the cultural hegemony of the country's social fabric. Instead I would suggest that a conservative American would view conversion to Christianity as the only solution for a Muslim to be redeemed or given an honorary status of whiteness. However, redemption in the eyes of liberals would be much more invisible. In the article “The Fifth Black Woman”, Cabardo and Gulati describe a fictional situation where five Black women work at a legal firm with identical qualifications, but only four of them get partnerships at the firm. In almost a throwaway line, they mention that the fifth Black woman is a member of the Nation of Islam⁶⁴. Along with other characteristics, this source showcases the value that is placed on the performance of race and gender, especially in these more liberal workspaces that do not show any proof of legal discrimination. Therefore, it is important to note that being Muslim is a performance just as much as it is a visible identity. Depending on how ingrained Christian Nationalism is, or how much it is explicitly taught, will determine the forms of discrimination Muslims will face in the United States.

⁶⁴ Carbedo, Devon W., and Mitu Gulati. “*THE INTERSECTIONAL FIFTH BLACK WOMAN.*” *Du Bois Review: Social Science Research on Race* 10, no. 2 (2013): 527–40. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1742058X13000301>.

Christian Nationalism Today

In *Taking Back America for God*, Andrew L Whitehead and Samuel L Perry define Christian Nationalism with a series of characteristics (myths, traditions, symbols, narratives, and value systems), which aim to fuse Christianity with American civic life⁶⁵. The implementation of these characteristics result in many social phenomena that have been studied at length- “nativism, white supremacy, patriarchy, and heteronormativity, along with divine sanction for authoritarian control and militarism”⁶⁶. These authors also define Christian Nationalism as it differs from American Civil Religion, stating that the two come from different theological backgrounds. While civil religion in the United States manifests from doctrines of faithfulness, obedience and stewardship, Christian Nationalism demands a strict adherence to a national and ethnic Christian identity. Much of this ethnocentric belief is manufactured through apocalyptic thought based in premillennialism, that Jesus will come back after the corruption of the world has reached a breaking point. Therefore, it is the role of the white, American Christian to delay this corruption to convert as many non-believers to Christianity so their souls may be saved in the rapture. Whitehead and Samuel also list plain, literal readings of the Bible and divine militarism as other characteristics highly linked to Christian Nationalism. Sociologist and author of *The Flag and the Cross: White Christian Nationalism and the Threat to American Democracy*, Phillip Gorski very succinctly summarized Christian Nationalism as “political idolatry dressed up as religious orthodoxy”⁶⁷.

⁶⁵ Whitehead, Andrew L. and Perry, Samuel. *Taking America Back for God: Christian Nationalism in the United States*. Oxford University Press, 2020.

⁶⁶ Ibid.

⁶⁷ Gorski, Phillip S. and Perry, Samuel L. *The Flag and the Cross: White Christian Nationalism and the Threat to American Democracy*. Oxford University Press, 2022.

Islam and Muslims as a severe threat to the social order in the United States. When Trump was implementing the “Muslim ban” there was significant anxieties from Christian Nationalists that Muslims would enter the country as extremists and force their religion on the American people. To attempt at comforting this anxiety, Trump claimed that there would be interviews with people attempting to enter the country about whether or not they love America and its people⁶⁸. This claim not only signifies that Muslims are not seen as compatible with a Christian America, but that their existence is limited to a contagion. The dehumanization rhetoric of Christian Nationalism does not stop at relegating the “other” to animal, or nature, but is even more insidious as the “other” is characterized as a germ or a virus, simply a mindless, corrupting force. Limiting the “spread” of Islam to the United States does not simply stem from the nativist policies of Christian Nationalism, but is also related to the larger theological belief of premillennialism. However, this rhetoric is doubly insidious as the Muslim ban narrative arose during the refugee crises in Syria and Libya. The polling from *Taking America Back for God* showcases how simple religious affiliation made people more likely to support the socio-political services that would benefit refugees, although adherence to Christian Nationalism was a very strong indicator of nativist policies on immigration⁶⁹.

The polling also indicated that many Christian Nationalists are anxious about Muslims giving public speeches in the United States. Free speech being given without question to Christian Americans becomes an issue, again, of corrupting Americans when given to a Muslim, specifically one from the Middle East. Speech, a metaphorical limb of the person speaking, is cut from Muslim Americans as Christian Nationalism grows. To prevent the spread of the contagion that is Islam to the American audience, Christian Nationalists systemically silence Muslims

⁶⁸ Whitehead, Andrew L. and Perry, Samuel. *Taking America Back for God: Christian Nationalism in the United States*. Oxford University Press, 2020.

⁶⁹ Ibid.

through economic and political repression. Ironically, about a third of the refugees that Trump prevented from entering the country were Christians escaping persecution from regime changes in their home country, displaying how the nativism of Christian Nationalism is essentially a *white* Christianity, not simply an adherence to the religion itself⁷⁰. Simply having Middle Eastern origins is a tainting identity, which surpasses in importance of even a Christian identity, as labels of “terrorist” become baked into the identity itself. This is seen time and time again as Donald Trump rhetorically replaces the words “Muslim” with terrorist in his speeches⁷¹.

Trump’s speeches are filled with Christian Nationalist rhetoric. He brings back blood metaphors that are closely linked to Puritan ideas of blood purity, being racial, religious and nationalist⁷². When Trump mentions executing Muslim terrorists with bullets dipped in pig’s blood, he is explicitly making these links to not just racial blood purity, but blood that is spilled in religious warfare. This disrespect of religion through weapons was also used by the British just before the 1857 rebellion as they introduced rifles whose cartridges greased with pig and cow fat had to be removed by mouth⁷³. Trump’s messages obviously have a much more violent tone, but still harkens to colonial religious violence. He also uses terms such as “rodents” and “zombies” to refer to non-white people entering the country, both referring to them as not human, but also “somewhat” or “almost” human⁷⁴. Trump’s rhetoric, whether intentional or not, is religious and dehumanizing in nature, and is very often targeted towards Muslims specifically. Of indicators measured to predict voting for Donald Trump in Whitehead and Perry’s study,

⁷⁰ Gorski, Phillip S. and Perry, Samuel L. *The Flag and the Cross: White Christian Nationalism and the Threat to American Democracy*. Oxford University Press, 2022.

⁷¹ Ibid.

⁷² Ibid.

⁷³ Morgenstein Fuerst, Ilyse R. *Indian Muslim Minorities and the 1857 Rebellion: Religion, Rebels, and Jihad*. I.B. Tauris, 2017.

⁷⁴ Gorski, Phillip S. and Perry, Samuel L. *The Flag and the Cross: White Christian Nationalism and the Threat to American Democracy*. Oxford University Press, 2022.

Islamophobia was ranked third only below affiliation with the Republican party and political conservatism. Additionally, their polling also indicates that respondents were much more likely to see Muslims as a threat than Jewish people showing that membership to whiteness does change over time and that Muslims are seen as the most threatening “Other” category.

One of the more recent examples of how Muslims are racialized as being contagious and tainting, is the prayer rug scandal at the southern border in Trump’s last presidency. Trump tweeted about prayer rugs being found in New Mexico, insinuating that Muslims were crossing the Mexican-American border to avoid the legal immigration process⁷⁵. Later this claim was found to be demonstrably false⁷⁶. However, the goal of stating the claim was completed, as it makes the southern border appear even more terrifying for the average American who might not immediately question these claims, ultimately funneling more money into policing the border. The fact that the “illegal aliens” at the border could be Muslim raises the stakes, especially as language around non-white immigration takes on more rhetoric around “invasion” and “replacement”. An interviewee in Whitehead and Perry’s polling stated that he thinks some immigrants do come here wanting a better life, but that there is a sizable amount of immigrants that want to do the nation and its people harm. To talk about this specific group of immigrants he points to the “Arab” countries and Muslims in particular. There is homogenizing done to immigrants from both the Middle East and Latin America, however, it is clear that for many Christian Nationalists, Muslims serve an enormous threat to the United States as a whole.

Christian Nationalism is inherently nativist and therefore supports many xenophobic policies relying on many dog whistles to get their point across. Additionally, this nationalism also utilizes secular allusions to Christian Nationalism such as “Western culture/civilization” and

⁷⁵ Rupar, Aaron. *Trump’s Unfounded Tweet Stoking Fears About Muslim “Prayer Rugs,” Explained*. NPR, 2019.

⁷⁶ Ibid.

“judeo-christian values”. When polling voters, Gorski found that the importance of fighting for white, Christian values was more important than a president who presented their religion⁷⁷. Many people were disappointed with the possibility of Pence becoming president after Trump’s impeachment, despite the fact that he is outwardly a much more pious man. This explains some of the perceived complications or incongruencies with Donald Trump as the figurehead for American Christian Nationalism. Many of his attempts to appear more religious to his audience had failed, such as the picture he took in front of St. John's Episcopal Church following protests demanding justice after the murder of George Floyd⁷⁸. Many religious leaders, including from the church he took a picture in front of, spoke out about this disaster of image creation from Trump⁷⁹. These events do not sway his followers, because he has proved time and time again that he defends Christian Nationalism specifically. Whitehead and Perry found that religious adherence tends to increase the support for humanitarian policies as a whole while Christian Nationalism specifically predicted the opposite. It is important to note here that Christian Nationalism is the thread that links the policy making that harms anyone who does not fit the white Protestant norm.

Incompatibility of Hindutva and Christian Nationalism

Throughout this investigation I have presented Hindutva and Christian Nationalism as functioning very similarly because of their roots in British colonization. However, these two movements still exist on very different playing fields on a global scale even though they intersect in many ways. Both the United States and India are incredibly diverse countries but in different

⁷⁷ Gorski, Phillip S. and Perry, Samuel L. *The Flag and the Cross: White Christian Nationalism and the Threat to American Democracy*. Oxford University Press, 2022.

⁷⁸ Bashir, Martin. *George Floyd Death: Trump's Church Visit Shocks Religious Leaders*. BBC, 2020.

⁷⁹ Ibid.

ways. The United States specifically has a population largely built on immigration where first, second and third generation immigrants have made it to extremely high positions of power in the government. However, this “melting pot” narrative of the all encompassing and homogenizing nature of an American identity does not always hold true, especially to many white Americans online who believe in foreign invasion and white replacement hoaxes about the United States today. This creation of a white, Christian, working class, often rural identity is formed by what sociologist Arlie Hochschild calls a “deep story”, which is the story that explains the values and identities that a group holds. She states:

*“White Christian nationalism’s “deep story” goes something like this: America was founded as a Christian nation by (white) men who were “traditional” Christians, who based the nation’s founding documents on “Christian principles.” The United States is blessed by God, which is why it has been so successful; and the nation has a special role to play in God’s plan for humanity. But these blessings are threatened by cultural degradation from “un-American” influences both inside and outside our borders.”*⁸⁰

Therefore, there is significant anxiety held by these white Americans who see others as “cutting in line”, especially from non-white leaders.

Muslims in the United States government have stoked this anxiety, but so have Hindus. A current prime example is Usha Vance, the Second Lady of America. She has been very open about her and her family’s religion, but this has stoked the fires of American populism. DOGE staff member Marko Elez posted “Normalize Indian hate” on Twitter, and soon lost his job because of it⁸¹. While the formal MAGA administration tries to distance themselves from outward messaging of hate or racism, it is clear that its many followers do lean into blatant

⁸⁰ Gorski, Phillip S. and Perry, Samuel L. *The Flag and the Cross: White Christian Nationalism and the Threat to American Democracy*. Oxford University Press, 2022.

⁸¹ *Usha Vance Breaks Silence on Normalizing Indian Hate, Says She Thinks its Terrible*, Times of India, 2025. <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/world/us/usha-vance-breaks-silence-on-normalizing-indian-hate-says-she-thinks-its-terrible/articleshow/120103937.cms>

religious and ethnic centrism. It is estimated that about 16,000 hateful posts about Usha Vance have been made to date about both her gender and religious identity. Many of these posts have come from Republican party members themselves. Christian Nationalism, as a response to a growing diversity in modernity, pushes back against anything that does not adhere to their own deep story of identity. Hindutva's online presence does make attempts to show their compatibility with the West in some ways, and have made many Hindutva communities here in the States. However, the only concrete similarity between the two ideologies is a hatred for Muslims and Islam. This inherent incompatibility makes it doubly difficult for people who are both South Asian and Muslim in the United States to square an identity that is being attacked from many sides.

Conclusions

In conclusion, there are many similarities between the ways that Muslims are racialized in both the United States and India, and this is not by accident. Imperialism has spread language around heathenism and race around the world to justify resource extraction to benefit those living in the imperial core. That is not to say that racism or racecraft has no unique qualities in India, because that is not true. However, despite cultural differences, the continuous racialization of Muslims as violent, jihadist outsiders looking to spoil and infect the existing social order only signifies that it is the product of centuries of language and action that inflicted material struggle on Muslims. Only by unpacking these ideologies and problematizing them can we start making the first steps at instituting equity and combating global Islamophobia, especially at the time of a large scale refugee crisis and the ongoing genocide in Palestine.

Additionally, Kashmir has very recently been caught up again in this ongoing relationship between Muslims, racialization and violence. In a situation very similar to Palestine, Kashmir

has been militarily occupied by Indian and Pakistani forces since the partition of India in 1947. This contested territory is of a Muslim majority and violence towards its population from its occupiers has been ongoing. Outrage has been stoked recently after the BJP government allowed tourism in the militarized zone occupied by Indian troops, but those tourists were killed by an assumed militant group based in Pakistani occupied Kashmir. This action has again labelled the Muslims in the area as terrorists and Kashmiris face extreme violence in the aftermath of the attack. There have already been reports of Hindu Nationalists attacking Muslim merchants on the street⁸². The stakes for this conversation are immense, and the importance to address the violent racialization of Muslims only increases. All of these oppressions are linked to the shared context of colonization and global solidarity is imperative.

⁸² Mateen, Zoya. *'We Are Too Scared to go Back': Kashmiris in India Face Violence After Deadly Attack*. BBC, 2025.

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