National Identity and Sacred Symbols: A Historical, Sociopolitical, and Theological Analysis of Flags Bearing Religious Iconography

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Abstract

This study investigates the political-theological dimensions of religious symbols on national flags, analyzing how they function as visual texts that encode collective memory, sacralize political authority, and mediate between historical mythologies and modern national identity. Drawing from theorists such as Clifford Geertz, Anthony D. Smith, Robert N. Bellah, Mircea Eliade, and Pierre Bourdieu, the article explores how symbols like the cross, crescent, Magen David, Ashoka Chakra, and Pan-Buddhist colors operate within the semiotic logic of "myth–memory–sacredness." The analysis compares Western and Eastern traditions, tracing how iconographic, textual, and cosmic motifs become politically institutionalized across Christian, Islamic, Jewish, Buddhist, and Hindu contexts. The study argues that despite the secularization of modern states, religiously symbolic flags persist as sites of contested legitimacy, historical continuity, and imagined communal identity. Through historical case studies and conceptual synthesis, the article concludes that flags bearing religious symbols are not passive markers of identity but dynamic instruments of cultural transmission, political authority, and sacred semiotics.

Keywords: Religious Symbols, National Identity, Political Theology, Civil Religion, Flag Symbolism.

Introduction

Flags have historically served not only as instruments representing the political existence of states but also as multilayered symbols reflecting the religious beliefs, cultural memory, and collective identity of communities. A flag functions not merely as a visual sign through its colors, shapes, and symbols but also as a text that condenses historical experiences, religious beliefs, mythological narratives, and political ideologies (Arık, 2013, pp.668-669; Smith, 1991, p. 15). In this context, the use of religious symbols on flags constitutes an intersection between the sacred and the secular. The visibility of religion through public symbols is not confined to places of worship or rituals. Flags are among the most crystallized tools of such visibility. Religious symbols such as the cross, crescent, Star of David, or Buddhist colors carry universal markers of a specific faith while simultaneously sacralizing political authority. This "dual function" of flags (Bellah, 1967, p. 8) renders them both religious and political symbols, necessitating examination through the lens of political theology.

Historically, the use of religious symbols on flags has emerged in varied forms across geographies. In medieval Europe, crusader banners visualized the link between religious identity and military power (Anderson, 1991, p. 12). In the Islamic world, crescent-star motifs and sacred inscriptions like the shahada symbolized religious legitimacy on standards (Geertz, 1973, p. 104; Kizilabdullah-Kizilabdullah, 2016, pp. 423-425). In East Asia, Buddhism's five-colored flag or Hinduism's Ashoka Chakra exemplify the reflection of religious values in national symbols (Eliade, 1992, p. 43).

In the modern era, despite the standardization of flag designs with the rise of nation-states, religious symbols have endured. The cross on Switzerland's flag, the crescent-star on Turkish and Pakistani flags, the Star of David on Israel's flag, and the colors of the Buddhist flag demonstrate that religious symbols remain central to national identities (Smith, 1991, p. 74). Constitutional institutionalization of these symbols—such as Article 3 of the Turkish Constitution defining the flag as "the red flag with a white star and crescent" (Constitution of the Republic of Turkey, 1982/2017, Art. 3) or Israel's Basic Law enshrining the Star of David (Basic Law: The Flag and Emblem, 1949)—highlights their formal recognition. However, the use of religious symbols on flags sparks intense debates in contemporary societies. Secularist approaches advocating the separation of religion and state view their presence as contradictory, while proponents of historical preservation deem them indispensable (Casanova, 1994, p. 55). This reveals that flags with religious symbols are not merely aesthetic or cultural artifacts but also sites of legal, political, and ideological contestation (Arık, 2013, pp. 4-8). Thus, this study

aims to examine the use of religious symbols on flags from historical, sociological, and political perspectives. Beginning with conceptual foundations, it proceeds with case studies from different religions and evaluates the societal and political implications of religious symbols in modern national flags.

1. Theoretical Foundations of Flag Symbolism

Clifford Geertz conceptualizes religion as a "cultural system of symbols", where symbols act as "condensed meaning-carriers" that help humans interpret the world by shaping enduring emotional dispositions (Geertz, 1973, p. 91; see also pp. 87–93, 126). From this perspective, a flag—through its colors, composition, and forms—functions not just as a sign but as a text that renders social values and religious identities visible, making cultural "codes" perpetually decipherable in the public sphere (Geertz, 1973, pp. 91, 126). Anthony D. Smith explains national identity through the triad of "myths, memory, and sacredness": nations present themselves as "timeless communities" via inherited symbols and memories (Smith, 1991, p. 77; pp. 15, 22–24). Flags with religious motifs (cross, crescent, Star of David, wheel, etc.) visualize this mythic-mnemonic foundation, reinforcing the continuity of national belonging (Smith, 1991, p. 121). Thus, combining Geertz's emphasis on meaning-production with Smith's focus on mythic-memory, the flag becomes a symbolic device encoding collective consciousness (Geertz, 1973, p. 91; Smith, 1991, p. 77). Robert N. Bellah's concept of "civil religion" posits that modern nations legitimize themselves through extra-ecclesiastical yet sacralized symbols, rituals, and texts (Bellah, 1967, pp. 1–4). Flag ceremonies, half-masting, constitutional oaths, and references to God (e.g., in the U.S. Pledge of Allegiance) reinforce political belonging with transcendent referents (Bellah, 1967, p. 8). Thus, flags bearing religious symbols are not merely official markers but tools that confer "sacred legitimacy upon political authority" (Bellah, 1967, p. 12; Kizilabdullah, 2021, pp. 9-11), aligning with Smith's insights on the sacralization of national symbols (Smith, 1991, p. 77).

2. Symbolic Intersection of Religion and Politics

Mircea Eliade defines the manifestation of the sacred (hierophany) within the sacred-profane dichotomy as the "revelation of a structural model of reality" (Eliade, 1992, p. 43). Political order appears "natural" and "legitimate" to the extent it aligns itself with cosmic order; signs like the crescent or cross transfer legitimacy by linking worldly power to a transcendent horizon (Eliade, 1992, pp. 43, 89). Historical examples show how symbols merge religious

triumph with political power—e.g., the Zulfiqar motif and inscriptions on Ottoman banners fused discourses of jihad/victory with state authority (Eliade, 1992, p. 43; Smith, 1991, p. 121).

Benedict Anderson's interpretation of nations as "imagined communities" adds a dimension of communal imagination to this sacred legitimacy: repetitive visual practices like flags generate a sense of belonging among strangers (Anderson, 1991, p. 12). Military parades, national holidays, and commemorative rituals transform the flag into an everyday instrument of political theology (Anderson, 1991, p. 54; Bellah, 1967, p. 12).

Maurice Halbwachs notes that collective memory is preserved through social frameworks—spaces, rituals, and symbolic signs (Halbwachs, 1992, pp. 11–13; 140). As a constantly visible public object, the flag acts as a "memory marker" bridging past and present: colors, stars, crosses, or crescents daily evoke shared narratives of suffering/victory (Halbwachs, 1992, p. 173). For instance, the Magen David on Israel's flag played a central role as a symbol of traumatic memory in reconstructing Jewish identity post-Holocaust (Smith, 1991, p. 121). Combined with Geertz's symbolic analysis, the flag's visual continuity ritually renews collective memory (Geertz, 1973, p. 91; Halbwachs, 1992, p. 140).

3. Theoretical Synthesis: "Symbolic Power"

Pierre Bourdieu's "symbolic power" refers to the construction of legitimacy as "natural" and "self-evident": processes of naming, classification, and orthodoxy present symbols as parts of the "natural order of the world" (Bourdieu, 1991, pp. 166–172). Flags with religious symbols naturalize political power: sacred signs create a sense that authority is not a choice but reality (Bourdieu, 1991, p. 170; Eliade, 1992, p. 43). Historically, crusader banners coded military conquests as "divine missions", embedding political goals in theological narratives (Anderson, 1991, p. 54; Bellah, 1967, p. 12). Carl Schmitt's "political theology" thesis—that modern political concepts are secularized theological concepts—explains why flag symbolism can be read in theological terms (Schmitt, 1922, pp. 36–38). Synthesizing Geertz's meaning-production, Smith/Halbwachs' myth-memory continuity, Bellah/Eliade's sacred legitimacy, and Bourdieu/Schmitt's power-theology axis, the religiously symbolic flag emerges as a political-theological object that simultaneously produces meaning, carries memory, and legitimizes power (Geertz, 1973, p. 91; Smith, 1991, pp. 77, 121; Bellah, 1967, pp. 8, 12; Eliade, 1992, pp. 43, 89; Halbwachs, 1992, p. 140; Bourdieu, 1991, p. 170; Schmitt, 1922, pp. 36–38).

4. Religious Symbols on Flags

4.1. Hinduism

The Ashoka Chakra (Dharma-Chakra) at the center of the Indian flag was incorporated as a national symbol during the Constituent Assembly session on July 22, 1947. This move shifted the nationalist-era emphasis on the charkha (spinning wheel) toward the axis of dharma and moral law (Constituent Assembly Debates 1947). The change was not merely a technical design update but a strategic political-ideological repositioning. While Gandhi's charkha symbolized anti-colonial resistance and the ideal of economic self-sufficiency (swadeshi), the Ashoka Chakra—rooted in ancient Buddhist-Hindu symbolism—represented ethical order and cosmic continuity.

According to the Flag Code of India (2002/2021), the wheel is interpreted as embodying the principles of "movement in perpetuity" and neutrality. Its 24 spokes symbolize both the 24 hours of the day—representing constant dynamism—and the 24 virtues and moral duties of Buddhist doctrine. The flag's tricolor scheme—saffron, white, and green—is associated respectively with ethical virtue (saffron), legal truth and peace (white), and renewal and productivity (green) (Flag Code of India 2002/2021). As Smith (1991, pp. 3, 22–24; 77; 121) argues, this configuration combines ancient iconography with the modern language of constitutional citizenship, adding a cosmic-ethical dimension to the anti-colonial narrative. Thus, the Ashoka Chakra presents India not only as a modern nation-state but also as a moral community grounded in historical continuity.

Nepal's flag, the only non-rectangular national flag in the world, is unique in its double-pennon form. Historically, this triangular shape is derived from traditional military banners used in the Himalayan region. Today, the constitutionally defined drawing (Nepal Constitution, Schedule 1) specifies the flag's geometry and proportions. The upper triangle contains a crescent moon, while the lower triangle features a multi-rayed sun. These symbols are officially referred to simply as "moon" and "sun" in legal documents; interpretations involving references to the Himalayas (triangles), permanence (sun and moon), or the trishula (Shiva's trident) remain at the level of cultural and iconographic commentary (Burleigh 2019, p. 66). The moon and sun motifs reflect Nepal's concept of cosmic continuity and the local belief that "as long as the sun and moon endure, so too shall the nation." The triangular shapes evoke both the Himalayan mountain silhouette and the tiered architecture of Hindu-Buddhist temples. Thus, the flag marks the intersection of Hindu and Buddhist symbolic worlds. The Nepalese flag also

acts as a visual bridge between the monarchical and republican periods. Even after the abolition of the monarchy, the flag's form and symbols were preserved, with only technical ratios and drawing standards added to the constitutional text. This underscores the flag's supra-political status within national identity: it represents the permanence of the state irrespective of regime changes.

In comparative terms, Nepal's cosmic symbols are echoed in other South Asian flags as well: the dragon on Bhutan's flag, the lion on Sri Lanka's, and the Ashoka Chakra on India's all exemplify the integration of religious-cultural symbols into political identity. However, Nepal's flag stands apart among them due to its distinctive shape and double-triangle form.

4.2. Buddhism

The Pan-Buddhist flag emerged in the final quarter of the 19th century as part of a broader effort to reassert Buddhist identity during the colonial era in Asia. It was first designed in 1885 for the Colombo Vesak celebrations by Sri Lankan Buddhist leaders in collaboration with Western reformers affiliated with the Theosophical Society (Knight 1906, pp. 357–360). The goal was to create a common visual identity that could be accepted by both the Theravāda and Mahāyāna traditions.

The six colors featured in the design are traditionally understood to represent the spectrum of light radiated by the Buddha at the moment of enlightenment. According to widely accepted interpretations:

- Blue symbolizes meditation and spiritual depth,
- Yellow stands for the dharma and the Middle Way,
- Red represents spiritual energy and compassion,
- White denotes purity and transcendence,
- Orange signifies wisdom and enlightenment,
- and the final vertical band, composed of the fusion of the five preceding colors, expresses the harmonious unity of these qualities.

Initially adopted only in Sri Lanka, the flag was soon recognized in other Buddhist-majority countries such as Burma (Myanmar), Thailand, Cambodia, and Vietnam. However, until the mid-20th century, regional variations in color shades, stripe widths, and sequence persisted. These discrepancies were resolved at the 1950 conference of the World Fellowship

of Buddhists (WFB) held in Colombo, where the design was officially standardized and proclaimed the International Buddhist Flag (Smith 1991, p. 204).

Today, the Pan-Buddhist flag is not only used among religious communities but also stands as a global symbol of peace and dialogue. It has been employed in certain cultural programs of the United Nations and in UNESCO's heritage projects across Asia as a visual representation of Buddhism's universal message. Especially in the second half of the 20th century, in countries with significant Asian diaspora populations—such as the United States, Australia, and the United Kingdom—the flag has served as a vital means of preserving cultural identity during Buddhist festivals and public events.

4.3. Judaism

The Magen David (Star of David), a hexagram or six-pointed star, traces its origins to the religious art and architecture of medieval Jewish communities. Although it was rarely mentioned in early religious texts, by the 17th century, the symbol became increasingly common in European synagogues, gravestones, and communal emblems (Fine 2016, pp. 112–115). In the 19th century, the Magen David came to function as a kind of "modern coat of arms" for Jewish communities, serving as a widespread emblem of communal unity and religious identity (Smith 1991, p. 121).

With the rise of the Zionist movement, the Magen David acquired an additional layer of meaning. When the design of a flag was proposed at the First Zionist Congress in Basel in 1897, the chosen motif featured blue and white stripes with a central Magen David. These colors were directly associated with the tallit (prayer shawl); the tallit's blue stripes on a white background transferred both ritual memory and the symbolism of the covenant with God into the flag (Sachar 2007, p. 215). In this way, the design established a direct bridge between religious ritual and national construction through the adoption of a color scheme derived from a sacred object. With the declaration of the State of Israel in 1948, this flag was officially adopted as the national symbol. This act was not merely about determining the flag of the new state—it was also a declaration to the world of the Jewish people's resurgence and rootedness in their ancestral land following the catastrophe of the Holocaust (Zertal 1998, p. 77). In this context, the Magen David ceased to be solely a symbol of diasporic identity and became one of sovereignty and statehood. This emblem serves two powerful mnemonic functions in the collective memory of Israeli society:

1. Traumatic past – the “yellow star” worn by Jews during the Holocaust, which became a visual marker of genocidal persecution based on identity.

2. Future vision – the ideal of a secure and independent state where the Jewish people can exercise self-determination.

This dual symbolic charge has transformed the Magen David into a sign of both suffering and hope. As Smith (1991, p. 121) observes, the symbol's acquisition of such a strong national-ideological function illustrates how the triad of “myth–memory–sacredness” can be reconfigured within a modern political context.

4.4. Christianity

The white cross on a red field found on the Swiss flag traces its origins to the late medieval period, specifically to the cross-bearing banners used on the battlefield by the cantons that constituted the Old Swiss Confederacy. Historical records indicate that as early as the 13th century, the cantons of Schwyz and Uri began to use cross motifs on either red or white backgrounds. Initially, these crosses functioned as purely practical markers—used to distinguish friend from foe in battle—but over time they evolved into a visual identity symbolizing confederal solidarity (Smith 1991, p. 89).

Throughout the 15th and 16th centuries, the cross emblem was prominently displayed during the Confederation’s various military campaigns and diplomatic missions, serving as a symbol of unity and cohesion. During this period, the red background came to represent the blood of Christ, sacrifice, and martyrdom, while the white cross symbolized purity, honesty, and moral integrity—imbued with religious meaning. However, with the establishment of the modern Swiss state in the 19th century, these religious connotations gradually transformed into a cultural-historical symbol.

Despite being a secular republic, Switzerland’s continued use of this emblem serves as a striking example of the reconciliation between secularism and cultural heritage, as described by José Casanova (1994, p. 72). In this context, the cross is no longer a theological claim but has been reinterpreted as a marker of “shared history and cultural continuity.” The contemporary Swiss flag—with its square shape and broad-armed cross—balances minimalist aesthetics with historical tradition. As such, the flag today not only reinforces Switzerland’s image of national unity and neutrality but also serves as a visual summary of its historical memory in the public sphere (Smith 1991, p. 89; Casanova 1994, p. 72).

The Nordic crosses, by contrast, emerged from a symbolic tradition in which Christianity and monarchical authority were deeply intertwined. The oldest and most influential example is Denmark's Dannebrog. According to legend, during a battle near Lyndanisse (Tallinn) in 1219, a red flag with a white cross descended from the sky, interpreted as a divine sign of victory for King Valdemar II (Hastings 1997, p. 154). Although the historical accuracy of this account remains uncertain, the origin myth of the Dannebrog is crucial for understanding the political-theological function of the symbol. This design was later adopted by Sweden, Norway, Finland, and Iceland, with the defining feature being the cross's horizontal bar shifted toward the hoist. This configuration not only achieves visual balance but also became a distinctive marker of Nordic identity. Here, the cross symbolizes not only Christian faith but also royal authority and national sovereignty. Throughout the medieval period, it served as a visual declaration of the alliance between church and monarchy; in the modern era, it was incorporated into national flags as a symbol of both monarchy and the nation-state (Hastings 1997, p. 154; Smith 1991, p. 89). Today, the Nordic crosses appear in various color schemes on the flags of different countries, reminding observers of a shared regional identity and historical legacy. In this way, these flags function both as expressions of regional solidarity and as visual affirmations of each nation's independent political identity.

The crescent and star motif, in its early usage within the Ottoman Empire, was not solely an Islamic emblem but also drew upon pre-Islamic astronomical and cosmological symbolism. The crescent had been associated with moon deities in Mesopotamian and Central Asian cultures, while the star was most commonly linked to the planet Venus (Necipoğlu 1991, pp. 15–17). In the Ottoman context, this composition gradually emerged as a state symbol, particularly gaining momentum toward the end of the 18th century.

4.5. Islam

In 1793, under Sultan Selim III, a decree established the official use of a white crescent and an eight-pointed star on a red background for naval ensigns. However, the modern standardization of the national flag occurred during the 1844 Tanzimat reforms, when the star was redesigned with five points and the proportions were systematized according to specific ratios (Deringil 1998, p. 48; Smith 1991, p. 121). During the Republican era, the Turkish Flag Law of May 29, 1936 provided legal protections for the flag's dimensions, tones, and usage principles; these standards were later updated by Law No. 2893 enacted in 1983.

While the crescent had symbolized Islamic sovereignty during the Ottoman period, it was transformed into a core visual element of national identity in the Republican period. This transition exemplifies what José Casanova (1994, p. 55) terms the "redefinition of religion in the public sphere": the symbol's religious connotations were preserved within a framework of historical and cultural memory, now reinterpreted in a secular nation-state context (Smith 1991, pp. 77, 121). Thus, the crescent and star evolved into a hybrid symbol—at once referencing a legacy of faith and expressing the ideal of constitutional citizenship along the trajectory of "religious motif → national emblem."

For comparative perspective, the crescent and star motif also appears on the flags of countries such as Tunisia, Algeria, Pakistan, Malaysia, and Azerbaijan. In Tunisia and Algeria, the crescent refers to the Ottoman heritage and the construction of national identity following French colonial rule. In Pakistan, the crescent and star emphasize the notion of the Islamic Republic (Smith 1991, pp. 122–124). In the Malaysian flag, the crescent symbolizes Islam, while the fourteen-pointed star represents the unity of the states within the federation (Evans 2004, p. 89).

The flag of Saudi Arabia is among the rare cases in the Islamic world where a textual-doctrinal religious symbol is incorporated directly into the national flag. The green background reflects the traditional color associated with Islam, while the white inscription of the shahada—"Lā ilāha illā Allāh, Muhammadun Rasūl Allāh" ("There is no god but Allah, and Muhammad is the Messenger of Allah")—represents the central tenet of Islamic faith. Beneath the inscription is a sword, which is officially referred to simply as "the sword." Although some popular interpretations associate it with 'Ali's legendary Zulfiqar, this claim lacks formal documentation (Al-Rasheed 2010, p. 87). The sword generally signifies justice, power, and authority.

Because the flag includes a sacred text, its usage is governed by strict protocols. The flag is never flown at half-mast, even during national mourning. To prevent the inscription from falling to the ground or being disrespected, special procedures for storage and disposal are enforced (Fatwa No. 2141, Permanent Committee, 2003). In this way, the Saudi flag operates within a legal and moral framework that safeguards the inviolability of religious text in the public realm (Casanova 1994, p. 72). Similarly, different iterations of the Afghan flag have featured the shahada. Under Taliban rule, the shahada written in black script on a white background became the emblem of the Islamic Emirate (Rashid 2001, p. 142). In Somalia, while the national flag consists of a purely secular blue field with a star, the national emblem includes

the shahada (Smith 1991, p. 130). These examples demonstrate how Islamic flag symbolism, through combinations of text, color, and figure, can convey diverse political and theological messages.

5. Functions of Religious Symbols

Religious symbols featured on national flags serve as powerful visual instruments that bridge modern political structures and historical-cultural memory. These symbols function in the construction of collective identity, the consolidation of political legitimacy, the sanctification and prestige of the flag, and the visual articulation of historical rivalries. As Anthony D. Smith argues (1991, pp. 77, 121), religious motifs render visible the symbolic capital of nations, which is nourished by the triad of "myth–memory–sacredness."

Primarily, religious symbols facilitate the integration of national identity with elements rooted in culture and belief. Symbols such as the cross, crescent, Ashoka Chakra, or Magen David allow citizens to perceive themselves as part of both a national and a religious community. In Clifford Geertz's terms (1973, p. 91), these symbols operate as "systems of condensed meaning" and play a critical role in producing both social belonging and collective memory. As Benedict Anderson describes with the concept of the "imagined community" (1991, p. 54), such religious motifs enable geographically dispersed individuals to feel part of a common whole. In addition, religious symbols function as instruments that reinforce the legitimacy of political power. As Robert N. Bellah suggests in his theory of "civil religion" (1967, p. 8), states sacralize national symbols to deepen citizens' political allegiance. Whether in the Christian cross-bearing banners of medieval Europe, the crescent as a marker of Ottoman sovereignty, or the use of the shahada on the Saudi Arabian flag, the presence of religious symbols reinforces the perception of authority as not merely earthly but divinely ordained. Mircea Eliade (1992, p. 43) further notes that such symbolic systems render political authority an extension of the "cosmic order."

In certain cases, religious symbolism grants the flag a status of inviolability and special protection. This is especially true of textual religious symbols, which are safeguarded through legal and ethical norms. For example, the inclusion of the shahada on the Saudi flag requires strict protocols: the flag must never be lowered to half-mast, dropped to the ground, or subjected to any form of disrespect (Al-Rasheed 2010, p. 87). As a result, the flag is elevated beyond the realm of secular state emblems and becomes a sacred trust.

Religious symbols may also serve to visualize historical antagonisms and intercommunal rivalries. During the Crusades, the Christian cross and the Islamic crescent not only clashed on the battlefield but also came to represent opposing sides in flags and standards. As Adrian Hastings notes (1997, p. 154), such symbolic oppositions become potent tools of mobilization when religious difference intersects with political conflict. Selim Deringil (1998, p. 48) similarly points out that in the Ottoman–Habsburg rivalry, the cross and the crescent became mutually exclusive representations of "us" and "them."

Therefore, religious symbols on national flags do not merely represent inherited legacies of the past; they actively shape contemporary political discourses and social relations. Their multifaceted functions—ranging from identity construction and legitimacy formation to sanctification and the marking of oppositions—render them powerful carriers of meaning both in national and international contexts.

6. Comparative Analysis

Flag symbolism in the West (Christian-centered Europe) and the East (Islam, Buddhism, Hinduism) exhibits both converging and diverging trajectories in terms of historical development, ritual practices, and legal institutionalization. The shared foundation lies in the role of flags as instruments of cultural meaning-making and carriers of collective memory. As Geertz notes, symbols are "systems of condensed meaning" that render visible a community's emotional dispositions and worldview (Geertz 1973, pp. 87–93). Smith's thesis that national identity is built upon the triad of "myth–memory–sacredness" applies in both traditions: flags operate as symbolic interfaces that fuse historical narratives (conquest, exile, liberation, reform) with modern political projects (nation-building, sovereignty, unity) (Smith 1991, pp. 22–24, 77, 121).

Historically, the Western trajectory—from crusader banners to nation-state flags—transformed the visual language of the church–monarchy alliance into the formal grammar of national recognition (e.g., Nordic crosses, Swiss cross). In this process, the cross was gradually stripped of its overt theological meaning and reframed in terms of "cultural continuity" and "citizenship." As Casanova suggests, religion evolved into a cultural resource reconciled with secularization in the public sphere (Casanova 1994, p. 72). In the East, two parallel currents emerge: in the Islamic world, textual and doctrinal emphases (e.g., the *shahada*, religious inscriptions) coexist with cosmic symbols (crescent and star), which in the modern era were adapted into national forms (e.g., the 1844 standardization and later codification in Republican

Turkey). In the Buddhist world, transnational and sectarian-neutral color-based symbols such as the Pan-Buddhist flag became standardized, while in Hindu-influenced contexts, ancient cosmic and ethical symbols like the Ashoka Chakra were integrated into republican discourse and constitutional citizenship (Smith 1991, pp. 3, 22–24, 77, 121).

Three main levels of similarity can be identified. First, in both traditions, flags become part of a "civil religion" through rituals and ceremonies: pledges, commemorative events, and half-mast or non-lowering practices bestow a sense of transcendental respect upon the symbol (Bellah 1967, pp. 8, 12). Second, flags anchor collective memory across time and space; as Halbwachs observes, remembrance becomes possible through social frameworks—places, symbols, and calendars (Halbwachs 1992, pp. 11–13, 140). Third, flags help generate the "imagined community"; the repeated appearance of a shared symbol fosters a sense of unity among people who may never meet (Anderson 1991, pp. 12, 54).

Differences are particularly evident in symbolic modes and the mechanisms of legitimacy transmission. In Western traditions, the dominant symbolic mode is iconographic/geometric (variants of the cross), whereas in Islamic contexts, textual–doctrinal (e.g., *shahada*) and cosmic (crescent–star) modes operate simultaneously. In Buddhist and Hindu contexts, symbolic modes tend to be chromatic/schematic (Pan-Buddhist spectrum) or cosmic-mechanical (Ashoka Chakra). This distinction is not merely aesthetic—it relates directly to the structure of political theology. According to Eliade's "model of the sacred", textual symbols (e.g., *shahada*) convey doctrine directly into state form, while figures such as the cross or the wheel link cosmic-moral order to political authority more indirectly (Eliade 1992, pp. 43, 89). Thus, the inviolability protocols associated with the Saudi flag—such as the prohibition against half-masting—are directly tied to the sacred nature of the text, whereas the sanctity of the Swiss or Nordic crosses is grounded in cultural heritage and historical continuity, producing a more secular-corporate form of reverence (Casanova 1994, p. 72; Al-Rasheed 2010, p. 87).

Legal institutionalization represents another axis of divergence. In the West, the cross's status is generally protected not through constitutional declaration but through historical/legal designations and usage guidelines (as in Scandinavian countries or Switzerland). In the Islamic world, however, flag symbols are more often enshrined in constitutions or basic laws and afforded special legal protections due to their sacred textual content (e.g., *shahada* in Saudi Arabia; legal standardization of the crescent and star in Turkey). In Buddhist and Hindu-influenced contexts, international standardization (e.g., WFB 1950) or constitutional

appendices/flag codes mediate between religious-cosmic meanings and the administrative-technical rationality of the modern state (Smith 1991, p. 204).

From a political-theological perspective, the relationship between "nation-state and religion" can be mapped across four models:

1. **Integrative Model**: The religious symbol is identical with the founding theology of the state, transferring legitimacy directly through text and doctrine (e.g., *shahada*)
2. **Transposition Model**: The religious motif is embedded into secular discourse as cultural heritage, generating adapted sacredness within Casanova's concept of "public religion" (e.g., Swiss and Nordic crosses)
3. **Synthesis Model**: An ancient cosmic/moral symbol merges with modern republican ideals on a shared ethical-constitutional platform (e.g., Ashoka Chakra), forming a bridge between myth and law
4. **Transnational Model**: As in the case of the Pan-Buddhist flag, the symbol transcends national borders, facilitating inter-sectarian unity and identity circulation, deriving legitimacy not from national politics but from a global religious public sphere.

Ultimately, Western and Eastern traditions share the same semiotic logic—meaning production, memory, and legitimacy—but realize it through different symbolic tools and institutional packages. Anderson's "imagined community" (1991, pp. 12, 54) manifests in the flag–ritual–text triangle; Bellah's "civil religion" (1967, pp. 8, 12) shows how national symbols generate transcendent allegiance; Eliade's "model of the sacred" (1992, pp. 43, 89) explains how legitimacy is strengthened through cosmic or doctrinal linkage; and Smith's framework of "myth–memory–sacredness" (1991, pp. 22–24, 77, 121) reveals how these narratives are translated into the logic of the modern nation-state. Thus, comparative analysis affirms that religious symbols are not static icons but dynamic indicators that are continually re-signified within diverse politico-theological regimes.

Conclusion

At the intersection of national identity and sacred symbolism, flags are not merely official emblems of statehood; they are also visual texts in which memory, belief, and belonging are most intensely embodied. Through their colors, shapes, and symbols, flags carry the heritage of centuries into the present, uniting the past and the present, the sacred and the secular, on a single surface. Throughout history, these symbols have shifted in meaning according to context:

in the medieval period, the cross served as the military expression of divine mission, whereas in the modern era it has evolved into a secular signifier of cultural continuity. In the Ottoman Empire, the crescent and star drew upon cosmic associations of celestial bodies to become religious symbols, later standardized into national forms from the Tanzimat reforms to the Republican era. In India, the Ashoka Chakra transformed from an ancient Buddhist-Hindu icon into a constitutional symbol of anti-colonial resistance. The Pan-Buddhist flag developed from a local design into an emblem of international Buddhist identity.

These symbols are not merely indicators of identity; they unify populations under a shared sense of belonging, confer sanctity upon authority, render flags inviolable, and at times make visible historical rivalries. In Israel, the *Magen David* represents the resolve for national rebirth born from the trauma of the Holocaust; in Saudi Arabia, the inclusion of the *shahada* on the flag underscores the theological foundation of the state, and its prohibition against being flown at half-mast preserves its sanctity. The periods in which the cross and crescent confronted one another illustrate how symbols continued to function as identity markers even on the battlefield. While geometric symbols like the cross in Western traditions are intertwined with historical and cultural heritage, in the East, textual inscriptions, cosmic imagery, and chromatic representations are more prevalent. Legally, religious symbols in Islamic contexts are often protected through constitutional measures, whereas in the West they are preserved more through historical precedent and customary practices.

Even when forms of government change or borders are redrawn, these symbols endure. For flags serve as enduring bridges that carry both memory and belief in the formation of nations as “imagined communities.” Their persistence despite debates over secularism demonstrates the resilience of the myth–memory–sacredness triad at the roots of national identity. In this sense, the flag is both the theological language of politics and the visible text of collective memory.

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