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Part One

# Identity

## Introduction to Part One

The preferred form of political identity in the modern world is belonging to a nation. In this conception, the world is made up of nations, just as the organization that brings them together is the "United Nations." Each nation is entitled to its state, so that the basic building block of the international order is the nation state. This international order represents an extension to the world at large of a pattern that developed in Europe over a long period. France, for example, has been a nation state in some sense since the Middle Ages, Spain since the sixteenth century, Germany only since the nineteenth century. But however recent some of the current political geography of Europe may be, the existence of nations was already a basic feature of its political landscape in late medieval times, and these nations in turn had roots going back into the early Middle Ages. Just how real the continuity was, and how inevitable the shaping of the political geography of Europe as a community of nations, are not questions we need concern ourselves with. It is enough that this European pattern of nation states gradually emerged and was exported in modern times to the non-European world. Or more precisely, the new Westernized elites of non-European societies were at pains to import it—and for good reason: it enabled them to claim independence from Europe in the name of a European value. This did not mean that in real life every country became a nation state; but some did, and those that did not were under pressure to fake it.

A crucial feature of the concept of the nation is the centrality of ethnicity to it.[1] Europe had come to see itself as a community of nations

[1] I use the term ethnicity in contradistinction to religious affiliation. Ethnicity in this conception is what makes a Breton a Breton and a Basque a Basque, and a key part of what makes a Frenchman French and a Spaniard Spanish; but it is not what makes a Buddhist a Buddhist.

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sharing a civilization, and to an extent a religion, but divided by ethnicity, and this was the nationalist paradigm that was then widely adopted in the non-European world. Nations were peoples—like the French, the Poles, and the Danes, who were differentiated most obviously by the fact that they spoke French, Polish, and Danish respectively. By the same token nations were not religiously defined groups: Catholics and Protestants, or Lutherans and Calvinists, are not peoples in the European sense, and so do not qualify as nations. It is in this respect that the nations of Europe were always a secular phenomenon. The doctrine of secularism is, of course, a modern development, and in pre-modern times the religious tradition of Europe had political pretensions that no secularist could have accepted. But those pretensions had always coexisted with non-religious, ethnically defined political identities. This coexistence could naturally take more than one form. There could be intimate symbiosis, as in the case of Protestantism and English nationalism after the Reformation; or religion might be pushed aside, as in French nationalism since the Revolution. This second pattern, in which religion is seen as irrelevant or even pernicious, has been far more widespread in the modern than in the pre-modern world. But the key point is that whatever their relationship to religion, nations as such were identified in ethnic, not religious terms: English and French, not Protestant and Catholic. It was ethnicity, not religion, that was constitutive of nations, and the religious tradition of Europe was always one that left space for ethnic identities.

This European way of looking at things was by no means idiosyncratic, but neither was it universal. Other parts of the world had their own ethnic and religious traditions, and the relationship of these to political identity could be very different. Thus, exporting the European conception of political identity to such regions was bound to produce some distinctly un-European outcomes. We begin with the Islamic world.