The aim of this chapter is to examine certain religious dimensions of nationalism in historical perspective, giving special attention to what I have elsewhere termed the “profane sacrality” of national identity (Hedetoft 1990a, 1995). According to this analysis, national identity functions as both a formal and substantive replacement of public-collective religiosity, following the modern privatisation of religious belief. “Die Nation fordert wie Gott liebende Hingabe” (“the nation requires, like God, loving, unselfish devotion”), as the German political philosopher Erhard Stölting approvingly suggested in the mid-1980s (Stölting 1988). George Mosse refers to nationalism as a “cult of death” (Mosse 1990). And Anthony Smith, following both Carlton Hayes and Emile Durkheim, in more pacific, less dramatic terms, conceptualises the nation as a “sacred communion of citizens, a willed and felt communion of those who assert a moral faith and feel an ancestral affinity” (Smith 2000). This is a formulation obliquely echoing Ernest Renan’s well-known definition of the nation as a daily plebiscite in which citizens continuously reaffirm and commemorate their sense of belonging to the national community based on its “past glories” and “heroic deeds” (Renan 1882/1990). Or in Michael Herzfeld’s potent formulation, “the secular equivalent of salvation is the idea of a patriotic and democratic community, one that tolerates neither graft nor oppression” (Herzfeld 1992, 6).

The key question addressed in this chapter pertains to the specifics of this national belief system. First, how is “loving, unselfish devotion” expected (even in a sense required) to be practically and symbolically manifested by and maintained in the minds of citizens—through various kinds of ritual acts of belonging—as a seemingly essential and transcendent bond between its members and between nation and state? Moreover, how is nationalism as a civil, political religion currently affected by transnationality and globalisation?
After first considering the rationale, modalities and rituals/discourses of nationalism-as-religion, the major portion of this chapter is devoted to an analysis of the ritual sacrality of belonging in the phase of nationalism proper (between 1880 and 1945), as well as in the present age of globalisation. It is argued that significant transformations (of function, form and content) have taken place, notably as regards rituals of death and unselfish suffering—transformations implying that national religiosity now finds itself positioned, uneasily, between the pompousness of state ritualism, the mundane quality of civic allegiance, the nostalgia of past glory, and the complexities and asymmetries of transnational belonging.

Positioning Nationalism as a Modern Belief System

As regards the meaning of religion and religiosity, I follow Carolyn Marvin and David Ingle’s succinct formulation in their paper “Blood Sacrifice and the Nation: Revisiting Civil Religion” (1996): “a system of cosmological propositions grounded in a belief in a transcendent power expressed through a cult of divine being and giving rise to a set of ethical prescriptions” (Marvin and Ingle 1996, 1)—although one might sensibly quibble with the authors over the use of “ethical” rather than the more precise term “moral”. As for nationalism, in an abstract sense it is the necessary idealism of the self-created state, as the highest instantiation of the zoon politikon and its communal spirit. It is intimately tied to the function of the state as the incubator and representative of the “general interest”, the volonté générale, positioned above and beyond the ordinary self-interested concerns of the common person—the preserver and guarantor of order, harmony, solidarity and identity (Hall 1998; Hedetoft 1995; Rousseau 1762/1950; Schieder 1992). By virtue of this position as societal authority and ultimate arbiter, the state can and will legitimately issue demands on members of the community (subjects or citizens) for loyalty, obedience, sacrifice, self-abnegation, devotion, belief and trust built on the morality of community and cultural togetherness. The most common forms and methods used to impose and enact these virtues are practical and symbolic existentialism in ritualised form—its highest manifestation being personal death in an ulterior cause and for the greater good in national wars. The prototype of this person is the almost allegorical figure of the citizen-soldier (Hedetoft 1995, part I, chapter 2). Along