

TWO IDENTITY BUILDERS IN AMITY AND ENMITY: Religion and Politics

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Abstract: Religion and politics are the two ancient social institutions which propose, each in its own way, a notion of how to live in this world. Since both of them structure the social living of people they are everywhere interactive. The constant interaction of politics and religion in different countries gives birth to diverse forms of political and religious co-habitations and there emerges consequent issues revolving their identities, methods of reaching out to people and means of their survival. This paper explains the rationale of the inevitable alliance between politics and religion, exposes the important models of politics and religion co-existing in the current world and examines the potential of religion to withstand the attempts of politics to overwhelm religion. It also envisages that the emerging cold war between secular and religious nationalisms will not result in disastrous casualties.

Keywords: Civil Religion, Deprivatization of Religion, Patronization of Religious Symbols by Politics, Political and Religious Interactions, Religious Nationalism, Secular Nationalism.

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1. Introduction

Religion and Politics are two ancient social institutions. We cannot say when they did exactly begin. They might have originated when humans started organizing their relationship with the Absolute and fellow beings. Anyhow, the history of civilizations shows that they are unavoidable pillars of social life.

Religion: What do we mean by religion? The philosophers, historians, theologians, anthropologists, psychologists and sociologists interpret religion differently. Rudolf Otto, a German philosopher and theologian, in his work *The Idea of Holy* (1917) analysing the biblical accounts of the experience of the prophets and saints in their encounter with God described the essence of religious awareness as “awe, a unique blend of fear and fascination before the divine.”⁶ We are familiar with the definitions given by E. B. Taylor and F. Schleiermacher. They all conceive religion as a set of beliefs and practices through which people communicate with the Absolute.

The social scientists do not like, however, to perceive religion merely as a set of abstract doctrines or values. To them religion is a social institution related to the structures and processes of human societies. It reflects and affects the stratification systems in society, political and economic processes, levels of integration and of conflict, and the course of social change.⁷ Given that our focus is how religion interacts with politics, here we will look at religion from the sociological perspective. The definition given by Clifford Geertz suits well for our purpose: Religion is

a system of symbols which acts to establish powerful, pervasive, and long-lasting moods and motivations in men by formulating conceptions of a general order of existence

⁶Winston L. King, Religion, in *The Encyclopaedia of Religion*, Mircea Eliade, ed., vol. 12, New York: Macmillan Publishing Company, 1987, 284.

⁷J. Milton Yinger, “Social Aspects of Religion,” *The New Encyclopaedia Britannica*, vol. 15, New York: Encyclopedia Britannica Inc., 1980, 604-605.

and clothing these conceptions with an aura of factuality that the moods and motivations seem uniquely realistic.⁸

To put it differently, religion is a social agent operating continuously as supplier and regulator of human behaviour.

Politics: Like religion, politics is also defined from various perspectives. According to Robert Dahl, known as the Dean of American Political Scientists, political system is a persistent pattern of human relationships that involves power, rule or authority. Max Weber, the German sociologist, defined politics as the striving to share power or the striving to influence the distribution of power, either among states or among groups within a state.⁹

Invariably all the definitions of politics are focused on power and this is because the very *raison d'être* of politics is the acquisition and management of authority. Many of the values for which people strive – power, prestige and possessions – are in scarce supply. If each individual tries to acquire them in his/her own way then the social life would become impossible. Hence, there is the need of an organism that distributes the resources and opportunities equitably to the individuals. Political Institutions are the structures that assign ultimate coercive power to certain procedures and certain individuals in order to enforce approved ways of achieving life's values.¹⁰

There can be as many definitions of politics as the number of political scientists. However in the context of our discussion, we understand politics in reference to the accumulation, organization and utilization of power in a region, territory or society, especially the power to govern, to decide who controls the common institutions of society and on what terms.

⁸C. Geertz, “Religion as a Cultural System,” *Anthropological Approaches to the Study of Religion*, Michael Banton, ed., London: Tavistock, 1966, 4.

⁹M. Sushitra, “Political Philosophy,” *ACPI Encyclopaedia of Philosophy*, J. J. Puthenpurackal, ed., Bangalore: Asian Trading Corporation, 2010, 1051-1052.

¹⁰Yinger, “Social Aspects of Religion,” 611.

Similar Interests: The above two brief sketches show that both religion and politics are socially committed institutions. Both propose a notion of how to live in this world. They provide not merely ideas but they entail a set of practices that serve to give identity to persons as well as to groups. They structure their social living. Both have answers to some of the fundamental questions people ask about life, their disasters and their future. Since both are interested with the same questions that affect human destiny they are everywhere interactive. As these social agents intersect constantly (they catch fish in the same pond) there emerges also a series of questions or issues: What are the modes or forms in which they outreach people? Where do their goals and approaches converge and diverge? What types of relationships they mutually carry on when the societies become more heterogeneous in culture? How do the changes in culture affect their mutual relationship? We do not deal with them all in this short paper.

Our objective is firstly to explain the rationale of the inevitable alliance between politics and religion; secondly to explore the important models of politics and religion co-existing in the current world and finally to ask: Will the religion be the loser in the game played with politics? We will conclude examining the question whether the bond between politics and religion is detrimental to the future of humankind or not?

2. Inevitable Bond between Politics and Religion¹¹

A broader and deeper study of history of civilizations reveals that politics and religion are inevitably related and that their influences are more or less reciprocally equivalent. They are independent variables but they are bound to live in friendship for each other's welfare, why?

Politics, despite its independence as a separate social institution, is in need of religion. Politics is power and power in politics is a compound of force, influence and authority. Power

¹¹Max L. Stackhouse, "Politics and Religion," *The Encyclopaedia of Religion*, Mircea Eliade, ed., vol.11, New York: Macmillan Publishing Company, 1987, 408-410.

can be enforced through disciplinary measures only for a short period. In the long term, political power, to be accepted by the people, has to be founded on meaningful vision of life. People within or beyond the boundaries of a political system will subvert, disobey and resist force if they feel that the basic vision of life is lacking or not respected by the concerned political system. In other words politics without proper qualities of life cannot exercise legitimate authority over the people.

How and where politics can acquire legitimate values rendering authority? Wealth and intelligence claim, to a certain extent, authority, but they also fail in having a final command or control over people. Only when the political wisdom and force are transformed into a metaphysical-moral vision of life it can assert legitimacy. Political power is not merely to serve the principles of life on this earth; rather it points to the purposes beyond the empirical life. Authority in all civilizations is incomprehensible without paying attention to the transcendental or ultimate sense of life. Therefore, politics cannot but depend upon religions who have been all through the history the depositors of ethical visions.

Similarly, religion is also in need of politics. No culture or religion can survive without political support and public force. The threat of violence is a fact of life and societies of all times needed some designated political authority to arbitrate disputes, to disarm and control arbitrary violence from within and to withstand aggressive invasion from without. Religions, which remain merely as utopian ideas cannot ensure continuity and harmony. That is why we notice that religions die out when they are not constitutionally safeguarded by some political order (Zoroastrianism). The political leaders have a say in determining which religious perspectives are acceptable in a region or which religious leaders are to be honoured in a nation. History attests that religions have spread due to the political conquests.

In short, politics and religion must not be seen as entirely autonomous entities; they have to be seen in mutual collaboration. Religions function as the guarantor of legitimacy to politics and politics serve as the custodian of religious bodies.

What religions can crown, politics can dethrone and what religion legitimates, politics can de-legitimate. But what religion brings into conflict, politics cannot easily reconcile; and what religion unites, politics cannot easily divide.

3. Modes of Political and Religious Interaction¹²

Politics and religion, each has its own field structured by different ways of relating authority and equality, closure and access, etc. Yet in the exercise of authority and ensuring equality, religion and politics cut across mutually their boundaries. A current example of the crossing of boundaries is the dispute over conducting devotional practices in the Government aided private management schools. Both religion and state have an interest in the education of children. But the question is whether injecting devotional practices into the state-supported schools represents an encroachment into the coercive power of the state.

The close relationship between religion and politics has been sustained in diverse forms. In some cases the state may seek to abolish religion altogether. In other cases, the state may distance itself from religion and guarantee religious freedom within its territories. In yet other cases a tenuous link between the state and the religion remains. Let us see three variables representing the form of religion-politics interaction in a few nations.

3.1. Religious Nationalism

The latter part of the twentieth century witnesses an upsurge of religio-ethnic nationalism. The major reason for the emergence of such religion centred nationalisms may be, as David Martin says, the border situation of the nationalities. Referring to the countries like Greece, Cyprus, Poland, Belgium, Ireland, and Croatia, he shows how an indissoluble union of religion and nation arise to fight against foreign domination. In these states,

¹²As regards the discussions under this heading on the modes of interaction between religion and politics I am indebted to Linda Woodhead and Paul Heelas, eds., *Religion in Modern Times: An Interpretative Anthology*, Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 2000, chapter 7, 214-263.

the Church has been the sole available vehicle of nationality and hence bishops came forward in public to speak for nations. In Cyprus, they even led independent struggles.

In such struggles, religion assumes the role of a suffering Messiah. The religious symbols were visibly used to mobilize the masses. The myth of identity is strengthened in different ways: the Greeks celebrate in full swing the Resurrection, the Polish arrange pilgrimages to Our Lady of Czestochowa and the Irish climb St. Patrick's mountain. The religion and politics are united on the basis of suffering and threat. Whenever there is a threat or border situation, the nation is pushed towards the historic faith of the people. It happens even in atheist countries when they are encountered with a threat from another atheistic nation. This is the situation of Rumania and Poland, Hungary and Czechoslovakia.¹³

Another example of religion becoming a political force in situations of threat is Zionism. Theodor Herzl, the founder of Zionism, in a pamphlet entitled *Der Judenstaat* (1896), presented the movement of Zionism as a response to the challenge of anti-Semitism. He suggested that the Jews could very well live merged with other nations if they would be left in peace for a few generations; but he added that the nations would not leave them in peace. To him, an apt solution to their problem would be to grant sovereignty over a portion of the globe large enough to satisfy the rightful requirements of a nation. He also stated that it was the distress, which bounded the Jews together and helped them to discover their strength.¹⁴ In most of the cases, it is the existence of a common enemy that prepares the favourable ground for the growth of religious nationalism.

Behind the steady growth of theocratic Islamic rule in many states the driving force is nothing but the imagined threat of Western culture. One of the major Islamic political strategists

¹³David Martin, *A General Theory of Secularisation*, Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1978, 107-108.

¹⁴Z. Zalman Abramov, *Perpetual Dilemma: Jewish Religion in the Jewish State*, Cranbury, New Jersey: Associated University Presses, 1976, 60-61.

says that the post-Cold War West needs a new empire of evil to mobilize against. I think that its opposite is also true. The Islamic countries are also in need of a secular foe to mobilize their own forces. The Islamic nationalists make no distinction between religion and politics. In their outlook, the distinction made between religion and politics is only a mark of Western way of thinking. They reject the notion that what draws people together as a nation is a rational compact in a geographical region through common laws and political processes. This does not mean that they reject everything that is Western. They see no contradiction in adopting certain forms of Western political organization provided they can be legitimized by the traditional principles of religion.¹⁵ They are worried about the moral basis of politics, and in that they are not ready for any negotiation. They insist that the political basis of a nation must be nothing but Islamic ideology.

Religious nationalism postulates that nations are divine creations with specific God-given purposes and features. The nation is often believed to stand in a unique relationship with the creator from which both specific obligations and exclusive rights are derived. Nations are ascribed certain roles in the grand divine design known as the history of humanity and these duties are included as central to the national identity. One's own nation is often regarded as the predestined leader of the nations of the earth. The members of the chosen nation are themselves reflections of the divine. The authorities of the nation claim to uphold a mystic knowledge, a national gnosis, asserting that world history will conclude in the foundation of a nation of gods. The religious nationalist think that they are engaged in the apocalyptic battle between the divine and diabolic powers.¹⁶

¹⁵Mark Juergensmeyer, *The New Cold War? Religious Nationalism Confronts the Secular State*, Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1993, 1-7.

¹⁶Mattias Gardell, *Countdown to Armageddon*, London: Hurst and company, 1996, 8-9.

3.2. De-Privatized Religion

With the formation of nation-states in the modern age, the Church and State became separate entities in Europe and this process of mutual alienation is known as the phenomenon of differentiation. It is a process whereby the set of social activities once performed by religions are now split up between different institutions of secular state. But coming to the postmodern age, we observe that sacred is not inevitably excluded from the political realm. Instead, there is a complex and unpredictable redistribution of the sacred in the social life. As there was secular sector within the sacred space in the undifferentiated societies, so there is a sacred carry-over into the secular sectors of a differentiated society. The sacred is lodging in new structures of power, cohesion and identity and this we call deprivatization.¹⁷

One of the ways in which the sacred creeps into the secular space is by the induction of symbols. All over the globe political parties borrow rituals, creeds, texts, gurus, charisma, exorcism, etc. from religion. A sacred aura is attached to the state, its people, its flag and its territories. Jimmy Carter declared in his first campaign that he was a born-again Christian, and George Bush in his first campaign told Americans that Jesus Christ was the political philosopher who most influenced him.¹⁸ Coming to India, the ruling party Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) patronize religious symbols to mobilize patriotic sentiments at the moments of elections. The politicians positively employ in their rhetoric the dominant representations which are used of gods. The reference to the images of gods strengthens their political authority, giving some kind of legitimacy to their strategies. This is not totally new. In the medieval period, the picture of a god presiding over a feudal court, surrounded by the angels and

¹⁷David Martin, *Does Christianity Cause War?* London: Clarendon Press, 1997, 40-41.

¹⁸P. E. Hammond and D. W. Machacek, “Religion and the State,” *The Oxford Handbook of the Sociology of Religion*, Peter B. Clarke, ed., Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011, 403.

archangels was being used in the political circles to legitimate their order, law and hierarchy.¹⁹

Another way in which the process of deprivatization gets momentum within the liberal democracies is through the creation of political parties with a religious basis. The Christian Democratic parties of Western Europe furnish a good example. *The Christian Democrats* of Germany and Italy, the CVP/PSC in Belgium and the *Movement Républicain Populaire* (MRP) in France were political creations often founded by Catholic figures. But they did not continue the defensive separatist mentality of the long established catholic parties. Instead, they embraced the democratic political system and the social market economy. In Germany the new Christian Democrat party was a cross-confessional party incorporating both Protestant and Catholic militants. This new party consciously stressed their independence from the clerical guidance and declared their wish to win the support of all voters regardless of their confessional or social background. This does not mean that Church is excluded from the political realm. What did largely disappear was the notion of political parties devoted to the defence of the particular interests and values of Catholicism. Instead a new vision of working politically, as an active influence within a range of non-Catholic parties and movements is getting accepted.²⁰

3.3. Civil Religion

Jean-Jacques Rousseau was the one who interpreted first the concept of civil religion as an appropriate form of religion for the modern times when direct bonds between the ruler and the ruled cease to exist. In his view, for the maintenance of the community at modern times, citizens must have a religion of their own which will make people fulfil their obligation to the

¹⁹David Nicholls, *Deity and Domination: Images of God and the State in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries*, London and New York: Routledge, 1989, 223-224.

²⁰Martin Conway, "Introduction," *Political Catholicism in Europe 1918-1965*, Tom Buchanan & Martin Conway, eds., Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996, 30-33.

state. The dogmas of this new religion can be the concerns of the state and its members. They have to be simple and exactly worded which need no explanation or commentary for comprehension. He outlines its positive tenets: they are citizens possessed of intelligence and foresight, the happiness of the just, the punishment of the wicked and the sanctity of the social contract. Its negative canon is only one: intolerance.²¹

Robert Bellah, a proponent of civil religion in America, envisaged an eclectic mix of religious and secular beliefs and symbols for the civic life. As regards the Americans, he said that civil religion is constituted of the words and acts of the founding fathers mainly the Presidents. For instance, he refers to the second inaugural of Jefferson:

I shall too need the favour of that Being in whose hands we are, who led our fathers, as Israel of old, from their native land and planted them in a country flowing with all the necessaries and comforts of life. Europe is Egypt; America, the promised land. God has led his people to establish a new sort of social order that shall be a light unto all nations.²²

Bellah even looked forward to the emergence of an international civil religion. At present, he says, the flickering flame of the United Nations burns too low to be the focus of a cult, but the emergence of a genuine trans-national sovereignty will certainly need a change. It will necessitate the incorporation of a worldwide civil religion which goes beyond any particular religious matrix.

José Casanova indicates an efficient path for religions to be functional in a world of civil religions. According to him, religions have to move from state-oriented entities to society-oriented institutions. They may enter into the public sphere to defend the establishment of democratic regimes and the right of

²¹Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *The Social Contract and Discourses*, London and Melbourne: Dent, 1973, 306-308.

²²Robert Bellah, “Civil Religion in America,” *Daedalus* 96, 1 (Winter 1967), 7-8, 18, cited in Linda Woodhead and Paul Heelas, eds., *Religion in Modern Times: An Interpretative Anthology*, Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 2000, 240.

individuals for the public sphere.²³ In other words, religions can play a significant role in the society by becoming an efficient partner in public debates. By reminding the normative positions they can influence the public opinion. The two modern dynamos of contemporary society are the capitalist market and the administrative state. They continue their self-propelled march towards a world system challenging the indigenous tradition and wrecking the unorganized masses. In such a context, religions could be the prophetic voice against the unjust policies of a globalized market.

4. Will Religion Be the Loser?

We have seen three models of politics and religion interacting in the contemporary era. Now if we make an assessment of these diverse forms and the current scenario of their cohabitation in our surroundings can we say that religion is losing the game? I think, no. The result is not altogether negative for religion.

In several countries, religions have played significant roles to capture freedom. For instance, Mahatma Gandhi's campaign against British rule illustrated how much the Hindu religion could be a powerful instrument to resist totalitarian regimes. Christianity had a decisive role in overthrowing the communist government in the Eastern Europe. Latin America furnishes a good example of Christianity in the twentieth century playing an active part in opposing unjust socio-economic and political arrangements. The liberation theology helped populations to escape from social bonds by agrarian revolution, urbanization, literacy and communication. Many priests, sisters and pastoral agents came for the sake of people. Their service, solidarity and shared poverty undercut long-established social and cultural distances amidst people. In some other nations, religions extend support to the states for the maintenance of democracy. A best example would be Protestantism in USA.²⁴

²³José Casanova, *Public Religions in the Modern World*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994, 220-222.

²⁴D. H. Levine, *Popular Voices in Latin American Catholicism*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992, 32-40.

Over and above the political role, a new space for religion is dawned in the secular states. In contrast to what modern philosophers claimed, the secular states failed in responding satisfactorily to the quests of contemporary people. Reason, science and technology could not solve the fundamental issues of humanity. Consequently, secular societies look again back to religions to fulfil the normative role. Religions have the best resources to supply directions on how to order the society. They acquire a meaningful space in the political life by becoming an efficient dialogic partner in the public conversations.

5. A New Cold War?

The social scientists, who are concerned over the current developments in the political scenario raise the following question: Will there be a new cold war between secular and religious nationalisms or a peaceful-coexistence? It is a legitimate question because there is no satisfactory compromise on the ideological level between religious and secular nationalisms and hence a global state of enmity could settle in. We see the emergence of a united religious bloc stretching from Central and South Asia through the Middle East to Africa. With an arsenal of nuclear weapons at their disposal and fuelled by American fear of Islam, it might well replace the old Soviet Union as a united global enemy of the secular West.

But it is equally right that religious nationalists are incapable of uniting with one another and that they desire an economic and political reconciliation with the secular countries. In this context, a grudging tolerance might develop between religious and secular nationalists and each might be able to admire what the enemy provides: communitarian values and moral vision on the one hand, individuality and rational rules of justice on the other. In this mutual dialogue, there is hope for a new synthesis between religion and secularity. A healthy merge of old religious culture with the spirit of democracy and organizational set up of industrial world can build up a balanced planet.²⁵

²⁵Juergensmeyer, *The New Cold War?* 201-202.

6. Conclusion

Politics and religion are bound to cooperate for each other's welfare due to various reasons. Political power, to be accepted by the people, has to be founded on a meaningful vision of life, of which religions are the main depositors. Similarly, political force will be necessary for religions to control arbitrary violence that arises from within and without their communities.

The coexistence of religion and state gives shape to diverse forms of social living. In some countries where politics faced the border situation, religion became the cementing force of the society and at sometimes that produced religious nationalist regimes. In those countries where secular culture had once dominated over religion have now begun to induct religious symbols, attach a sacred aura to the state and put in political fronts with some religious basis. There are also cases, in which the citizens make religion of the state, i.e., a religion that sets the visions of the founding fathers of the state as the norm of civil life and enters into public sphere to defend the democratic principles and rights of the individuals.

In the 'give and take relation' between religion and politics, as some think, religion will not altogether lose its identity. In many countries, religions continue to play significant roles in resisting injustice and in protecting ethical values needed for the democratic living. Of course, the mutual overlapping of religion and politics during their involvement in society may create conflicts in public life. These tensions, however, will ultimately lead to a healthy blend of political and religious ethos.