

# BIBLICAL VIEW OF RELIGION AND POLITICS

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## A. Introduction

Throughout history religion and politics have been essential and key elements of human life. The interplay between religion and politics in human societies, more than any other aspects of human life, has been very active factor. Often the two have been in both ideological and in practical order very amiable, but often too at conflicts and at odds, trying to overpower each other even with violence. It is very auspicious of the present times that most of human factors, including religion and politics, have been able to enter into a spirit of communion through mutual dialogue. We welcome this development and desire that it be brought to happy and fruitful conclusion.

## B. Historical Note

### 1. Five Main Epochs in the History of the People of Israel

**Beginnings in Canaan:** The origins of the people of Israel is rooted in the person of Abraham (19<sup>th</sup> century BCE), who from Ur in Mesopotamia moved to Haran further North and eventually settled in Hebron in Canaan. There his descendants became numerous, settling peacefully as a social group among the peoples of the land.

**Sojourn in Egypt:** Later (ca. 17<sup>th</sup> century BCE) a migration of a large group of them took place into Egypt, who, although a foreign group of people, for some centuries lived seemingly as a well-established society. A remnant may have stayed back in Canaan. With the rise of new powerful Egyptian dynasties in the 14<sup>th</sup> century, the foreign Israelite society lost its favourable standing and in fact came to be treated as slaves, entering a life of afflictions.

**Exodus from Egypt and Settlement in Canaan:** In these times of affliction Moses arose and led the people out of Egypt from bondage, leading them, over a number of years, through Sinai up to the fringes of the ancient land of Canaan (13<sup>th</sup> century). There they crossed into the land of Canaan

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under the leadership of Joshua and subsequently established themselves, sometimes overcoming much resistance from local inhabitants, sometimes with much ease. Thereafter for about two centuries the people of Israel lived under the leadership of the Judges as a sacral society of tribal confederation, in the style of ancient amphictyony system. A new phase began (ca. Middle of the 11<sup>th</sup> century), when Israel was organized into a kingdom or state in the style of other nations and peoples: Saul became king (ca. 1050 BCE), after whom the kingdom reached its height with King David (1000-961 BCE) and his son Solomon (961-922 BCE). The kingdom then continued as divided into two: namely, the kingdom of Israel in the North, which survived until 721 BCE, when it was overtaken by Assyria; and the kingdom of Judah in the South, which survived until 587 BCE, when it underwent the same fate at the hand of Babylon.

Exile and post-exilic period: Thereupon the age without the earthly kingdom begun, with a substantial group of prominent persons led into Exile in Babylon and another much smaller group going into self-exile in Egypt, and others remaining in the land of Canaan. This initiated the dispersion of the people of Israel among the nations. But the ingathering of the people begun soon enough after the Persian Kingdom overpowered Babylon and in 538 BCE King Cyrus proclaimed the return of Israelites to their land and way of life. Under the benevolent Persian rule Israel re-established themselves in their land not as a state of its own, but rather as People of the Law, which came to be known as "Judaism". In these times a social split, somewhat reminiscent of the division of the Kingdom in 922BCE, developed between Judea and Samaria, ending up with the Samaritan Schism.

Latter Period: Under the rule of the Greek Ptolemaics (ca. 300-200) and Seleucids (ca. 200-100), the Persian benevolence was replaced by forceful imposition of Hellenistic Political, social and religious power and culture on the people. This great distress led the people to open scale rebellion under Matthaëus and his sons (the Maccabean rebellion, ca. 138BCE), which successfully led to the establishment of the short-lived Hasmonian Kingdom (104 BCE), winning back long cherished statehood and rule, reminiscent of the glories of the times of David and Solomon.

## **2. Biblical History in the Time of Jesus (1<sup>st</sup> century CE)**

During the latter half of the last century BCE political intrigues among smaller local kings hastened the end of the Hasmonian rule by Roman

Empire, who then governed the territory indirectly through non-Jewish governors or kings or directly by their own rulers. Jesus of Nazareth appeared on the scene, at a time when some were bent on the establishment of the Davidic Kingdom, others keen to safeguard the Judaic Religion under whatever political power, and still others waiting for the coming of a New Age.

### **3. Historical Note on Israel and Christianity during Past 20 Centuries**

Since the beginning of the Christian era the Jewish people have been without State and King in the Promised Land, and have lived dispersed among the nations as well. Palestine has been under the rule of the Christian Kings, and subsequently under the Arab and Turkish rulers, until the Zionist Movements (late 19<sup>th</sup> century) led finally to the creation of the State of Israel in Palestine in 1948. That too has been an issue for severe conflicts in the territory up to our times, when a peaceful acceptance of the political State of Israel and a future State of Palestine seems to be in the offing.

After three centuries of strenuous existence among other nations and States Christianity received socio-political acceptance as a religion and received State protection under the Byzantine and the new Roman Empires. Gradually the new Roman Empire in western Europe became the Christian Empire under the rule of the spiritual head of Christianity in Rome, in whom the secular power of the state was also established. Within a few centuries in that Empire of western Europe the idea of secular state developed, leading it to gradual disintegration and establishment of smaller secular States. In mid 19<sup>th</sup> century the spiritual head of the Church in Rome was rid of the secular authority of the State.

During these centuries, however, all Christian communities outside of western Europe remained either under special protection of the State or for the most part without any special reference to it.

## **C. Theological Reflection on Religion and Politics in the Bible:**

### **1. Introductory Remark**

In the larger sense politics may refer to the small or large organization of all respects of human life as society ("polis"). The state is a very particular type of politics entity for which the term is used specifically. In modern times international communities of States is a new political

phenomenon. Religion is meant to organize all inner spiritual dimensions of the human life as person and society. Communities of a Religion are organized as societies, thus as "political" entities in the larger sense or sometimes even as strictly political entity such as a State. The admixture of religion and politics in the life of the human person and society is very complex and intertwining affair. We here try to see the main trends of these realities in the biblical tradition.

## **2. Covenants in the History of the People of God in the Bible**

Religion and Politics for the People of God have evolved around four main Covenants of Yahweh with His People, namely a) the Covenant with Abraham; b) the Covenant at Sinai; c) the Covenant with King David; and d) the New Covenant of post-Exilic period. These put forth essential ideas and practice for religion, society and politics for the people of Israel.

a) The Covenant with Abraham indicated that the descendants of Abraham would possess land in Canaan and become a people, a populous nation under its God. As the primary covenant this laid the foundational concepts and practice for Religion and Politics for the people of Israel, the subsequent covenants basically refining these initial visions according to their own times. Three elements are essential in this primary Covenant for the religious and political life of the Hebrew people:

A very first element in politics and religion here is the "promise and inheritance of land". Many peoples in the Middle East surely as in other places migrated from one place to another seeking habitation. Among them were Abraham and his clan. But this granting of the land of Canaan, as promised by God, became part of the religious and political inheritance and tradition of the Hebrew people. One needs a piece of land or territory as its geography, its "situs" on earth, in order to place oneself concretely as social and political entity. For Israel this particular land became part and parcel of its religious and political history.

The two biblical terms, "ger" (foreigner) and "am ha ares" (people of the land) complement each other vis-à-vis possession of land. Abraham is called a "ger" in the land of his migration (Gen. 23:4) and the settled people called "am ha 'ares". And yet as the descendants of Abraham settled in the land, the former inhabitants would be referred to as "foreigners". Subsequently Israel became once again "ger" in Egypt (Ex. 22:20, 23:9; Dt.

24:18, 22), but never people of that land and requiring to flee from there as final resort. After re-settling in Canaan among its peoples these peoples in turn become "foreigners". Deportation from the land into exile in Babylon gives the people of Israel a new painful experience of being inhabitants in a foreign land once again, in "diaspora", dispersed among the nations, without their own land. The people of Israel have been both "foreigner" and "people of the land" at different epochs of its history.

We may note that while one requires land to be inhabitants on this earth, settlement in the ownership on any particular land is accidental and temporal, not absolute. The biblical description of Abraham as "a wandering Aramean" (Dt. 26:5) is a very appropriate picture of peoples on earth: persons, groups, races, etc. have more often than not moved from place to place. Permanency of land is very relative for races and cultures. Throughout history there have been migrations for various reasons at local, national and international levels. The modern American nations are example of this, as also the global tendency of small and large migrations in our times. Thus land as determining the social or political "locus" of a people, race, nation or State is essential but variable. History shows that the geographical boundaries of races, peoples and States changed back and forth due to reasonable and even unreasonable factors.

Bible indicates that geographical description of a State, nation or people is quite flexible. Internationally more mutual understanding is required for the determination of the boundaries of de facto political States and of people belonging to this or that State or place. To us two or three hundred years may have the impression of being "eternal" yet that is merely a "long moment" of a larger period of time. In the words of Piere Teilhard de Chardin "however old prehistory may make it seem to our eyes, humanity is still very young".

A second element of political and social factor in this Covenant is the concept of a people or nation: In this biblical tradition a people or nation or State is understood to be composed of one's race and people. The race of Abraham was substantially the people of that race, but groups of many other clans, races and peoples were part of its. While concept of race, nation, or even of the State often tends to connote "one single people", historically they are more mixed than single "pure" unit or race. Consciousness of being a single or "pure" unit is very relative in time: often it means that the past mixture of diverse racial elements is forgotten, and that its future is open to

receive new racial elements; perhaps that process is already on. The biblical experience indicates that the more one becomes conscious of being single or pure, the more one is prone to take stand as distinct race and superior to others; on the other hand the more one is conscious of being a communion of many races and people, or that one is in "diasphora" or foreign among others, the more one can become united with many others.

The third element in this Covenant, of course, is the faith in and belonging to God who directs the life of the people. Religion meant God guiding the religious, social and political aspects of life, and that one needed to place one's confidence in God in everything.

b) The Covenant at Sinai established through Moses is given as a permanent remembrance of the deliverance by Yahweh from the slavery in Egypt and returning to the fulfillment of the covenant made to Abraham. In this the God of Israel is defined as Yahweh. This covenant was reaffirmed at Shechem, after the people of Israel had entered and settled in the Promised Land.

The Sinai Covenant is key in the establishment of the specific Religion of Israel under Yahweh who is supreme God. A code of religion as way of life is given, and under the supreme governance of Yahweh a structure for governing the religious, social and political aspects of life of the people is also provided.

Under this Covenant Israel established herself in Canaan as a sacral society of federation of its twelve tribes, founded on the rule of Yahweh Himself, represented in the person of Judges as ruler in Israel. Like Moses the Judges acted as the political, social and religious leader of the people. The Judges were charismatic leaders ("nagid") chosen by God who was supreme authority. All aspects of life are organized under the pattern of Religion.

However, in Canaan Israel grew up in the midst of other small national kingdoms, States, or city states, with larger political States or Empires around them, namely the Babylonian, the Egyptian and the less influential Hittite Empire, governed by kings and rulers, local or foreign, dynastic or not.

But Israel had the need to survive among other nations and be powerful like them, and for that they had to transfer the organization from the system of sacral society under the Judge to that of a kingdom or State under a king

("melek") "like the other nations" (1 Sam 8:5, 20). A theological debate followed, first refusing such authority as by Gideon (Jdg 8:22-23); even deriding outright the idea of a king as in the case of Abimelek (Jdg. 9:1ff), and finally as expressed in two opposing decisions of one favouring earthly kingship as willed by Yahweh himself (1 Sam 9: 1-10 etc.) and the other as demanded by the people against Yahweh's wishes (1 Sam 8:1-22). Accordingly Saul is anointed as King. But the debate continued, and the tribes retained their tribal nature in general, until a decisive step came about in King David.

c) Subsequently in the person of David kingship and kingdom became established factor through Covenant with David, promising him and his posterity a house and kingdom forever (2 Sam 7: 8-16) and establishing Mount Zion, i.e., Jerusalem, as the eternal dwelling place of Yahweh. David had already been a ruler for the Philistines in Ziglak in the regions of Judah. David was anointed king over Judah, and also over North, after the short reign of Saul's son Esh-baal, becoming thus king of the United or Dual Kingdom of Judah and Israel. He extended the kingdom beyond the tribal territories, and he and his son Solomon ruled a kind of Empire like that of the other nations. Kingdom and dynasty rule became factor of Religion in Israel.

Soon, however, the United Kingdom broke up into two, with Judah in the South retaining the Davidic Covenant, while Israel in the North discarding the Davidic Covenant, yet not reverting to governance by Judges as in former times, but by kings of its own style. While in Judah political life and Religion could still be governed under the King, the North experienced much turbulent political life, often with murderous successions to the throne, and with definite conflict between Yahwism and pagan Ba'alism. In fact in both kingdoms with political aspects of life being the primary concerns of the kings "like the other nations", Religion could be taken care of only in a secondary way by the State.

d) The loss of statehood in 578 BCE, followed by exile in "diasphora" brought about the concept of New Covenant of the Final Times, elaborated by Prophets Jeremiah, Ezechiel and Deutro-Isaiah. While at the time of slavery in Egypt Israel was faced with the problem of survival as a people, at the time of exile it was faced with that of survival both as people and as a national and State. This experience was all the more painful because of losing the power and honour of a political State, which Israel enjoyed for over five hundred years. It was theologically and spiritually destructive as

well, since it meant the apparent end of the previous divine covenant and promise.

Prophets Jeremiah, Ezechiel and Deutero-Isaiah proclaimed the coming of the most mature, namely the final age and age of fulfillment, of religion and political life for Israel. These Prophets proclaimed that the State or society could not endure without true religion, namely without Israel's faith and commitment to Yahweh: yet at the same time they were able to project the time-confined history to a beyond-time projection, from the purely bodily dimension to its spiritual extension. There is fundamental spiritualization of all realities, including religion and politics, their material aspects being placed within the larger spiritual dimensions: i) the past history of Israel, now in ashes, enters the universal history of all peoples; ii) the almighty Yahweh, rendered powerless, becomes the powerful God of all peoples and nations; iii) the present religion, now no more, becomes true religion written in the heart of the believer; iv) this nation, this people and this state, now destroyed, is to flourish again in its remnant as a new people in the world; v) this promised land, now lost, is to be the whole world where the promise will be fulfilled. This was an idealistic and universalistic and universalistic vision, which opened up the way to consider any authentic religious, social or political values to materialize in unlimited ways.

### **3. Wider Vision of Religion and Politics in Post-exilic Period**

The post-exilic history of Israel is marked by this wider vision of religion and politics: there was the nostalgia to revert to monarchy, the nation having its own State and its religious system ordered and governed under the State. But while the State did not materialize except as exception, the nation could be still at ease within benevolent foreign political rule, and its religions essentially organized under the governance of a Religious authority, the High Priest, into "Judaism". Whenever the foreign State ceased to be benevolent to Israel, a struggle to gain autonomy as a way of survival surfaced. Concretely speaking Israel could and has survived as a people and religion, whenever it has had its own State or not. Indeed the need for the present political state of Israel has been felt partly for the difficulties of Israel's survival among the nations, and beyond the present State Israel exists among peoples and States elsewhere.

We can note the following development of religious and political leadership in Israel throughout its variegated history; a) at the time of



Exodus, when Israel is an a-political society without land and founded on Religion alone, all leadership is founded in the Charismatic Leader Moses; b) when Israel is established as a quasi-political society having its own land, all leadership is founded in the Judges, who carry out both religious and political functions as Prophet and Ruler; c) as Israel becomes full-pledged political State, the political and religious authority and functions are distributed in the separate persons of the King, the Priest and the Prophet; and d) when Israel reverts to land without its own State, authority in Israel was distributed among the three persons of the "foreign" Ruler, the High Priest and the Prophet, the High Priest becoming more essential Institutions and structures for the functioning of Religion and Politics change according to concrete situations.

#### **4. The Coming of Jesus of Nazareth**

A New Phase in Biblical tradition come about at the coming of Jesus of Nazareth. Christianity appeared in the Biblical Tradition as a fulfillment of the idealistic vision proclaimed by the New Covenant of the post-exilic period. The fundamental differences between the on-going tradition of the Talmud in Israel and of Christianity is that while Judaism upholds the promise of the Messiah, Christianity upholds that the promise has been fulfilled, and the final difference between promise and fulfillment is placed in the person of Jesus.

##### **a) We May Note the Following Four Key Points in Christianity**

i) Firstly, Jesus, in keeping with the style of the post-exile prophets, placed all authentic religion as a spiritual goodness in the heart of the person, proclaiming as questionable and even to be outright rejected, all external manifestations of religions that disturb or destroy its spiritual dimension. On the other hand this spiritual goodness of religion remained open to be manifested through any true religious structures within authentic tradition of the community of believers. Neither is true religion bound to any particular political system, not to the State-Religion supercedes politics, although any person will belong to some State or political system.

ii) Secondly, in keeping with the post-exilic, covenant, Christianity as the new people of God is open to receive all peoples of whatever race or nation. Specific land or specific race, as envisioned in the Covenant to

Abraham, are not determining factors, although people will live in some land and belong to some race.

iii) Thirdly, although in the New Covenant of Jesus, as in the post-exilic times, the earthly material and bodily entered into the spiritual dimension, a converse movement also has happened, namely the utmost spiritual divine entered into the material and bodily reality of this world. the divine reality of God Himself is assumed into historical, material and bodily reality on earth, as is understood in the communion of the Divine in the person of Jesus. this coming down of the Divine to the earthly human comes to its deepest point on the Cross of Jesus, since on the Cross Jesus in total coming down is in communion with the least of humanity. In Christianity, therefor, salvation is finally reduced to loving communion with all down to the least of the suffering humanity and creation. It may be noted that the nucleus of this principle is to be found in the concept of the Suffering Servant of the post-exilic Covenant in Israel. For Christianity, therefore, any social, political or even religion structure will bear true religion when there is a "going down" to all, down to the "poorest of the poor". Thus even a system like slavery could be though of being brought into a system of truly loving communion of its "superior" and "inferior" persons, if practiced according to this spiritual principle. The principle of Communion from the top to below and vice-e-versa is essential for the rightful ordering of society.

iv) Also the principle of personhood is a key factor. The person is the primary entity in the society and it matures through its inner freedom. "Who do people say I am?" is a question that needs to be answered about each person. Jesus insisted on his identity; and conviction about him came about because he spoke and acted with authority, namely that he could be seen as author of what he proclaimed and upheld. Religion is based on a number of principles for the spiritual, moral goodness. Yet the doctrine remain without inner power unless they are concretized in the living person, which determines that person's inner freedom. The person transcends the society and the State because of its spiritual freedom.

J. Maritain would note four characteristics of a society according to the Christian teaching: a) that it must be personalistic, namely that the person is fundamental and basic element; b) that it must be communal, namely tending to a communion among the individual persons; c) that it must be pluralistic, namely to recognize the distinctions of diverse groups and functions; and d)

that it must be theistic, namely that it must be orientated to God its origin, that it be spiritual beyond being temporal.

### **b. Jesus and State**

although Religion supercedes social and political systems, the Bible, in keeping with the principle stated above, teaches to honour and be subject to political authorities, as all authority comes from God (Rom 3:1). Jesus himself pays taxes to the political authorities and teaches to "give to Caesar what is Caesar's, and to God what is God's" (Mt. 22:21). Also Jesus stood in trial under the political rulers of his time, as also to the religious and social authorities, the High Priest and the Sanhedrin. And at the same time from his own point of spiritual authority he has put their authority into challenge, as when he answered Pilate saying "you would have no power over me unless it had been given you from above." (Jn 19:11), and so often being at odds with social and religious authorities of his time.

To be sure all things belong to God, Caesar's and God's alike. But on earth every authentic reality, whatever is Truth, has its own distinct authority, because it is given from above. Each one has his distinct authority, no one has all the authority, and all must relate with each other at the level of their own authority. Authority of the individual and of the community, authority of the temporal and of the spiritual, all are ordained for distinct authority and obedience to each other, in a spirit of serving each other.

The spiritual meaning of authority is essential in understanding Jesus' teaching concerning established authorities in religion and society. A distinction is made between power ("dynamis") and authority ("exousia"), the former as solely strength in the physical sense, the latter as the moral right to that strength, the spiritual element. It is one thing to have power, it is a totally different matter to have authority to exercise that power. The question is: how does power becomes authority? According to the principle of self-denial or self-sacrifice or humility or "going down to the other", power becomes spiritual, when its origin is uprooted from the self and placed in the third "person", in the other. To be authoritative the authority needs to place its heart in God above and in the heart of the "persons below", over whom authority is placed. Authority is thus not owned, but "given" or "received" from above and even from below, a participation of and communion with the authority of others. Authority is also obedience, a listening to the other; and obedience is also authority, a capacity to be in

communion with authority itself. This communion with the other is what makes authority or obedience a spiritual power. Thus religion by itself is not a spiritual matter, nor politics merely a secular one. Both can act very materialistically and worldly-way if they act in their own name only, in autocratic way; both can act in very spiritual way, if they act with a mind of having received authority as gift, and in communion and solidarity with all concerned, above or below. Authority as spiritual power indicates that the persons having authority are responsible entity, spiritually grown-ups, childlike but not childish. Authority is indeed the spiritual freedom of the person. Thus encounter of authorities of various aspects of life must happen respectfully and with substance, as very mature encounter.

#### **D. A Note on Modern Democracy**

These principles of individuality and communion in the realm of authority lay the foundation for democracy, namely, the recognition of the authority of the individuals and the participation of authority all together. In older times when the larger population could not have been active participants, the monarchic system took active role to incorporate in their decision the mind of the masses. Today the larger population has become active participants in authority. Their role will become more active as they become more responsible in their own authority, as they become more responsible persons, possessing greater spiritual freedom.

There is one problem in modern democracy namely, it still remains autocratic, not of persons but as groups. The practical principle of democracy today, for the major part, is governance by majority rather than by equally responsible people, and decisions tend to reflect consensus. This style needs to be developed. The future development of democracy will be a reaching out to ordering human affairs through responsible consensus at local, national or even international levels.