

RELIGION AND POLITICS:
A PERSPECTIVE ON THEIR INTER-DEPENDENCE
IN CONTEMPORARY SOCIETY

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ABSTRACT

The human origins of religion and politics and their development up to the present day is indeed mind boggling. Although we cannot possibly determine when exactly religion and politics began in historical terms, these two realities must have originated when humans started becoming aware of their relationship with ‘the Absolute’ and with their fellow human beings. Religion and politics have been a significant part of human life and social behaviour ever since. The resurgence of religion and politics in the institutional life of society across the globe requires a fresh discussion about the role religion and politics play in human interaction today. This article attempts to dissect the compromises and anomalies of these two social institutions – religion and politics.

Keywords: Religion, politics, authority, power, values, autonomous entities

INTRODUCTION

In April 2019, a coordinated bombing attack of three churches and three hotels took place in Sri Lanka. The majority of the victims were people engaged in Christian worship on the holiest day of their religious calendar while foreign tourists and local citizens in the three hotels were also victims of this criminal act. Since the perpetrators were all Muslims at least in name, the obvious prejudices and biases were once again reiterated among the majority population. Moreover, the incumbent political leadership also came under suspicion for aiding and abetting the perpetrators for their own political gains. A volatile discussion on religion and politics appeared in the public discourse that began to ask whether the atrocities committed were religiously inspired with a politically motivated agenda. In the aftermath of the attacks, the minority Christian community and majority Buddhist community suddenly seemed united in their joint accusation of the Muslim minority community. A new crisis was unfolding in Sri Lanka with severe political implications as the country plunged into

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the third decade of the third millennium with its own economic downturns and fiscal crisis looming. By April 2022, the country was at a tipping point of economic bankruptcy and political instability. At the time of writing, the country still hopes that international financial institutions will stabilize the economy, attract investors and bring life back into the collapsed tourist industry.

STEPPING AHEAD

There appears to be an obvious co-relation between religion and politics when groups of terrorists seem to find a religious motivation to attack places of worship on Easter Day, which is a day considered especially holy by Christians. Religion seems to have been a consideration by the perpetrators who found a connection with the ethos of their own religious belief as expressed in the video utterances released to the public after their attacks.¹ The victims in the three churches and the three hotels were engaged in prayer when these coordinated attacks occurred on that Easter Sunday. The incumbent governments have been put under enormous pressure by the local communities to find the perpetrators, as any similar interest by any outside body was conspicuously absent. One reason for this ‘lethargy’ shown by non-governmental bodies may be the countless similar ideologically inspired atrocities that have been committed since 9/11 across the globe. In most cases the core ‘perpetrators’ have also been the victims of mindless violence that has led them to self-annihilation after inflicting terror and fear on others. Such a violent ideology belongs neither to religion nor to politics and will not lead to any lasting transformation.

In one of the orations delivered during the funeral service of late Archbishop Desmond Tutu (1931-2021), also known as the ‘South African Lama’, this great legend and icon of the liberation struggle and uncompromising freedom fighter was described as the ‘moral compass and national conscience’ of South Africa. His struggle was for freedom from apartheid and for justice, equality and peace. His was one of the most influential religious voices in the secular/political world. Religion and politics are enmeshed with each other for various reasons and sometimes they have brought forth life while in other instances their opposition to each other has caused irreparable damage to human communities. It is unreasonable to consider religion as totally isolated from politics even though there are those who say that the two are diametrically opposed, one belonging to the secular order and the other hovering in the realm of the sacred.

¹. See <https://edition.cnn.com/2019/04/26/asia/sri-lanka-suicide-bomber-intl/index.html>. accessed 26th April 2019. This YouTube shows final video pictures of the ring leader and views of the planned attack.

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What does the term "religion" mean? Religion is interpreted differently by intellectuals, historians, theologians, anthropologists, psychologists, and sociologists. For instance, German philosopher Rudolf Otto examined biblical narratives of the prophets' and saints' encounters with God in his essay "The Idea of the Holy" (1917) and described the essence of religious understanding as "a singular blend of terror and curiosity before the divine."² On the other hand, Friedrich Schleiermacher (1768 - 1834), a theologian and philosopher, saw religion as a system of principles and practices that people use to communicate with the Absolute. Schleiermacher concentrated on how these principles and practices are applied in daily life and how they affect behaviour and judgment. Religion cannot be viewed simply as a collection of impersonal theories and principles. The direction of the discussion in this article is to investigate the interaction of religion and politics.

German sociologist Max Weber (1864–1920) described politics as an effort to share power or to have an impact on how power is distributed. Because the fundamental purpose of politics is the acquisition and control of power, status, privilege, and possessions, power is always at the center of every notion of politics. Both religion and politics are interested in questions of human destiny. They are, therefore, always interacting with each other while experiencing a variety of conflicts and contradictions.³

There is an inevitable alliance between politics and religion and their influence on each other is more or less equivalent. They are independent variables that are bound to develop a sort of friendship for each other's welfare. This indicates the paradoxes and the anomalies of the Easter Sunday bombing and many other incidents globally in the recent past. Politics and religion seem to relish such paradox and anomaly and their mutual compromises could hurt the institutions that both have helped grow.

POLITICS, STATE AND PEOPLE

Despite its independence as a distinct social institution, politics seems to need religion to acquire prestige and recognition from the elite of society. Politics is power, which

². Winston, L. King. (1987). *Religion in The Encyclopaedia of Religion*, Mircea Eliade. (ed.). Vol. 12, New York. 284. Vincent Kundukulum, "Two Identity Builders in Amity and Enmity: Religion and Politics," *Journal of Dharma* 40. 2 (April-June 2015). 156

³. Yinger, J. Milton. (1974). *Social Aspects of Religion*. 611. M. Sushitra, *Political Philosophy*. ACPI. *Encyclopaedia of Philosophy*. J. J. Puthenpurackal. (ed.). (2010). Bangalore: Asian Trading Corporation. 1051-1052

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is a combination of strength, inspiration and authority. Power can be enforced only temporarily through disciplinary measures. Long-term acceptance by the populace requires that political power be based on a relevant worldview. For this reason, religion is considered a catalyst in social formation and became paradigmatic in the case of Desmond Tutu, who became 'a moral compass'. People, both bound by and free of the confines of a political system will subvert, disobey, and reject force if they believe that the political system in question lacks or disregards their fundamental conception of the world. In other words, politics devoid of moral principles cannot have legitimate or enduring power over citizens.

A recent example can be found in the case of farmers in Sri Lanka who were under undue moral pressure to convert from using chemical fertiliser to organic fertiliser almost overnight without providing them with the necessary support systems and technical know-how to produce organic fertiliser. A gradual transference procedure with a suitable transition period, monitoring mechanism, expert assessment in post nourishment of soil, nutrient analysis with expert opinion and advice, creation of seed banks at regional level would have made the people able to trust the State. If genetically modified varieties were to be introduced, then continuous examination of their suitability of cultivation, harvesting, storage and consumption should have been considered. The sudden decision for this transference of chemical fertilizer to the organic resulted in the political leadership having to end its term prematurely due to pressure by the people. Rash decisions led the country to an economic collapse resulting in political instability. Politics simply cannot take for granted the sovereignty of the people.

UNHOLY ALLIANCE

Are religion and politics autonomous entities? How and where can politics acquire values that act as a legitimate basis for authority? The 'social contract' or the political mandate vested in representative politics is de facto owned by the people. Wealth and intelligence, to a certain extent, also claim to undergird authority but they too fail to have final command or control over the people because of the primacy of 'people power' over the State. People elect a government on a contractual basis and their representatives can create state-craft to deliver and maintain the fundamentals of democracy. Only when political force is connected with a metaphysical-moral vision of life can it assert its legitimacy. Political power is not exercised merely to guarantee the survival of the people and the promotion of socio-cultural and other aspects of society but must recognize that people preserve and foster certain sublime aspirations beyond the empirical aspect of their daily lives.

Authority in all civilisations is incomprehensible without giving due attention to the transcendental or the ultimate sense of life as Paul Tillich (1886 -1965) reminded us in his statement that “Being itself manifests itself to the finite being in the infinite drive of the finite itself”.⁴ The sublime sense of the divine or the religious drive evident within an individual and within society is a reality that politics must recognize as an ally. Politics is attractive to people who are religiously bonded because religion gathers people together. In the view of Emil Durkheim (1858-1917), humans are inherently egoistic while collective consciousness (norms, beliefs and values) form the moral basis for a socially integrated society. Politics provides civic life with a particular sense of order by means of a system of governance in which values like peace, reconciliation, co-existence, justice, order and the humane conduct of human affairs are recognized.

Therefore, politics is in need of religion. But religion is also needed by politics. As long as political support is given for the benefit of society as a whole and not only for personal gain or advantages, no civilization or religion can endure without it. Violence is always a possibility, and it has plagued cultures throughout history. It has been suggested that war has truly shaped world history. To resolve conflicts, disarm and control gratuitous violence from within and fend off a violent invasion from without, society needs a defined political power. For this reason, when religions are not constitutionally protected by the political order, they tend to decline. Historically, religions have expanded throughout the world by taking advantage of political conquests, invasions, and royal sponsorship.

In other words, politics and religion must be regarded as working together rather than as two completely separate realities. Politicians often visit shrines and temples to develop relationships with religious authorities. Politics and religion work together so that the public can express their political choice. Politics depends on religion for its legitimacy and politics, in turn, protects religious institutions. While some people approve of this (un)holy partnership, others despise it as improper. However, there are many ways to express the intimate connection between religion and politics. In some situations, the state simply bans religion outright or confines it to the home, as was done in France and also by Kemal Ataturk in Turkey in 1923. In other circumstances, the state may separate itself from religion and uphold religious freedom within its borders (UK and USA). In other instances, the state and religion are only loosely connected (Sri Lanka, Pakistan). I will now discuss three factors that have an impact on the interaction and development of the connection between politics and religion in some countries.

⁴. See his *Systematic Theology*. (1951). Chicago: University of Chicago Press. 191

RELIGIOUS NATIONALISM

In the latter part of the twentieth century, we saw an upsurge of religio-ethnic nationalism. Some argue that such nationalism is the residue of colonial repression, which many nations experienced and which subsequently led to ethno-nationalist or other forms of religious nationalism. One of the classical reasons for the emergence of such religio-nationalism may be the geographical border situations of certain countries such as Greece, Cyprus, Poland, Belgium, Ireland, and Croatia. Here the indissoluble union of religion and nation emerged in order to oppose foreign domination, which they considered to be an external threat to internal cohesiveness. This threat, however, mostly remained undefined because of the variety and the tensions to be found within any of these nations. In sociological terms, these internal differences normally wither away in the interests of overcoming the external threat. When the external threats wither away, the internal differences surface even more robustly than before to claim space and dominance.

The Church (religion) has been the only institution that has affirmed nationality in many states and bishops have spoken out publicly in favour of these nations. Some bishops even launched autonomous movements, some of which led to violent struggles, as in Cyprus, Poland, and Ireland. In these struggles, religion has played the role of the suffering Messiah and liberator and religious symbols were used to inspire the public. A striking example is the rosary processions used by the clergy, the religious and the laity in the Philippines to depose President Marcos. Religion and politics collaborated to alleviate the suffering of the masses and to oppose the threat against internal identity. This was the situation of Romania and Poland too, even during the papacy of John Paul II. Religion and politics also collaborated during the national agitation that arose against the Soviet rule under Wojciech Jaruzelski and the rise of the Solidarity movement in Gdansk under the leadership of Lech Walesa in the late 1980s.

Another good example of religion operating as a political force in situations of threat is Zionism, which has responded to the challenge of anti-Semitism ever since the infamous Holocaust. Theodor Herzl, the founder of Zionist geopolitical ideology, suggested that the Jews could very live, work and merge with other nations provided that they were left in peace for a few generations. But these other nations, in his view, did not leave them in peace.

Since many Islamic nationalists are theocratic in their thinking and behaviour, they do not distinguish between politics and religion. The separation between religion and politics in post-9/11 Islamist religio-political philosophy is merely a sign of the western way of thinking. Islamic nationalists claim that Islamic ideology (or religion)

alone must serve as the political foundation for nationhood and nation-building. They see the threat of ‘western culture’ as the religio-political enemy of the very existence of Islam. Such thinking has also consolidated the Zionist movement and helped it discover its strength. But the ‘rival Abrahamic cousins’ are yet to prove to the rest of the world that they can coexist even though they may disagree on many fronts. Both Islamic nationalism and Zionism are classic examples of religious nationalism that have emerged since the end of colonialism.

The recognition of a common enemy is a strategy that provides motivation for religious nationalism. In Sri Lanka, a predominantly Buddhist country, this strategy is used in subtle ways to garner votes for the majority Sinhala Buddhists. In this particular instance, Sinhala Buddhist nationalism mobilises its own religious and political forces by creating a parallel religious and political foe that is presented as a threat to the religious and political unity and identity of the nation.

Countries with a Muslim majority require a secular adversary to rally their own internal forces. Islamic nationalists reject any difference between religion and politics and they defend this idea in terms of religion by claiming that it is a feature of western thought and can, therefore, be disregarded as a less important aspect of political administration. They do not have any objection to implementing some Western governmental structures as long as they can be justified by religious traditions. They are concerned about the moral foundation of politics and are not prepared to engage in any negotiations that might endanger the idea of national identity and the Islamic principles of right government. They maintain that a country's political structure must be built on Islamic ideology, which has its origins in the Qur'an and in the life of the Prophet (PBUH) and his companions.

Religious nationalism holds that nations are divine entities with certain God-given attributes.⁵ In the divine plan that has become known as the history of humanity, nations were given specific responsibilities, which were considered essential for national political identity. This is why Presidents and Prime-Ministers in Sri Lanka make their post-election pledges to the nation either at the Sacred City of Anuradhapura (Northcentral Province) or at the Temple of the Sacred Tooth in Kandy (Central Province). People often regard their own country as the predestined leader of other countries in the world. Religious nationalists often believe that they are involved in an end-time conflict between heavenly and demonic forces. They are convinced

⁵ The idea of the divine right of kings and that kings were specifically chosen by God to represent him was a notion that prevailed both during the time of the Old Testament as well as during the time of the Enlightenment of the 17th and 18th centuries. See Oswald Firth's PhD thesis. (1973), University of Strasbourg (unpublished).

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that the divine has sent them to fight against external forces of diabolical origin. Sri Lankan politicians are no exemptions to such mythological ideas and are ready to make use of religious institutions and other stakeholders for their own political purposes.

DE-PRIVATIZED RELIGION

With the formation of nation-states in modern times, Church and State became separate entities in Europe according to a process of mutual alienation known as the phenomenon of secularization. This development worked well for some countries and led certain other countries to redefine and adopt their own social and cultural ethos. As a result, social activities that were once performed by the religions have become the responsibility of different institutions belonging to the secular state. The complete privatization of religion was imposed on the nation and the state embraced it as a sacrosanct obligation. The religions felt diminished and bereft of their power. Secularity became so entrenched in the state psyche that in some of the Scandinavian countries any mention of religion in public discourse is considered an impediment to progress and development. The statement: "Religion is a private matter and we don't do God in democratic discourses"⁶ is a clear sign that religion can be set aside when dealing with political governance.

But the use of symbols is one way in which the sacred infiltrates the world of the secular. Political parties throughout the world use religious rituals, creeds, writings, gurus, charisma, exorcism, etc. for their own purposes. George W. Bush claimed that Jesus Christ was the political philosopher who had most impacted him during his first presidential campaign.⁷ Casting pots of ritually prepared water into rivers (in the case of Sri Lanka) or placating gods to contain the recent pandemic, instead of relying on scientifically tested methods, is another example of the use of symbols. Reference to the images of gods strengthens politicians and gives legitimacy to their strategies. In short, religion remains the handmaid of political manoeuvring

The development of political groups with a religious foundation is another way in which the de-privatization trend picks up speed in liberal democracies. Christian Democratic parties founded by Catholic figures in Germany and Italy, for example, serve as excellent examples of the creation of political organizations that did not maintain the defensive, separatist attitude of the long-established Catholic parties.

⁶ Former Downing Street spin-doctor Alastair Campbell is reputed to have said when his boss, the then-Prime Minister, Tony Blair, was asked about his faith: "We don't do God," See <https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-politics-27112774> accessed 25th October 2022

⁷ P. E. Hammond and D.W. Machacek, (1997). *Does Christianity Cause War?* London: Clarendon Press. 40-41

Instead, they found a more acceptable alternative by accepting the social market economy that exists in modern democratic societies.

CIVIL RELIGION

The idea of "civil religion" was first presented by Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712–1778) as a suitable type of religion for contemporary times in which a direct relationship between the ruler and the ruled no longer existed. The basic principles of this "new religion," such as rewarding the just, punishing wrongdoers, and the integrity of the social contract were implemented by the state. Robert Bellah was a supporter of Civil Religion in America who promoted a blend of religious and secular symbols and values for civic life. "God had led his people to establish a new sort of social order that shall be a light unto all nations."⁸ According to Jose Casanova, "Religions have to move from state-oriented entities to society-oriented institutions."⁹ Religions could be a prophetic voice against the unjust policies of a globalized market.

WILL RELIGION LOSE?

I cannot see religion as the loser in this discussion because in several parts of the world religions have played significant roles in national freedom struggles and in the establishment of an order for the equal rights of minorities and women. The fall of the Berlin wall that divided families between East and West Germany since the end of the WWII was religiously inspired by a united voice for a unified Germany.¹⁰ Mahatma Gandhi's grassroots campaign and people's movements, which were inspired by the *Bhagavad Gita* against British rule, provide another example of the extent to which *Sanatana Dharma* (in his case *Vaishnavism*) could be a powerful instrument in the resistance of totalitarian regimes.

Furthermore, the loss of the Kremlin's influence over independent states was a major achievement of Christianity and resulted in the overthrow of the communist regime in

⁸ Bellah, R. (1967). "Civil Religion in America." *Daedalus* 96 1. 7-8. 18. See. Linda Woodhead and Paul Heelas. (2000). *Religion in Modern Times, An Interpretative Anthology*. Oxford: Blackwell Publishers. 240

⁹ Casanova, J. (1994). *Public Religions in the Modern World*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press. 220-222

¹⁰ Peace prayers have been conducted since 1982 and led by Pastor Christian Führer at St. Nicholas Church in Leipzig despite the policy of state atheism. In November 1989, the complete fall of the Berlin wall became a reality just before Christmas. The incumbent chancellor of West Germany, Helmut Kohl and the PM of East Germany, Hans Modrow, greeted each other and the people moved between the borders without any restriction. The final and the official dismantling of the wall commenced in June 1990. It is still being debated whether religion was part of the political campaign for reunification. See. *The Church and the Fall of the Wall*.

<https://www.pbs.org/wnet/religionandethics/2009/11/06/november-6-2009-the-church-and-the-fall-of-the-wall/4842/> accessed 13th October 2022

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Eastern Europe. Besides, liberation theology became a means by which certain Latin American societies such as Brazil managed to escape from oppressive social situations through agrarian revolution, urbanization, and literacy. Paulo Freire (1921-1997) was an educationist who gave this process of reflection-action-reflection the name: "conscientization". Latin America provides a good example of the way Christian leaders in the 20th century played an integral role in opposing unjust socio-economic and political structures imposed by military juntas and regimes. The long-standing social and cultural divisions between people that had been upheld by authoritarian governments and certain political classes of society were demolished by their service, solidarity, and shared poverty. Rational methods and policies created by science and technology cannot by themselves solve humanity's core problems. This is why religion can continue to play a significant role in political life and can facilitate conversations between politicians and other leaders of society for the common good.¹¹

A NEW COLD WAR?

Has a 'new cold war' already begun between secular and religious nationalism as these both campaign for peaceful-coexistence? This is a legitimate question because there is no satisfactory compromise on the ideological level for a choice between religious and secular nationalism. However, attempts are being made by social activists, public intellectuals, researchers, religio-socially motivated religious leaders and international stakeholders interested in human capital for greater social inclusion. These attempts reveal the need for substantial positive action and collaboration to provide an alternative, shared narrative for the struggle between secularism and religious nationalism. It is possible, however, that this struggle is reduced to simplistic and empty exchanges devoid of a clear action plan for the needed structural changes that will facilitate a shared social and national coexistence.

The on-going war in Ukraine, the European Union (EU) and all the allies of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) at this time of writing are involved in a struggle of wits to bring the Kremlin into subjection. It's an unwinnable project for all parties because the 21st century cannot be another century of wars like the previous one. The world cannot afford to ignore the message from COP27 in Sham El Sheikh, Egypt, uttered by the UN's secretary general, Antonio Gutierrez in the form of a sharp warning to the whole world to show more concern for ecology, which involves a "fight against global warming as a 'battle for human survival' in order to stop the world speeding down a 'highway to hell'".¹²

¹¹. See. *Journal of Dharma*. (April-June 2015). 40. 2. 166

¹². <https://www.reuters.com/business/cop/cop27-were-highway-climate-hell-un-boss-warns-accessed> 7th November 2022

CONCLUSION

It seems that hegemonic religious nationalists cannot agree to unite even at the ideological level because politics has become the defining element of identity. Both religion and politics have an all-embracing capacity at the functional level and both realities are inclined to encroach unawares into each other's sphere of influence. The solution for this state of affairs may be very difficult and there are many good, bad and ugly examples of such situations in history. Hopefully, a grudging tolerance may develop between religious and secular nationalisms and one side might be able to appreciate what the other has to offer, namely: communitarian values and moral vision for a society based on peace and interracial harmony. Politics and religion must cooperate with each other because they are far less productive as institutions if they remain divided from each other. In order to be accepted by the people, political power has to be founded on a meaningful vision of life, which religions can provide given their fundamentally ethical vision for communities and individuals. Similarly, political force will be necessary for religious institutions to harness individual and community excesses and their arbitrary violence against each other.

The ordering of society is a responsibility shared by religious institutions by virtue of their ethical narrative. Moreover, by virtue of the social contract that people subscribe to in representative democracies, politics has an abiding duty and commitment for the common good of all. Ofcourse, the mutual overlapping of religion and politics through their engagement in society may create conflicts in public life, as was demonstrated during the Easter Sunday bombings in Sri Lanka in April 2019. These tensions, however, should lead ultimately to a healthy blend of political dynamics, which is the civic right of people. Religion c provide the inner solace as well as the strength to endure in the political effort for social justice, fair access to resources, debates around ecology, artificial intelligence, digital currency and cloud based mega data highways. Hence, religion and politics cannot be compartmentalized because they must both, together with science, confront the most challenging and controversial issues faced by humanity today. Somewhat surprisingly, politics appears in all walks of life. Religion is like an elephant in the room.¹³ Both politics and religion have no choice but to live and let live within their own borders while showing readiness to cross borders for the good of everyone. ■

¹³. See. Roborgh, H. (2019). "The Elephant in the Room. Religion as a Subject of Inquiry." *South Asian Journal of Religion & Philosophy* Vol. 1. No. 1. 52-69