

The Relationship between Religion and Politics in a Globalizing World

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Abstract

Religion plays a powerful role in modern politics, and the relationship between the two is ever-changing. The governing of a state cannot be separated from the religious views of its people that affect the leaders and lawmakers of a country. Law mirrors society. This paper explores the ways that religious beliefs, practices, and communities shape and are shaped by the political expectations and necessities of a nation by using examples from major world religions. Readers will be presented information regarding each religion's perception of the relationship between religion and politics and how religious adherents have upheld or opposed the relationship. Because religion and politics are always changing and adapting, the foundational ideologies of the relationship between these two entities are continually challenged, reimagined, modified.

Introduction

According to Robert Swierenga, “People act politically, economically, and socially in keeping with their ultimate beliefs. Their values, mores, and actions, whether in the polling booth, on the job, or at home, are an outgrowth of the god or gods they hold at the center of their being” (Wald 2018: 39). Swierenga presents an overarching theme of how religion holds significant influence over every aspect of life. Religion has the power to affect individuals’ everyday decisions, which in turn affects how they act politically, economically, and socially. The focus of this paper will be on the relationship between religion and politics. Both religion and politics are “living” entities, which means they function as independent beings that adapt and change to their environment just as a human being does. Together the two have an overwhelming effect on individuals, communities, countries, and even the globe. Religion and politics function as a symbiotic relationship that both have the potential to benefit or harm one another mutually. This paper will use seven world religions to show the history and infusion of politics into modern religion.

Application of Terms

Before one can understand the relationship between religion and politics, one must have an understanding of the concepts themselves. The words “religion” and “politics” can mean something uniquely different to each and every individual. Understanding the relationship between religion and politics is challenging, considering that both have dynamic definitions. According to the *Cambridge Dictionary*, religion is the belief in and the worship of a god or gods, or any such system of belief and worship. While it is common to define religion simply as a system of belief, religion is infinitely more than that. Religion is a way of life that has the power to its every aspect. Religion is an identifier that connects individuals to the community around them, individuals across borders, their ancestors, and an imagined world existential to Earth. With that, one can see how religion can have such an instrumental hand in politics. The *Cambridge Dictionary* defines politics as the activities of the government, members of law-making organizations, or people who try to influence the way a country is governed. This definition is much broader than common definitions of politics. The definition includes branches of politics that are not specifically involved in the government. For example, the definition allows readers to place non-governmental organizations and military regimes into every day political action.

Political Globalization

Over time, religion and politics have changed and adapted in order to accommodate the needs of society better. Modernization and globalization have been the main facilitators of changing societal needs. Globalization is yet another word that is difficult to define. A broad definition of globalization is a complex web of social processes that

intensify and expand worldwide economic, cultural, political, and technological exchanges and connections (Campbell 2010: 4). In relation to religion, globalization can be better defined as the process in which people, ideas, and goods spread throughout the world, spurring more interaction and integration among the world's cultures, governments, and economies. As globalization and religion have intertwined, religions have increased their influence on political systems, both global and local. Religions have extended their influence by spreading globally, constructing a variety of religious sacred places and institutions across the globe, and becoming global actors in the efforts to facilitate social change. The term political globalization can describe the expanding reach of political systems. Political globalization can be described as the advancement of a borderless political system. The system is constructed with influence from national governments, their governing organizations, IGOs, NGOs, and other social movement organizations. Political globalization has promoted the importance of global actors in politics rather than leaving the governing to individual nation-states. In addition to political systems that identify as global, individuals themselves are now identifying as "global citizens." Global citizens are individuals who think of themselves as having citizenship of the world rather than a specific nation. In *Global Citizen - Challenges and Responsibility in an Interconnected World*, Seyla Benhabib is referenced as stating that global citizens are flexible citizens. They are national and transnational at the same time (Sterri). Political globalization and global citizens have further facilitated the interaction of global religions in world politics.

Human Diagnosis of Religion Expressed in Politics

Now that a foundation has been laid for the different interpretations of the terms religion, politics, and globalization, let's shift the focus to the relationship between religion and politics in a globalizing world. The discussion will be approached by using seven major world religions as a framework to explain the dynamic relationship. The eight world religions as identified by Stephen Prothero in *God's Not One: The Eight Rival Religions that Run the World* in order of influence are Islam, Christianity, Confucianism, Hinduism, Buddhism, Yoruba Religion, Judaism, and Taoism. With the exception of Yoruba Religion, all religions will be referenced in this paper. According to Prothero, each religion offers its own diagnosis of the human problem and its own prescription for a cure (Prothero 2010: 333). In Islam, the problem is pride, and the solution is submission (Prothero 2010: 27); in Christianity, the problem is sin, and the solution is salvation (Prothero 2010: 68); in Confucianism, the problem is chaos, and the solution is propriety (Prothero 2010: 113); in Hinduism, the problem is wandering, and the solution is devotion (Prothero 2010: 136); in Buddhism, the problem is suffering, and the solution is awakening (Prothero 2010: 177); in Judaism, the problem is exile, and the solution is

to return (Prothero 2010: 253); in Daoism, the problem is lifelessness, and the solution is flourishing (Prothero 2010: 313). Humans use these solutions as answers to their earthly problems. Furthermore, humans apply the solution to the human diagnosis offered by their religion to the problems in politics. Religion is used as a tool in politics in a variety of ways. These ways range from social change to political advancement. More specifically, four of these ways go as follows: political movements in the name of religion, religion as a platform for political advancement, religious reaction to political injustice, and religious suppression in the name of politics. By examining specific examples in seven major religions, one will clearly see how religion and politics have become incredibly intertwined in this globalizing world.

Islam and Islamophobia

According to Prothero, Islam is the most influential of all world religions. Islam is a religion that has faced a magnitude of controversy. To its adherents, the religion is a way of life. Others view the religion as dangerous. More specifically, it is viewed as dangerous by the American people. Islam has played an influential role in modern American politics, largely due to the terrorist attack in New York in 2001, commonly referred to as 9/11. The attack came from Islamic terrorists from Arab nations. It was funded by the Al-Qaeda terrorist organization of Osama bin Laden (“9/11 attacks”). The motivation for the attacks is allegedly the retaliation for America’s support of Israel, its involvement in the Persian Gulf War, and its continued military presence in the Middle East (“9/11 attacks”). The actions of 9/11 instilled a sense of fear about the religion of Islam in the American people and other individuals around the world. These Islamic extremists used religion as a platform to express their dissatisfaction with American political decisions. Since the attack, American Muslims struggle to practice their religion without persecution. Persecution was further promoted by media stereotypes and the reaction of the American government. Americans’ response to the attacks further ingrained the presence of religion into American politics.

Christianity in American Courts

After Islam, Christianity is considered the next most influential religion. Throughout history, Christianity has had a pattern of political indifference. Political indifference stems from religious differences among Christian followers. Varying human interpretations of Christianity and its beliefs have led to numerous splits in how Christianity is practiced. Examples include the disputes between Roman Catholics and Orthodoxy in the Middle Ages and Protestants and Catholics in the sixteenth century (Prothero 2010: 75-76). The United States was founded out of religious disputes among Christians. Critics of the Church of England decided to separate themselves from “an unregenerate

government which persisted in maintaining a corrupt church” by leaving England and sailing across the Atlantic Ocean to establish a new state that would honor God in the right way (Wald 2018: 40). Since this event, Christianity has played a fundamental role in American politics.

Religious images, symbols, and statements are constantly used in American political culture. This provides evidence of what is referred to as a civil religion (Wald 2018: 51). Previously the term civil religion was referred to as a public theology or political religion (Wald 2018: 51). The goal of civil religion is to align the states’ views with particular religious views that are seen as fit by the state. By projecting a sacred meaning to the nation, civil religion enables people of diverse faiths to integrate their religious and political beliefs (Wald 2018: 51). The idea of civil religion is both appealing and unappealing at the same time. To a majority of the individuals who believe in Christianity, aligning the states’ agenda with Christian views allow Christians to better support state action. However, for non-Christians, this idea creates an imbalance in their political and religious views. Critics argue that Americans view international politics as a clash of moral opposites (Wald 2018: 56). By loosening legal constraints on issues such as abortion, school discipline, sexual behavior, drug use, and sex roles, a multitude of Americans think the government has abandoned its Christian foundations (Wald 2018: 59). While the state is taking steps towards more secular laws, Christian roots still remain in modern politics.

The presence of religion in politics is seen most through how the American courts and presidents promote their political agendas. Civil religion is especially evident in America through the speeches and writings of political leaders (Wald 2018: 51). Forty-four presidents have referred to God in their Inaugural Address (Newcombe). Presidents use God as a platform to relate to over a third of the American people. Even presidential candidates use language about America’s tie to God to “activate a sense of group-based attachment” between themselves and the electorate (Wald 2018: 57). The goal of using this language is to get the Christian vote, which is typically considered a majority voting group. The recent election with candidates Hillary Clinton and Donald Trump proves to be an example of practicing civil religion. Shortly before the 2016 election, Capitol Ministries expressed the belief that the Christian vote should go to presidential candidate Donald Trump. The site offers political advice to Christians who were torn between the two candidates. Capitol Ministries’ Ralph Drollinger and Frank Sontag discuss why Trump should get the Christian vote. Drollinger identifies Trump as the correct individual because he “believe[s] that God might be answering our prayers and raising up a great leader in Donald Trump” (*Why Trump Should Get the Christian Vote*). In addition, Drollinger has been sending Trump weekly Bible studies that he teaches

in Washington, D.C., and says that Trump had responded favorably with written notes. This further promotes the view of Trump as a Christian leader. Drollinger concluded by encouraging Christians to vote for Trump and asks for prayers on election day.

Confucianism and Chinese “Civil Religion”

Following Islam and Christianity, Confucianism is considered the third most influential religion. Confucianism promotes a social order that values respect for elders, love, and harmony. Confucianism is built on an ancient religious foundation to establish the social values, institutions, and transcendent ideals of traditional Chinese society. Confucianism has always played a role in Chinese society, although in today's times, Confucianism has a unique relationship with the state of China. Recent events in China have portrayed conflicting views on the relationship between China and Confucianism, for example, the placement and disappearance of a Confucius statue and the Qufu Church Controversy. Over time, China disassociated from Confucianism to create a more established state. However, now China has reassimilated Confucianism in Chinese society to present Confucianism as a religion that aligns with the political and cultural agendas of the state (Sun 2013: 177). It has the potential to serve as a cultural symbol and political tool but is free from any actual religious organizations that the state would have to handle (Sun 2013: 177). The closest thing to a Confucius religious organization that could potentially oppose the state is Confucius nationalists. Confucius nationalists have voiced their stance on both events stated above: the placement and disappearance of a Confucius statue and the Qufu Church Controversy. Furthermore, Confucianism in another religion that has been addressed as a civil religion. Confucianism, as a civil religion, seems to hold great promise for a “moral reconstruction” of China (Sun 2013: 178). The Chinese government approaches Confucianism as a philosophy allowing for the government to discuss Confucianism in a non-religious context. By focusing on philosophical Confucianism, religion is emphasized as a moral, cultural, and political force (Sun 2013: 178). Disputes will continue as China explores the idea of molding Confucianism into a form of “State Confucianism” (Sun 2013: 178). Future Chinese politics will not appease individuals who wish for Confucianism to remain out of the government.

Hinduism and Indian Nationalism

Hinduism has been a platform for politics in India for quite some time. The actions of current prime minister Narendra Modi have created the concern of growing Hinduism nationalism. The claims stem from the prime minister's campaigning efforts for the 2019 election. Modi, who is a part of the Bharatiya Janata Party, was recently seen campaigning in India's holiest place for Hindus, Varanasi, which contains more than 20,000 temples (Ray 2019). The prime minister's decision to campaign from Varanasi

highlights the issue of the rising Hinduism nationalism. In addition, Modi has done little to stop the violent acts by Hindu nationalism. Two examples are the “cow protection” gangs and discrimination against women in temples. The “cow protection” gangs are a part of a violent campaign against the trade and consumption of cattle (Ray 2019). Because cows are viewed as sacred in Hinduism, these gangs have killed individuals who participate in the trade and consumption of cows. Under Modi’s watch, the gangs have become more active and tolerated (Ray 2019). Another example is the riots at a major Hindu pilgrimage site, Sabarimala temple. In 2018 the Supreme Court lifted the seven-hundred-year ban of women entering the temple (Ray 2019). BJP representatives were seen protesting their own government’s decision. Hinduism nationalism is present and alive in Indian politics of today. Modi has also used his presence at temples as propaganda for the campaign. Modi is indirectly projecting Hinduism in the state of India.

Buddhism and Socially Engaged Buddhist

Buddhism is the next world religion that has had a substantial impact on the world of today. Typically, Buddhism is perceived as a religion that maintains its distance from politics. This notion is confirmed by Ian Harris in *Buddhism in the Modern World*, Buddhism promotes the opposition to the spirit of politics (McMahan 2012: 178). However, in modern times Buddhist followers are taking a stand in politics, largely in Southeast Asia and Tibet. Despite the doctrinal rejection of politics, Buddhism and its founder have had a considerable impact on modern political thought (Ichikawa: 247). Modern states in Southeast Asia have sought to infuse political ideologies with Buddhist meanings to locate the power of the secular state within a Buddhist framework (McMahan 2012: 21). Except for socialist Vietnam, the constitutions of all Buddhist-majority states in South and Southeast Asia have given Buddhism a special statue of recognition (Ichikawa 1979: 149). Buddhist practices continue to empower the imagination of political futures in Southeast Asia (McMahan 2012: 24). Socially Engaged Buddhists have promoted Buddhist involvement in local problems. When the local problems stem from political injustice, religion and politics merge for Socially Engaged Buddhists. Aung San Suu Kyi, who promotes Buddhist Nationalism, has stated, “To be Burmese is to be Buddhist” (McMahan 2012: 183). San Suu Kyi’s alliance with Buddhism is seen in her political party: National League for Democracy (McMahan 2012: 203). For a religion against violence, the presence of Buddhism’s role in war and reform movements is controversial. In addition, Buddhist political organizations have even formed (McMahan 2012: 190). It does not appear that Buddhism will fade from the political sphere anytime soon as many Southeast Asian citizens remain suppressed by the government. Buddhism truly provides a platform for social and political reform.

Judaism and the Nation-State of Israel

The next most influential world religion is Judaism. Judaism is considered one of the world's oldest religions and the root of the two largest religions in the world today: Christianity and Islam (Prothero 2010: 247). While Judaism has been instrumental in the religious development of the modern world, its followers continue to be persecuted. The most prevalent persecution of Judaism in modern times is present in the state of Israel. The state of Israel has become the home for over half of the world's Jewish population. Recently the state of Israel officially declared itself the nation-state of the Jewish people in a constitutional law titled "Basic Law: Israel: The Nation-State of the Jewish People." The Jewish Nation-State Law begins by declaring that "Israel is the historic homeland of the Jewish people in which the State of Israel was established...in which the Jewish people fulfill its natural, religious, and historic right to self-determination" (Harkov 2018: 32). The law continues by declaring Jewish holidays as official days off and stating Israel's continuous commitment to supporting Jews around the world (Harkov 2018: 32). In addition, Israel's openness to Jewish immigration and the gathering of the exiled is another key aspect of the new bill (Harkov 2018: 32). As a nation, Israel is directly aligning itself with Judaism in the form of a legal document.

While the law strengthened Jewish Nationalism, minority groups in Israel expressed their concern with the new bill. Within the bill, Hebrew is named the official language of the state, and Arabic has a "special status" (Harkov 2018: 32). Making Hebrew the official language even further elevates the role of the Jewish people in Israel. However, arguments have been made that the state is not infringing on the rights of Israel's minority groups. Officially the law does not add any individual privileges for Jewish Israelis or take away minority returns, but it absolutely places the Jewish people as the focus of the state's agendas. The largest concern comes from Arabic Israelis. To some, the conflict is so vast that it calls for a two-solution. The two-state solution involves creating an independent state for Palestinians and an independent state for Jews. The strongest argument for two independent states is the idea that if the Jews and Palestinians do not separate, the Arab majority will take over, which would mean Israel would not be Jewish or democratic (Harkov 2018: 35). The conflict is still prevalent in today's time.

Taoism and Global Security

Last, Taoism and global security are discussed. Global security refers to the promotion and protection of state sovereignty by military and diplomatic means. This aspect plays a role in politics, especially when the military controls the state. In addition, global security refers to the wellbeing of individuals, firms, social movements, social classes, non-whites, wageworkers, women, indigenous peoples, the poor, post-colonials, and

planetary ecosystems (Pettman 2005: 61). While global security cannot be read in a sacral context, Taoism offers instructions on how to implement global security. Scholars like Stephen Lukashevich and Chad Hansen define Taoism as “a highly structured system of pain-avoidance” and “individuals reaching inward to tap some fundamental insight about the universe” (Pettmann 2005: 66) Taoism is seen to promote a particular aptitude for living life. That aptitude is one for living in such a way that self-conscious responses get replaced by ones that feel at least like the “natural structure of things” (Pettmann 2005: 67). Taoism provides an alternative view to rationalism. By following Taoism beliefs, leaders can naturally make decisions to better the political world.

Conclusion

After examining specific examples in seven major religions, the relationship between religion and politics in today’s globalizing world is made clear. Religion has the power to affect how people act politically, economically, and socially. The focus of this paper is to display just how powerful religion can be in modern politics.

Religion is an identifier that connects people to other individuals in the community around them, to individuals across borders, to their ancestors, and to an imagined world existential to Earth. Politics are the activities of the government, including national governments, global political organizations as well as military regimes and non-government actors. Lastly, globalization is the process in which people, ideas, and goods spread throughout the world, spurring more interaction and integration between the world’s cultures, governments, and economies. As globalization and religion have intertwined, religions have increased their influence on political systems, both global and local. The eight world religions as identified by Stephen Prothero in *God’s Not One: The Eight Rival Religions that Run the World* in order of influence are Islam, Christianity, Confucianism, Hinduism, Buddhism, Yoruba Religion, Judaism, and Taoism. All of these religions, except for Yoruba Religion, were used to display the interaction between political and global religions. According to Prothero, each religion offers its own diagnosis of the human problem and its own prescription for a cure. These cures are extracted from their religious meaning and implemented in politics to better govern a changing world. Political globalization and global citizens have further facilitated the interaction of global religions in world politics. Religion is used as a tool rather than a belief system. The tool is used in a variety of ways ranging from social change to political advancement. In today’s time, it will be difficult to separate religion from politics and globalization from religion. The relationship between religion and politics will continue to change as the world comes to globalize. Overall, globalization is good for religion and politics because it allows for growth and more freedom. Examples throughout seven different world religions have

affirmed Swierenga's statement that "[p]eople act politically, economically, and socially in keeping with their ultimate beliefs" (Wald 2018: 39).

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