

# CAN POLITICS LEARN FROM RELIGIONS?

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## Introduction

I will introduce the topic “Can Politics Learn from Religions?” by briefly considering some working definitions. Then, in the substantive part of the paper, Section 1 will summarize models of interaction between politics and religion that have been found throughout history. Section 2 considers the level of the nation-state, and Section 3 the international or global level. Then in Section 4, I will examine the learning process in a more analytic fashion. Section 5 treats the theme empirically from the East Asian experience, with some comparative cases, as well. Finally, I will end with a few concluding remarks.

Politics concerns the processes, human decisions, and actions by which groups in community (political communities, or polities) identify themselves, articulate their goals, and allocate their resources, maintaining and transforming themselves through time. This includes their discursive behavior and intentions, as well as their practices in a wide range of activities that may overlap with economic, military, social, cultural, and other fields. I am going to focus on the political levels of nation-states and international relations (also identified as global politics), leaving other interesting levels aside for the moment.

Religions, while rooted in personal convictions, are shared by groups in community (religious bodies, or religions) and involve their choices, words, and actions. Identity is important to religious groups, who are concerned about symbols, truths, and morality, especially in matters of transcendence and final ends. Expressive behaviors like devotions and liturgies are significant elements of religions. The degree of organization found in religions varies considerably, but one can identify religions at many different levels of human association. As I limited my political focus to nation-states and international relations, so I will direct my focus on religions to the larger and more stable traditions found today in the world.

### 1. Models of Interaction between Politics and Religions

Let me begin by surveying the ways in which politics and religions have historically related to each other, and summarizing those ways in several models of interaction. At least in the way contemporary analysts look at the world, we find both politics and religions everywhere; and so it is not surprising that these two spheres of human life have interacted in diverse ways at various times and places. These categories overlap in actual historical conditions, but the models will help to distinguish the main patterns.

One-sided dominance in the interaction between politics and

religions has been around for a long time. Anthropologists find “religious” symbols and rituals at the heart of ancient human groups. In civilizations from Mesopotamia to Egypt to Mexico, historians find religions at the core of identities among humans gathered in groups both large and small. These might be called “theocracies” in some cases, but the relative weight of the religious and the political in these cases is not always clear. Even modern versions like the totalitarian ideological states of the twentieth century at first sight seem to illustrate merely one-sided political dominance, but on more careful examination they exhibit some signs of quasi-religions.

Undifferentiated civil religion resembles the previous model in the sense that a dominant way of life aggregates the public sphere so thoroughly that a kind of fusion takes place between religion and politics. This occurs with various degrees of self-conscious awareness and participation in the groups concerned. The previous model of one-sided dominance is a more suitable category when the theocratic or totalitarian/autocratic rule is more manipulative. When a society does not differentiate the two spheres of religion and politics, the question of dominance fades into the background and a kind of civil religion (or religious state) emerges. The pattern is found in various forms of “caesaro-papisms” from Byzantium to Islamic caliphates to classic Confucian China. From a societal perspective this could be identified as a kind of undifferentiated social nexus rather than a civil religion as such.

Wary suspicion between the political and religious spheres is, of course, observed in many times and places. As political and religious institutions achieve a fair degree of autonomy, and the undifferentiated societies give way to conscious free choices about political and religious matters, a certain tension arises which can resolve into this kind of suspicion by each side of the other. From opposite ends of the religion-politics axis, both Khomenism in post-1979 Iran and laïcité in France over the past century reflect the wariness with which the political and religious spheres in modern societies see each other.

Mutual recognition is a fourth and final model of interaction between religions and politics. Medieval Europe saw debate over the proper roles of Pope and Emperor in the Gelasian controversies. The central significance of religious freedom in the political thought of modern times, and in particular in human rights theory, testifies to how new elements of pluralism and tolerance have become more explicit standards in the mutual recognition that religions and politics show to each other. As late as the 19<sup>th</sup> century era of colonialism, struggles between different civilizations and religions on a grand scale were taking place. And some observers today suggest that such clashes are characteristic of international relations today. Religions have addressed these issues directly through inter-religious dialogue and

ecumenical action. Political forces have done so through standards of religious freedom. In an age of globalization, the attractiveness of this model of mutual recognition for global politics is evident, but not automatically assured.

## 2. Religions and Politics in Contemporary Nation-States

The level of the nation-state is particularly important for politics in the contemporary world. While there are many aspects of politics pertinent to the interaction of religions and politics, political institutions and organizations are particularly important. Governments with their various institutions and roles are the focus of decisions, discourses, and activities that impact on religions, especially on the institutional expressions of religions.

Vice-versa religions affect the ways governments operate in numerous ways. Churches have their own separate institutional frameworks, but individually and collectively these institutions give the religious bodies a way to organize and to affect the public sphere just as political parties, labor unions, business associations, and so on, aggregate interests. I use the term “churches” advisedly, since there are a great variety of religious formations and associations, groups and communities which may not always fit the organization-laden image of the term “church” as used today. Religions operate through all sorts of “religious bodies” that include diverse social, cultural, and economic associations. My point here is not the terminology, which may come across as more restrictive than it is intended, but the fact that the values, goals, and allocations of religious bodies affect the state, governments, and a variety of political institutions.

In today’s world, there are still many polities that recognize an established church or religion in some way. The legal basis for this may range from constitutional provisions to laws and administrative policies covering a variety of fields. In any case, public policies toward religious communities are a necessity in our bureaucratized world; and they have a long history, as the discussion in Section 1 above indicated. While most polities recognize freedom of religion today, at least formally, they also claim authority and jurisdiction vis-à-vis religious bodies on many issues, often related to morals and public order. Issues like lands, buildings, taxes, and the legal recognition of institutions are some of the specific regulatory (or control) measures used by governments towards religious bodies.

It should also be mentioned that religious communities establish boundaries between themselves and the state and among the communities themselves. As communication, travel, and the spread of ideas have become easier, new and acute issues among religious communities arise

because of their increased physical or psycho-social proximity. These issues can easily go beyond technical and functional matters to questions of identity for individuals and groups. As the capacities of states to intervene in the lives of people increase, religious communities also view the state as a more conspicuous interlocutor or interactive agent.

Viewed in this light, it is not surprising that contentious issues between religious bodies and polities arise frequently today. There may be organizational or institutional confrontations of a visible or interest-group sort. Another set of more broad-ranging, less clear-cut questions arise concerning norms of social behavior. Intimate issues related to human life itself, to the family, to education, and to cultural identity are traditional concerns of religions; the impact of state policies on such issues today is such that nation-states today experience contending claims of polities and religious bodies concerning these questions. These issues affect not merely technical jurisdiction on specific matters but the fundamental legitimacy of primary institutions, both political and religious.

### 3. International/Global Politics and Religions

In some ways the global or international level seems to be a natural fit for the interaction of religions and politics. As noted earlier broad cultures and civilizations are marked by religious characteristics; and many religions (at least the major traditions of Christianity, Islam, and Buddhism, and in certain respects even Judaism and Hinduism) have universal or global aspirations and identities. In a world of politics significantly influenced by nation-states, the international or global arena corresponds with such boundary-free religions.

It is easy to link the two spheres of politics and religions both historically and conceptually through reflection on the international problem par excellence, war. Not only have some wars had a religious “flavor” among the apparent cleavages in those conflicts, but religions have addressed the problems of violence and justice through moral teachings. Certainly the most notable framework for considering the justifiability of armed conflict remains the concept of the just war, with its long and respected history. Today’s international law and various policy proposals for humanitarian intervention depend heavily on the moral foundation of just war theology or philosophy. Both pacifist and “holy war” notions that are widely held today also owe much to their religious inspiration.

More specifically, the current practice of conscientious objection and the articulated motives of many terrorists rest on religious foundations. This is not the place to examine the grounds of such claims in detail. My point is rather to illustrate the parallel way of thinking found in the political and religious realms in critical international issues of war and peace. Even if

veneer justifications are not always believable, the bow that vice makes to virtue when political actors try to justify warfare and terrorism resonates with religious norms in many instances.

Another striking feature of contemporary international/global relations with strong religious overtones is the question of political boundaries and the movement of people. Diasporas of religious communities are familiar historically, but the combination of relatively strict state boundaries and relatively easy travel in the contemporary world has introduced new effects of migration, both religiously and politically. Minority religious groups swell in numbers in many countries, creating hitherto unknown cultural and social problems. And because many religious minorities have ethnic neighbors, irredentism can be a source of international friction.

As societies change some scholars suggest that “global society” is the venue for social action today. In this perspective the role of universal or global religions, and of religion in general seems to be changing. The global religions provide a renewed source of identity as state boundaries and national societies become more porous. These changes are challenging to both nation-states and religions. Historical patterns of the spread of religions have been transformed as new religious movements and new media of communication impact global society in criss-cross patterns. How contemporary globalization and traditions of religious universality will interact in the future remains a fascinating question for study.

For scholars and practitioners of politics, perhaps no issue in this field is more urgent or difficult than the role of fundamentalisms. The term “fundamentalism” itself has quickly outgrown its origins, and can even be applied to ways of thinking and action only quasi-religious or otherwise ideological. At the international or global level, fundamentalisms seem to spread or proliferate as nationalisms did in an earlier era. Their roots in religious or quasi-religious traditions, however, are a characteristic that stands out. This may be why the modern international system has had difficulty understanding or dealing with this phenomenon.

#### 4. Learning: Patterns and Contents

In this Section I will examine the patterns and contents of learning that help to address the overall question of this paper: “Can Politics Learn from Religions?” Learning, of course, is something that people do; and so the question is really about how people engaged in politics can learn from religions today. I take an explicitly normative approach, based on the expectation that learning about religions and learning the positive elements of religions can make for better politics, in particular at the nation-state and

international/global levels that are the focus of this paper.

Norms are ubiquitous in religion and in politics. The strictures of law and the standards of markets fit into these norms, as do the more significant norms for religion and politics that concern morality, orthodoxy, orthopraxy, and legitimacy. There are, of course, private norms observed by individuals, but we are primarily interested here in public norms. Of course, whether public or private, all norms are personal in the sense that the thinking, judging, acting person adopts the norms. And because persons follow the norms, it is reasonable to expect that those persons maintain some consistency in their norms of action, whether political or religious.

We readily associate symbols and rituals with religions, but they are also employed widely in politics. The mobilization of political parties, the ceremonies of governance, political emblems and uniforms are filled with symbols and rituals. To say that politics can learn from religions is perhaps just stating the obvious in this regard.

Another historical and essential role of religions has been in the processes of dialogue and conciliation among people. By their inclusiveness religions bring diverse people together, and frequently aim even at reconciliation when people suffer divisions and conflicts. This may be through teachings about human relationships or in the context of humans in relationship to the transcendent (God). Polities depend on similar forms of dialogue and conciliation among people, without which they cannot maintain themselves. The moral teachings of religions have been and continue to be addressed to polities. This learning pattern can be found from ancient China and classical Greece to modern national constitutions and the charters and procedures of international organizations.

The politics of identity is a phenomenon that observers are acutely aware of today. Within nation-states issues of social cleavage are frequently framed as identity issues. And the ethnic, tribal, and religious identities that shape international identities explain much of what we call international relations. Perhaps especially in a globalized world, the personal identity of individuals shows a blending of religious and political aspects. We regard identities as foundational characteristics of people, and also recognize that these have a constructed aspect. That is to say, people learn and relearn features of their identities via their personal experiences. As people of diverse backgrounds and values interact more frequently and intimately in global society, both religions and polities are faced with the need to accept different persons with various identities.

The term “public religion” is used more and more today as religious expression changes in politics. In Section 1, I identified several historical

models of interaction between religion and politics. With greater or lesser conformity to the pure models, these forms continue in today's world. But in both nation-states and global politics, a number of circumstances have converged to make religion a more public reality now than just a few decades ago. Vigorous movements within many of the world's religions have thrust religious discourses into the public arena. The heralding of human rights, particularly religious freedom, has given religions an explicit, positive position in national and international fora. The legitimacy of governments and of many other types of political institutions has become more dependent on religious support as the twentieth-century's favorite ideologies have faded. In this context the public character of religions becomes more obvious, and polities learn a new form of coexistence with religions with far more venerable histories than their own.

If the undifferentiated nexus of society, polity, and religion that I identified in Section 1 stands out as a primordial model for the interaction of politics and religion, today's differentiated consciousness recognizes many differences and distinctions between the two. This results in a far more self-conscious identity for people in their religious and political lives. It also demands a more self-conscious learning. Some of the tools for this process exist in the form of concepts of tolerance and freedom of religion. The recognition of the public character of religion adds an important new learning tool.

### 5. East Asian Experience

Until the vigorous expansion of western powers in East Asia from the nineteenth century, East Asia knew many continuous centuries in which religions and polities were somewhat amorphously overlapped. Buddhist, Confucian, Taoist, Shinto, and shamanistic religions were identifiably distinct, but their boundaries with social and political communities were relatively vague. Individual persons did not generally view their religions in exclusivist terms, religiously or politically.

The encounter with religious and political ideas from the West changed all that. Christianity was introduced (or reintroduced, as the case may be), and religious rights were among the extraterritorial claims and legal demands of the western powers. And along with the legal distinctions surrounding the recognition of religions, East Asian polities were willy-nilly required to deal with unfamiliar, non-traditional religious bodies. New ideas and institutions also meant new tensions in societies and polities of the region.

Liberal models of the separation of politics and religion (or church and state) existed alongside secular models of a "neutral" state. But, as the



Japanese experiment with State Shinto demonstrated, religious values were sometimes co-opted or brought within a one-sided dominant political system. China's post-1949 communist regime crushed religious freedom until some thaw began from the late 1970s. The search for public standards of conduct amidst a tense stand-off between religious bodies and politics has proven difficult. Except for mainland China and North Korea, the last sixty years or so have allowed religious liberty for most of East Asia. Particularly striking has been the growth of Christianity in the Republic of Korea, and more recently in mainland China itself.

Many analysts have pointed to the role of religions in democratization waves of recent decades. Of special interest here are the cases of the "people's power" movement in the Philippines from 1986 and South Korea's evolution to democratic politics from 1987, in which religious groups played important roles. This also introduces a wider comparative or global view on the interaction of politics and religions. The democratization effects on Taiwan from the late 1980s, in Eastern and Central Europe especially from 1989, and in Indonesia (and East Timor) from 1998 have religious dimensions. As the Beijing Olympics of 2008 approach, the relationship between religions and the polity in China is attracting a great deal of attention.

A few other cases can be mentioned for comparison. From the United States of America to Africa, from India to Latin America, new patterns of interaction between religions and politics are noteworthy. The troubled geographical region stretching from Pakistan in the east to Israel in the west cannot be understood apart from the way politics and religions interact there. Perhaps the question to be asked there is not "Can politics learn from religions?" but "Can there be peace without both religious tolerance and renewed public religion?"

### Concluding Remarks

In the first few years of the twenty-first century, the interaction between religions and politics has been a notable feature of the global landscape. Acknowledgment by both sides of the importance of that interaction is a first step in the resolution of any tensions that exist and the construction of a peaceful future. The simple answer to the question with which I began, "Can politics learn from religions?" is yes. By offering an historical overview of their interactions and an account of the issues faced at the national and international/global levels today, I have suggested some of the ways that politics can indeed learn from religions. Dialogue, norms, and symbols are convergent aspects of both. Identities now being forged in both the political and the religious spheres can only benefit from mutual respect and a common foundation of tolerance, freedom, and public

acceptance.

### Bibliographic Notes

Instead of notes or an extensive bibliography, I will add a few bibliographic notes below as an introduction to the themes of this paper.

For political scientists initially engaging with issues of religion and politics today, two books offer a broad and balanced survey of the interactions of politics and religion, especially from a global perspective:

Eric O. Hanson, *Religion and Politics in the International System Today*, Cambridge University Press, 2006.

Scott Thomas, *The Global Resurgence of Religion and the Transformation of International Relations: the Struggle for the Soul of the Twenty-first Century*, Palgrave Macmillan, 2005.

The literature on religions, of course, is extremely large. Renowned authors like Mircea Eliade and Ninian Smart are well-known for surveys of the subject. An approachable volume by a sociologist of religions is Mark Juergensmeyer (ed.), *Global Religions: an Introduction*, Oxford University Press, 2003. Casanova's book on public religion addresses the interactions of politics and religions today: José Casanova, *Public Religions in the Modern World*, University of Chicago Press, 1994. A well-balanced account of a complex subject is: R. Scott Appleby, *The Ambivalence of the Sacred: Religion, Violence, and Reconciliation*, Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2000.

More specific political issues are addressed in the following:

Daniel Philpott, "Religious Freedom and the Undoing of the Westphalian State," *Michigan Journal of International Law* 25(2003-2004), pp. 981-998.

Elizabeth Shakman Hurd, "The Political Authority of Secularism in International Relations," *European Journal of International Relations* 10:2(2004), pp. 235-262.

Gabriel A. Almond, R. Scott Appleby, and Emmanuel Sivan, *Strong Religion: the Rise of Fundamentalisms around the World*, University of Chicago Press, 2003.

Some works that address the political dimensions of identity, cultures, and learning are:

Yosef Lapid and Friedrich Kratochwil (eds.), *The Return of Culture and Identity in IR Theory*, Lynne Rienner, 1996.

Susanne Hoeber Rudolph and James Piscatori (eds.), *Transnational Religions and Fading States*, Westview, 1997.

David Wessels, "Capacities for Global Politics: Cultures and Public Religions in the Pacific Rim," *Bulletin of the Faculty of Foreign Studies, Sophia University* (Tokyo, Japan), No. 40 (2005), pp. 123-150.



## INTRODUCTION



## 1. HISTORICAL MODELS OF INTERACTION BETWEEN POLITICS AND RELIGIONS

- A. One-sided dominance
- B. Undifferentiated civil religion
- C. Wary suspicion
- D. Mutual recognition



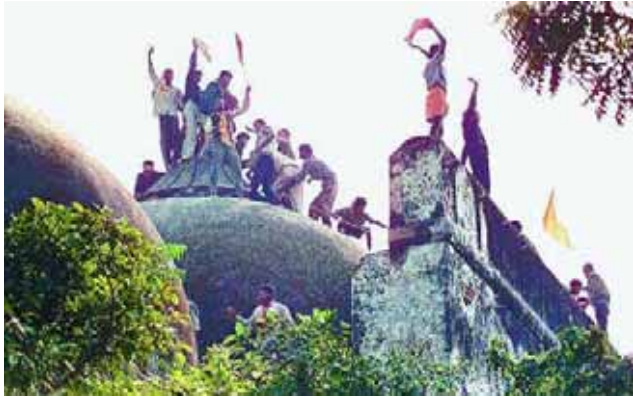
## 2. RELIGIONS AND POLITICS IN CONTEMPORARY NATION-STATES

A. Functional roles of organizations

B. Law and public policies toward religious  
communities

C. Religious communities toward each other and the  
state

D. Norms of social behavior: e.g., family education, life  
issues



### 3. INTERNATIONAL/GLOBAL POLITICS AND RELIGIONS

- A. Conduct of war: terrorism, conscientious objection, justice
- B. Irredentism, diasporas, migration
- C. “Global society” and universal religions: actual venues of social action
- D. Religious traditions and political/religious fundamentalisms



#### 4. LEARNING: PATTERNS AND CONTENTS

- A. Norms: private, public, personal
- B. Symbols: convergence and divergence
- C. Dialogue and conciliation
- D. Identities: foundational, constructed, respected
- E. Public religion as learning
- F. Self-conscious learning, self-conscious identity



## 5.EAST ASIAN EXPERIENCE

- A. Historical social overlap of politics and religions
- B. 19<sup>th</sup> century encounter highlights politics/religion tension
- C. Secular models, religious values, public standards
- D. From the Philippines and Korea to East/Central Europe? China?
- E. Comparative cases worldwide





## CONCLUDING REMARKS