



Religion, Fundamentalism and Ethnicity

A Global Perspective

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Preface

In recent decades, religion has had considerable impact upon politics in many regions of the world. The belief that societies would invariably secularize as they modernize has not been well founded. Technological development and other aspects of modernization have left many people with a feeling of loss rather than achievement. By undermining “traditional” value systems and allocating opportunities in highly unequal ways within and among nations, modernization can produce a deep sense of alienation and stimulate a search for an identity that will give life some purpose and meaning. In addition, the rise of a global consumerist culture can lead to an awareness of relative deprivation that people believe they can deal with more effectively if they present their claims as a group. One result of these developments has been a wave of popular religiosity, which has had far-reaching implications for social integration, political stability and international security.

This paper provides a global perspective on the relation between religion, politics, conflict and identity. Using a wide range of cases from various parts of the world, it examines the complex ways in which religious values, beliefs and norms stimulate and affect political developments and vice versa; the social conditions which give rise to religious movements as well as how such movements are promoted and sustained over time; the relations between religious leaders and followers; and the links between social mobilization and the pursuit of particularist objectives.

The paper contends that the defining characteristic of the relationship of religion and politics in the 1990s is the increasing disaffection and dissatisfaction with established, hierarchical and institutionalized religious bodies. Contemporary religious movements seek instead to find God through personal searching rather than through the mediation of institutions. They also focus on the role of communities in generating positive changes to members’ lives through the application of group effort. In this regard, the paper argues that religion’s interaction with political issues carries an important message of societal resurgence and regeneration, which may challenge the authority of political leaders and economic élites.

The first part of the paper provides an overview of the relationship between religion and modernization. It surveys the contradictory effects of modernization on social values in different cultural and religious settings. Given the uneven impact of modernization in developing countries, the relationship between religion and politics has always been a close one. Political power is underpinned by religious beliefs and practices, while political concerns permeate to the heart of the religious sphere. Therefore, attempts in many countries to separate politics from religion have been largely unsuccessful, especially as economic crisis and global restructuring undermine previous arrangements for promoting social and political cohesion.

Part two develops a typology of religious movements in order to demonstrate the political significance of religion as a global phenomenon. Four types of movements are highlighted based on whether religion is used as a vehicle of opposition or as an ideology of community development. Groups which link religion to the pursuit of community development are categorized as community-oriented while oppositional movements are classified as culturalist, fundamentalist, and syncretistic. Threats from powerful outsider groups or from unwelcome symptoms of modernization largely sustain the oppositional movements; community movements on the other hand derive their *raison d’être* from state failures in social welfare development.

The remaining parts of the paper provide detailed discussions of the dynamics of these four movements. Culturalist movements emerge when a community, sharing both religious and ethnic affinities, perceives itself as a powerless and repressed minority within a state dominated by outsiders. Culture (of which religion is an important part) is mobilized as part of a wider strategy aimed at achieving self control, autonomy or self government. Cases examined include experiences of Sikhs in Hindu India, the struggles of the peoples of Southern Sudan against Arabization and Islamization, Tibetan Buddhist opposition to the Chinese state and the African-American movement of self-development, the Nation of Islam.

Syncretistic religious movements are said to be found predominantly among certain rural dwellers in parts of the Third World, especially in Africa. They involve a fusion or blending of religions and feature a number of elements found in more traditional forms of religious association, such as ancestor worship and healing practices. Sometimes ethnic differentiation may form part of syncretism. Religious and social beliefs supply the basic elements for building group solidarity in the face of threats from outside forces, such as the state, big land-owners, transnational enterprises or foreign governments. The paper examines several African, Latin American and Caribbean cases where such threats have given rise to syncretistic religions, including the Napramas of north-eastern Mozambique, the Lakwena and Lenshina movements in Uganda and Zambia, the cult of *Olivorismo* in the Dominican Republic and Sendero Luminoso in Peru.

Religious fundamentalist movements aim to reform society by changing laws, morality, social norms and political configurations in accordance with religious tenets, with the goal of creating a more traditional society. The paper highlights two broad categories of fundamentalist groups: those based on the Abrahamic “religions of the book” and nationalist-oriented derivatives of Hinduism and Buddhism. For the first type, scriptural revelations relating to political, moral and social issues form the corpus of fundamentalist demands. Their political orientations vary considerably: some are deeply conservative (US Protestant evangelicals), some are reformist or revolutionary (many Islamist groups), some are essentially moralistic (Protestant evangelicals in Latin America), and some are xenophobic or racist (such as the banned Kach and Kahane Chai groups in Israel). In the absence of any clear set of scriptural norms, Hindu and Buddhist fundamentalisms are indistinguishable from movements with aspirations for national or cultural purity.

Community-oriented movements often emerge from attempts to improve community livelihood; these tend to be popularly driven and may have either conservative or reformist orientation, and are found typically, but not exclusively, in Latin America. Especially prominent in this regard are local community groups, mostly Roman Catholic in inspiration, which have grown in importance over the last 25 years in Latin America, the Philippines and in parts of Africa. Many derive their ideas from the tenets of radical liberation theology. In addition, there has been a strong growth in several Latin American and African countries of popular Protestant evangelical churches. What all these groups have in common is that local self-help groups are formed to improve qualitatively communities’ lives at a time when central and local governments are unable to satisfy popular developmental needs.

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Dharam Ghai, Director
May 1995

Introduction: Religion and Modernization

One of the most resilient ideas about societal development after the Second World War was that nations would inevitably secularize as they modernized. The idea of modernization was strongly linked to urbanization, industrialization and to an accompanying rationalization of “irrational” views, such as religious beliefs and ethnic separatism. Loss of religious faith and secularization dovetailed with the idea that technological development and the application of science to overcome perennial social problems of poverty, environmental degradation, hunger and disease would result in long-term human progress.

But with the decline in the belief in the efficacy of technological development to cure all human ills came a wave of popular religiosity with political ramifications. Examples include: the Iranian Islamic revolution of 1978-1980; Christian fundamentalists’ involvement in political and social issues in the United States; the recent growth of Protestant evangelical sects in Central and South America which helped to elect two “born again” presidents in Guatemala; internecine conflict between Hindus and Muslims in India, between Buddhists and Hindus in Sri Lanka, and between Muslims and Christians in the former Yugoslavia; the emergence in India of Sikh separatists in Punjab and of Muslim militants in Jammu-Kashmir; religious syncretistic groups in sub-Saharan Africa and elsewhere whose aim was community protection; and the impact of Jewish fundamentalist groups on Israel’s political configurations, especially in relation to the Palestinians.

To analyse and explain this wave of apparently unconnected developments we need to confront at the outset an issue consistently ignored in political analysis: How do religious values, norms and beliefs stimulate and affect political developments and vice versa? For example, historical analysis would point to the close relationship over time between the top hierarchy of the Roman Catholic church and successive less-than-democratic governments in Latin America, yet over the last 20 years (i.e., during periods of dictatorial rule) some Church officials emerged as champions of democracy, vocal in opposing military dictatorships. Senior members of the Roman Catholic hierarchy, on the other hand, retained their roles within the ruling triumvirate along with senior military figures and big landowners and capitalists. How do we explain the contemporary divergence of views between senior Catholic figures and many priests on the ground in Latin America? A similar process occurred among followers of Islam throughout the Muslim world (i.e., some 50 countries stretching from Morocco to Indonesia). Senior Islamic figures remained close to secular rulers, while political challenges to the *status quo* were led and co-ordinated by lower- and middle-ranking Muslims. A similar type of schism was observable in Thailand and Myanmar (Burma) where senior Buddhists were often supportive of military (-supported) régimes, while junior figures attacked them for their corruption and political incompetence. A common denominator in these events was senior religious figures’ close relationships with secular political and economic élites. Those closest to the people, on the other hand — those involved in religious issues at community level — found themselves responding to popular pressures for change which cut across horizontal class stratifications, vertical ethnic or regional differences, and the urban-rural divide. What emerged was a serious rift between rulers and ruled, where religion was often a focal point for demands for change.

This paper seeks to shed light upon the relationship between religion, politics, conflict and identity in the contemporary period. The focus will predominantly be on mass culture rather than élite preferences because no states are governed by actual or claimed theocratic régimes apart from a handful in the Muslim world (Saudi Arabia, Iran,

Afghanistan, the Sudan). Opposition groups, on the other hand, frequently include religious figures among their leaders. In summary, the arguments presented are: a) that the effects associated with modernization — i.e., socio-economic and political change involving urbanization, industrialization and centralization of government — are crucial to an understanding of the political role of religion in the current era; b) that religion — far from fading from political relevance — has on the contrary assumed an important — although variable — mobilizing role in many cultures; and c) that the nature of a religious vehicle will not only be accountable by reference to structural and systemic attributes and developments, but will also reflect the particular characteristics of the culture which produces and uses it.

In this paper the term “religion” is used in two distinct, yet related, ways. First, in a material sense it refers to religious establishments (i.e. institutions and officials) as well as to social groups and movements whose *raison d’être* are to be found within religious concerns. Examples include the conservative Roman Catholic organization, Opus Dei, the reformist Islamic Salvation Front (FIS) of Algeria, and the Hindu-chauvinist Bharatiya Janata Party of India. Second, in a spiritual sense, religion pertains to models of social and individual behaviour that help believers to organize their everyday lives. In this sense, religion relates to the idea of transcendence, i.e., it relates to supernatural realities; with sacredness, i.e., as a system of language and practice that organizes the world in terms of what is deemed holy; and with ultimacy, i.e., it relates people to the ultimate conditions of existence.

Because of the importance placed here on the explanatory value of the role of modernization, it may be appropriate at the outset to say a little about it. Throughout the Third World, with the important exception of post-revolutionary states such as China and Iran, the general direction of social change is usually referred to as either “modernization” or “Westernization”. That is, social change is understood to lead to significant shifts in the behaviour and prevailing choices of social actors, with such particularistic traits as ethnicity or caste losing importance in relation to more generalistic attributes such as nationalism. Growth of formal organizations (e.g. political parties) and procedures (e.g. “the rule of law”), it is claimed, reduce the central role of clientelism and patronage. In short, some believe that the advent of social change corresponding to a presumed process of modernization will lead to a general jettisoning of older, traditional values and the adoption of other, initially alien, practices. In many respects, however, the adoption of Western traits in many Third World states is rather skin deep: Western suits for men rather than traditional dress, the trappings of statehood — flag, constitution, legislature, etc. — a Western *lingua franca*, and so on. The important point is that social change will not be even throughout a society; social and political conflicts are highly likely owing to the patchy adoption of modern practices. Social change destabilizes, creating a dichotomy between those who seek to benefit from wholesale change and those who prefer the *status quo*. New social strata arise whose position in the new order is decidedly ambiguous. Examples include recent rural-urban migrants in Middle Eastern, African, Latin American and other Third World societies who find themselves between two worlds, often without an effective or appropriate set of anchoring values. Such people are particularly open to political appeals based on religious precepts.

Generally, religion is an important source of basic value orientations. It may have a powerful impact upon politics within a state or region, especially in the context of ethnicity, culture or fundamentalism. Ethnicity relates to the shared characteristics of a racial or cultural group. Religious belief may reinforce ethnic consciousness and inter-ethnic conflict, especially in the Third World (but not only there: think of Northern Ireland or the former Yugoslavia). Religious fundamentalism, on the other hand, connotes a “set of strategies, by which beleaguered believers attempt to preserve their distinctive

identity as a people or group” in response to a real or imagined attack from those who apparently threaten to draw them into a “syncretistic, areligious, or irreligious cultural milieu” (Marty and Scott Appleby, 1993:3). Sometimes such defensiveness may develop into a political offensive which seeks to alter the prevailing social, political and, on occasions, economic realities of state-society relations.

Religion relates to politics in ways which are themselves linked to the particular historical and developmental trajectories of individual societies, whether traditional or modern. In traditional societies the relationship between religion and politics is always a close one. Political power is underpinned by religious beliefs and practices, while political concerns permeate to the heart of the religious sphere. Rulers are not only political heads: they are also religious leaders, whose well-being is closely linked to their people’s health and welfare.

Modernization often leads to a high degree of secularization and a practical although not necessarily symbolic separation of politics and religion at the state level. The process is not, however, always complete or clear-cut. For example, Queen Elizabeth II of the United Kingdom is a constitutional ruler who is also formally the head of the Church of England. In practice, she is much less politically powerful than most state presidents; from a religious point of view her role is practically moribund, yet symbolically it still has some importance. King Hassan II of Morocco, on the other hand, is imbued with a high degree of religious authority which ramifies into political standing. His religious authority derives from his role as *Al Amir al Mumineen*: Commander of the Faithful. Many Moroccans believe that he is a direct descendent of the Prophet Muhammad. King Hassan uses his popular religious standing to offset challenges to his position from a growing Islamist (i.e., seeking Islamicization of society by political means) threat. He built one of the world’s largest mosques, which opened in August 1993, as a way of demonstrating his piety.

The Saudi monarch, King Fahd, also has a significant religious title: “Protector of the Holy Places” — Mecca and Medina. Yet, he protects them as the head of a modern state rather than as leader of a religious community alone. For King Fahd, the role of religion (in an institutional sense) in the upholding of his power is limited: there is no elected assembly, no written constitution, and no advisory body of religio-legal scholars (*ulama*) to give the king’s authority an Islamic gloss. In Saudi Arabia, there is no public scrutiny of decision-making and political processes at all. Fahd rules by way of his own absolutist political and tribal authority rather than because of his religious credentials, although the latter are useful in bolstering his position.

Somewhere in the middle of the two extremes — a virtual absence of religious authority (Queen Elizabeth) and a high degree of it (Kings Fahd and Hassan) — is King Bhumipol

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