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## Some Reflections on Religion and Politics

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## Some Reflections on Religion and Politics

### Abstract

In lieu of an abstract, below is the essay's first paragraph.

"Religion and politics are intertwined historically, sociologically, maybe even genetically. They are practically inseparable. Yet many people seem to find this relationship appalling, unintelligible, or illegitimate. The topic of the connections between religion and politics excites tremendous passion, pro and con, in many. Some see the connections as appropriate, laudable, even necessary for the survival of civilized life and democracy. Others, looking at different dimensions, regard any influence on political life from religious quarters as fundamentally immoral, irrational, unconstitutional and hostile to democracy. There is truth in both views. My aim here is to discuss briefly the rationale(s) behind such contradictory views with an eye to encouraging a bit more detachment and tolerance, less rancor, and perhaps even dialogue across the gulf that divides these wildly differing perspectives. Even such a brief review of these dimensions should convince skeptics that the connections between religion and political life are profound, significant and worthy of serious examination."

## Some Reflections on Religion and Politics

John Harman

Religion and politics are intertwined historically, sociologically, maybe even genetically. They are practically inseparable. Yet many people seem to find this relationship appalling, unintelligible, or illegitimate. The topic of the connections between religion and politics excites tremendous passion, pro and con, in many. Some see the connections as appropriate, laudable, even necessary for the survival of civilized life and democracy. Others, looking at different dimensions, regard any influence on political life from religious quarters as fundamentally immoral, irrational, unconstitutional and hostile to democracy. There is truth in both views. My aim here is to discuss briefly the rationale(s) behind such contradictory views with an eye to encouraging a bit more detachment and tolerance, less rancor, and perhaps even dialogue across the gulf that divides these wildly differing perspectives. Even such a brief review of these dimensions should convince skeptics that the connections between religion and political life are profound, significant and worthy of serious examination.

### A. Religion's Positive Contributions to Political Life:

The charge often leveled against religion—and there is certainly some truth in this—is that it is a divisive element in political life, that it encourages intolerance of others and thus promotes conflict rather than consensus. Yet the opposite has often been the case. In the midst of painful conflicts over desegregation in the South in the 1960s and 70s, it was efforts of ministers in white and black congregations to promote racial harmony that often led to dialogues and the beginnings of reconciliation. Certainly, having common faith and common religious concepts and terms and the ability (if not the practice) to worship together opened an opportunity for healing in ways that would be unlikely otherwise. That such dialogue and reconciliation was *political* action in the sense of addressing a deep rift in the body politic is obvious.

What such incidents underscore is the ability of religions to inspire a sense of brother- and sisterhood among people of otherwise widely different social circumstances. While not always the case (rich and poor neighborhoods usually provide their own congregations) there is enough evidence from rural areas, from mixed neighborhoods, from “mega-churches” and mosques, to justify the observation that at least occasionally this reality occurs. And the creeds generally aspire to such “leveling” in their proclamation of the common status of humanity in the sight of Deity. Theorists and philosophers as diverse as St. Augustine and Rousseau have noted the political implications of such teachings. It has even prompted some to ask, with Glenn Tinder in a notable article in *The Atlantic Monthly* some years ago, “Can We Be Good [Politically] Without God?”

In fact, religion has often served as the foundation for efforts to become better socially and politically. One of the most notable examples, which we have nationally memorialized, was the life and actions of the martyred Martin Luther King. He

epitomized the role of religious leaders in shaping the civil-rights movement. Yet he stood in a long line of religious critics who were at the forefront of efforts to do away with the slavery and its latter-day counterpart, segregation. These preachers, black and white, were able to bring home to countless congregations the notion that slavery, and later segregation, were violations of divine commandments—in other words, were sin. Such religious leadership and insistence was ultimately responsible for eliminating the blight of slavery peacefully in Britain, violently in America.

Often unrecognized by its secular critics, it is equally obvious that religion has been the wellspring of opposition to oppression. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Pope John Paul II, Archbishop Tutu are only a few of the thousands whose actions and writings have inspired the hopeless to believe in the eventual triumph of good over a seemingly overpowering political evil. The role of churches in nourishing the resistance to communism throughout Eastern Europe is undeniable. Their central role in bringing an end to apartheid in South Africa is equally obvious.

That religion should have such a role is a product of millennia-old doctrines and practices that there is something higher and more binding on humans than the proclamations and pretensions of the local prince. The higher law tradition of religious superiority to the secular political order goes back at least to the Old Testament. Moses confronting Pharaoh, Samuel calling Saul to task, Nathan condemning King David's adultery, and Elijah's struggles with Ahab and Jezebel all furnish powerful sermons on the transcendence of divine will over the transient and often self-serving desires of political authorities. That tradition became codified in the Catholic Church, whose canon law paradoxically provided the backbone of several legal systems. The Church itself has been the repository of often-contradictory impulses toward accommodation and critique of the earthly political order, serving as the spiritual and moral support for political orders throughout Europe for a thousand years, resistance to the Revolutionary impulses of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century, and a sponsor of such impulses in the "Liberation Theology" movement in Latin America in the mid-twentieth Century.

Source of solidarity and healing, foundation of resistance to oppression, repository of ideals of human progress in the name of worshipping God—these are only a few of the ways in which religion has been an ennobling and uplifting presence in the body politic. Yet there is a darker dimension to this relationship as well.

## B. Religion's Negative Influence in Political Life

Writing at the end of the Cold War, when some were predicting the "End of History", the eminent political scientist Samuel Huntington predicted instead the reassertion of a much older source of conflict in his celebrated article on the "Clash of Civilizations." Although not identical with religions, civilizations were generally and prominently marked by distinctive religious traditions. Huntington predicted that conflicts between the Roman-Catholic/Protestant West, the Orthodox Christian Slavic East, The Islamic World, Hindu-India and Buddhist Civilizations, and Confucian China would all serve as sources for wars into the future, resuming patterns of rivalry and tension that the

momentary struggle between communism and capitalism had briefly overshadowed. While extremely controversial in academic circles, the essay's popularity and eerie prescience regarding 9/11 and its aftermath all underscore a continuing reality of the divisive potential of religion.

That religion has served as a justification for intolerance and persecution, even genocide, is a reality alongside the abolition of slavery. Indeed, while ministers and congregations delivered thunderous denunciations of "the peculiar institution" in this country, equally religious churches and ministers delivered just as thunderous sermons in its defense. Popes and metropolitans historically justified pogroms, persecutions and slaughter of Jews. Sultan Mehemet The Conquerer's inspiring edict commanding tolerance towards his Franciscan subjects in 1463, has of late been replaced by a torrent of fatwas and teachings in several Muslim states and religious sites encouraging the slaughter of Jews and Christians in the name of Allah.

One of the significant elements in the debates over religion and politics in this country is the insistence on separation between church and state. While the exact limits this places on church-state interaction is a matter of great dispute, it nonetheless largely reflects the American suspicion of state churches in the European experience. That experience featured numerous religious wars fought over hundreds of years with terrible consequences for states and populations.

This suggests that one of the great lessons about the involvement of religion in political life is to beware its joining to state power. Such union has an enormous potential to corrupt both and lead both down the path ending in profound human misery. Such a joining of the claims on people's natural yearning for meaning and collective hope invests those who wield the resulting power with a terrible responsibility. That responsibility is manifold, many-dimensional. But one of its most important, even sacred, elements, is to uplift, ennoble, and dignify those who place their faith in them in ways that will never yield guilt and despair for having taken that decision. To lead people into the taking of other peoples' lives, often in awful ways, simply on the grounds of their allegiance to a different way of understanding God is to betray that trust in a terrible way. And it comes from a terrible arrogance that power can bring to those who "embody" the people's faith, or think they do.

While the joining of religious and secular authority is thus a development to distrust, the "cure" of separation can be just as lethal. As the evidence of decades of atheistic rule in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century can attest, the investing of political rulers with the authority of a "faith" in itself has just the same tendency toward cruel arrogance and catastrophic results. When Stalin, Hitler, and Mao—and a host of lesser dictators—proclaimed themselves larger-than-life Deities and proclaimed war on God as an illegitimate rival, millions of their dispensable subjects suffered and perished along with the demigods' "enemies".

If religion has had both effects—positive and negative—then what are we to make of a proper role or relationship between them?

### C. Some Points to Ponder Concerning the Relationship Between Religion and Politics.

Political scientists have studied this phenomenon for some time. Some truisms or regularities have emerged from that. One of these is that democracy, to flourish, requires a robust civil society—a lively and self-governing realm of public life apart from the control of the state. Such a civil society must act as the great tutor of people in restraint and tolerance, in finding ways of limiting the extent to which our differences define us in the interest of getting along. Religion is often an essential institution in getting people to recognize that despite differences we retain an essential humanity that ultimately binds us together. Religions that do *not* do this tear at the fabric of civil society and with it the possibility of political self-government. They promise to end that essential balance and tolerance in an orgy of self-righteous vengeance. From such evil masquerading as religion one should flee. The collective response must be to recognize such evil for what it is and accord it what evil deserves—to be outlawed and expelled from the body politic.

It will likely be objected that this would violate not only the norms of tolerance but fundamental legal restraints embodied, in America, in the First Amendment of the Constitution. Nothing could be further from the truth. Tolerance requires reciprocity or it is nothing more than surrender. There is nothing in the law or Constitution that requires one to surrender to the demands of a murderer, actual or aspiring. To demand tolerance while withholding it is an act of supreme arrogance (which of course doesn't keep hate religions from demanding such protection and other deluded sympathizers from calling for acquiescence).

Jean-Jacques Rousseau famously called for the recognition of a “civil religion” in *The Social Contract*, a faith promulgated or sanctioned by the state as a necessary glue to ensure that the state remains the primary authority in people's lives. This demand many have recognized as a usurpation of the legitimate role of religion to instruct and civilize sinful humans, and it surely is. But it underscores the wide recognition that faith in Deity is a crucial building block in creating peaceful societies. Thomas Hobbes infamously characterized the commonwealth as a mighty *Leviathan*, a *mortal* God, properly armed with the power to strike awe into its subjects. Proper awe of God, as Proverbs reminds us in the Old Testament, is the beginning of wisdom. Perhaps in part this means such awe is the beginning of human recognition of individual weakness, dependence on others, and desire for common support to become more than the sum of our fears. While some faiths have sought to become the earthly incarnation of the *immortal* God, governments have likewise sought to eliminate the influence of that God in the lives of their citizens, often on the pretext of avoiding religious feuds. In reality both demands are perversions. I suspect that the tension neither can nor should be securely resolved. Humanity seems to require both the prophetic and the profane, eternally at odds with each other, to work out its salvation and to keep the potential for perfection, political and personal, alive. History teaches us that attempting to resolve that tension through theocracy or totalitarian atheism is a recipe for destruction. In short, I believe, we will and ought continually to wrestle with the proper place of religion in political affairs—and vice versa. As long as the

struggle continues, the questions can be asked and the answers debated, rejected or embraced, we are a free society and democracy survives.

I am member of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints—the “Mormon” Church. Each summer the Church stages a Pageant at the Hill Cumorah outside nearby Palmyra, NY at which we present important tenets of our faith. Each summer that performance attracts obnoxiously offensive demonstrators screaming scurrilous accusations at visitors and performers alike. As a *believer* I am both perplexed and outraged at their behavior. But as a *citizen* I am profoundly grateful for the opportunity to live in a society where such confrontations can occur and rejoice that the opportunity continues.