

RELIGION AND POLITICS

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Summary

This article examines the relationship of religion to politics by means of an exploration of the case study of American fundamentalism.

A basic ingredient of all fundamentalist politics in the twentieth century is that of a critique and reaction to the values associated with modernity. These values include, science, reason and moral relativism. Fundamentalism, whether in its Islamic, Hindu or Christian versions, presupposes the existence of universal, timeless truths revealed to the faithful in divinely inspired texts. The existence of these truths is a basic requirement for understanding fundamentalist politics.

American fundamentalism emerges in the early decades of the twentieth century in reaction to both the direction of American culture and the tepid responses of parent denominations. In its essentially Protestant origins, American fundamentalism draws upon a rich tradition of a politically conscious and activist evangelicalism and turns this tradition against both the modern churches and contemporary American culture.

At present, American fundamentalism has become directly engaged in traditional party politics and succeeded in exercising a disproportionate influence upon Republican Party politics. Stimulated to political activism by the abortion decision in 1973, the Christian Coalition has become a major force in American politics. Its influence was particularly noticeable in the republican takeover of Congress in 1994 and the relentless pursuit of the impeachment of President Clinton.

The article concludes by speculating upon the future of both fundamentalist politics in America and, more generally, upon religion and politics in the other world religions. It suggests that the resilience of a politically driven politics is likely to continue with varying degrees of militancy and political success.

1. Introduction

In early modern times, a consensus existed that the process of modernization would inevitably be accompanied by both an end to ideology and an end to religion. The argument was usually put in the form of the proposition that modernization would inevitably produce secularization. There seemed to be reliable *prima facie* evidence to support this view. Western Europe has long abandoned any connection between religion and the myriad of political parties spawned in the nineteenth century. The existence of a powerful Soviet Union and its satellites and clients appeared to have successfully driven religion underground and rendered religious beliefs and politics marginal at best. In the US, the triumph of the market economy and its accompanying consumerism and materialism had rendered religiously driven politics to the periphery of social life. There was the nagging problem of evidence that a majority of Americans still believed in God, attended church and believed in an afterlife but none of these beliefs seemed likely to have a meaningful impact upon a secularized political process. The promises of the Enlightenment and its reign of reason over faith and superstition, science over revelation, and happiness over salvation, seemed well on its way to fulfillment. Indeed, one of the standard criteria for underdevelopment in Third World countries was the very existence of religious institutions and beliefs, which were destined to disappear as development, modernization, and materialism engulfed them in the Enlightenment's promise of "progress," and "civilization."

All this changed in the last three decades of the twentieth century. The collapse of the Soviet Union was accompanied by a resurgence of religious and ethnic sentiments that fueled civil wars between various shades of Islamic fundamentalists, orthodox Christians, moderate Muslims and secular Russians. Jewish orthodox fundamentalists gained strength in Israel and challenged the idea of a multi-ethnic pluralistic state. Varieties of Islamic and Hindu fundamentalist groups successfully pursued power in states as diverse as Afghanistan and Iran, India and Pakistan, Indonesia, Nigeria and Palestine. In America, the rise of an evangelical fundamentalism redirected the politics of one of the major parties and forced the other on the defensive. In Latin America and South Africa, the successful pursuit of a theology of liberation was instrumental in overthrowing regimes and set in motion post-revolutionary truth and reconciliation commissions that employed deep-seated Christian concepts like forgiveness and penance in pursuit of post-authoritarian democracies. Only Western Europe seemed to avoid the resurgence of religiously driven political movements, though some populist movements in opposition to the European Union or liberal immigration policies combined nationalist discourse with religious homogeneity. Political scientists have come to rediscover the interconnectedness of religion and politics and theologians have begun to revisit the idea of the state or political community in "salvation history."

One of the striking features of this phenomenon of religiously driven politics is that it encompasses both a politics of the Left as well as a politics of the Right. For many of

the religious movements identified as fundamentalist and emerging from distinct religious traditions the agenda is decidedly of the Right. A return to a previous epoch of religious dominance and “faithful” societies is the ultimate political objective. The pursuit of an ordered, religiously conforming orthodoxy, often governed by rabbis or mullahs, in short a theocracy, drives the fundamentalist politics of these sects (see *Conservatism*). For other revolutionary movements a politics of some version of a Socialist Left is pursued (see *Socialism and Communism*). Here, theology is employed for the purposes of emancipating the previously oppressed, be they the poor of Latin America or marginalized groups in Western societies such as homosexuals, women and people of color. For others, such as the fundamentalists in the US, constitutional impediments prevent the serious pursuit of a *coup d'état* but a spiritual reawakening and “rechristianizing” of society is seen as a realizable objective. For critics such a politics constitutes a *de facto* revolution that threatens the delicate balance of a multi-ethnic, religiously plural civil society.

This article seeks to lay out the broad theoretical categories for an analysis of the relationship of religion to politics. After identifying the relevant topics for a fruitful comparative analysis of religion and politics, the essay takes up a case study of fundamentalist politics in America. The article then returns to those comparative categories and shows how they might be applied to the special case of American fundamentalism. The conclusion speculates upon the likely future of the intersection of politics and religion.

2. The Sociology of Religion

Despite the variety of religious belief systems and the political systems they have inspired, several general analytical frameworks may be identified. Max Weber’s work on the sociology of world religions remains the controlling scholarship. By world religions we have in mind Christian, Hindu, Buddhist, Islamic, Confucian and Judaic. Each has developed over time a systematic code of conduct, an ethic, which has encompassed the economic, social and political spheres. Each has associated with its historical development a social stratum by means of which the particular ethical imperatives were legitimated and transmitted to the faithful adherents. Thus, as Weber noted, the cultured literati of Hinduism and Confucianism, the mendicant, contemplative monks of Buddhism, the knight orders of crusaders of Islam, the Prophets, Judges and Kings of Judaism and the itinerant artisans of Christianity, all occupied recognizable social positions within their respective communities. The historical analysis of the transformation of these religious communities would proceed by tracking the expansion and contraction of the social strata of both the elites and congregations of the faithful. The impact of these social strata upon the formation of the culture and the response of these religious elites and faithful when the culture resists that influence, is a central issue in determining the cultural significance of the various religious traditions.

In addition to this broad analytical framework derived from sociology, a conceptual map drawn from theology and ethics would seek to relate the content of the specific religious beliefs regarding the character of the deity or divine authority and the specific behavioral ethical imperatives, which are seen to govern the life experiences of the

faithful. Here, the best example would be that of the Ten Commandments for the Judaic and Christian traditions. This analysis clearly moves the investigation closer to the intersection of the political and religious realms. The institutionalization of these religiously derived imperatives, often by means of interpretations of parallel texts like the Christian Bible, the Islamic Koran or Jewish Torah and their respective political constitutional equivalents, lies at the center of the analysis of religion and politics. While other contributions to this encyclopedia will examine in detail the variety of constitutional arrangements which have come to shape various political communities, the intersection of religion and politics grounds these institutional structures among the deepest cultural assumptions derived from basic religious belief systems. There remains an ongoing controversy within social science whether the religious indeed constitutes the “deepest” cause for social or political behavior or is reflective of still deeper fundamental or domain assumptions drawn from economics, psychology or socio-biological, or other disciplines. For purposes of this article, however, it is not necessary to adjudicate or even argue the relative causalities of the human life system. It suffices to assume the modest position that the religious is one of the deepest sources of political, institutional structures across cultures.

A central research strategy in assessing the relationship between religious belief and political ideology is that of describing the crucial theological doctrines that define the role of the political in the larger cosmology of spiritual enlightenment and/or salvation.

James Madison’s observation in the eighteenth century that “if men were angels they would not need government” succinctly states a central theological assumption regarding the incompleteness of human existence and the role of the political in repairing that “fallen state” of human nature. Identifying comparable assumptions in the various religious traditions is an essential preface to the assessment and analysis of specific political programs and institutions that connect the religious to the political.

Employing these conceptual frameworks and analytical strategies to all of the world religions noted above is beyond the reach of this article. Rather, the main thrust of this essay will be to suggest how such an analysis might be employed in examining a contemporary issue in politics and religion; namely, the role of American Protestant Fundamentalism in American politics.

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Biographical Sketch

Gerard P. Heather, Professor of Political Science at San Francisco State University, has been visiting Lecturer at Lancaster University, Great Britain, and the University of Amsterdam, The Netherlands. Most recently, he was a Research Fellow of the School of Theology at Kaltholik University Nijmegen, the Netherlands. He has published in *The Journal of Politics*, the *European Studies Review* and several Dutch Publications. His specialty is religion and politics.