Can Religion Play a Positive Role in Politics?

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Are Religion and Politics Separable?

The twenty first century began with two major religious crises that have horrified the world – the sexual extremism in the Catholic Church and the violent extremism of Islamic groups. Together they have helped place religion in a very unfavorable light and one has since seen the rise of anti-religion sentiments in most developed societies\(^1\). We are also witnessing the rise of anti-religion discourse from new atheists, that is further highlighting the so-called crisis of faith\(^2\). Yet religion survives and religious groups continue to play a major role everywhere\(^3\).

As a Muslim intellectual living in the West, researching and teaching political theory and political philosophy, I have always marveled at the durability of the idea of secularism. For a civilization that boasts considerable sophistication in most areas, to assume that politics and religion constitute two separate realms or that the two can...
be separated is uncharacteristically naïve⁴. This belief, not in separation of church and state, but in the separability of religion and politics, in my opinion is one of the enduring myths of modernity. This myth rests on the false assumptions of pure politics and pure religion. It presupposes that a Jeffersonian wall can separate the two. Secularism is supposedly a device that seeks to protect religion from the corruption of politics and politics from becoming usurped by religion. I am skeptical of this faith in secularism.

All core issues are not only normative in nature but also impinge on individual and collective identities. Neither the conception of the individual self nor the construction of the collective self is free from political or religious considerations. Even in societies that were anti-religious such as the former Soviet Union and present day China and France and Turkey⁵, religion remained an important political issue and politics shaped the way religion was practiced. France, the paragon of laïcité, is obsessed with Islam.

The place of religious symbols in public sphere, whether it is Hijab (Muslim headscarf) in French public schools or the Ten Commandments in American courts, remains contested primarily because there is no consensus on the exclusion of religion from public sphere anywhere. Not only does religion play a role in politics, but politicization of religion is also a common occurrence.

There are two reasons why religion and politics are intertwined. The first is the increasing use of complex discourses for the purpose of legitimization. Today all politicians seem to follow the Machiavellian dictum – it is not important to be just, it is important to be seen to be just – and therefore politicians and political parties and regimes produce discourses to legitimize their goals and strategies. It is in the production of these discourses that religion either underpins political logic or camouflages politic motivations, depending upon the cultural context.

The second reason and perhaps the most important reason why religion will always play a role in crucial issues is the important role that religion plays in identity formation. All political issues that are important eventually affect individual and collective identity and in the process trigger religious sentiments. As long as religion plays a role in the identities of people, it will play a role in politics⁶.

**Can religion play a Positive role in politics?**

Even though the atrocities committed by groups such as Daesh, the Taliban, Boko Haram and Al Qaeda and the globalization of terrorism should secularize the most ardent of advocates for religion in politics⁷, the enormous significance of religion in the life of billions of people necessitates consideration of the role of religion in
politics. I am alert the readers that I am not interested in either reproducing glamorized medieval systems are laws. I am only interested in harnessing the devotions of believers into the public sphere in pursuit of good.

Believers can play the following role in societies (1) Witness their Lord by standing up for justice, (2) Serve their Lord by serving the poor and the deprived (3) Love their Lord by loving their fellow beings and finally (4) Serve the Truth (Al-Haqq) by supporting the pursuit of truth in education and media. How can we translate this into political action? Simple; by creating NGOs and social movements who: fight for the rights of all -- specially the weak, advocate for welfare policies that enable distributive justice, foster volunteerism and philanthropy and support educational institutions and research centers that pursue knowledge devoid of ideology.

But if religious groups pursue power to “impose laws”, to force ideology as knowledge and discriminate against those who are unlike them the religion is evil. But if religion motivates believers to seek for their fellow being all the goods they seek for themselves then it can be a force for good. – Wallahu Aalam.

END NOTES


6 https://books.google.com/books?id=ObwtZ36m1hwC&printsec=frontcover&dq=religion+and+politics&hl=en&sa=X&ei=TwVhVZqXPlv1ggS9I4DQCA&ved=0CCkQ6AEwAg#v=onepage&q=religion%20and%20politics&f=false