

Religion and Politics: An Unbreakable Symbiosis?

A Review of Current Trends

Dmitry Uzlaner

Politics and religion have always been interconnected even though the nature of that relationship is constantly changing. Prior to the 17th century, religion was one of the key factors determining the structure of political power, as well as matters of peace and war. Yet “following the Peace of Westphalia in 1648 and the development of centralized states first in (Western) Europe and then via European colonization to most of the rest of the world, religion took a back seat as an organizing ideology both domestically and internationally,” Jeffrey Haynes writes.

This did not break the bond between politics and religion, though. That relationship continued to overlap, but from now on it was considered one-sided. This time it was politics alongside the economy and other “serious” factors that started to influence religion. The latter could only serve as an object of manipulation. For example, the state instrumentalized religion in order to solve its own internal or external tasks. Where religion still remained crucial for politics, it was used for purely rhetorical and ornamental purposes during secular political rites and did not convey any real message.

Dmitry Uzlaner has a PhD in Philosophy. He is Editor-in-Chief of the magazine *State, Religion and Church in Russia and Worldwide*, and Director of the Center for the Study of Religion at the Russian Presidential Academy of National Economy and Public Administration.

CAN RELIGION INFLUENCE POLITICS?

The one-sided impact of politics on religion and the latter's inability to influence "serious" spheres of social life seemed obvious and well founded. Max Weber's remarks are well known on the influence of the Protestant ethic on the spirit of capitalism. Weber wrote about how the Reformation had paved the way for the emergence of a rational industrial capitalist system, which subsequently turned into the determining power of the modern world. However, his work ends with a sad conclusion that the contemporary capitalist system rested on "mechanical foundations" and no longer needed ideological support either from Protestantism, with its mundane asceticism, or any other religious tradition. The "tremendous cosmos" of the modern economic order "bound to the technical and economic conditions of machine production" got rid of its Christian props and turned into an "iron cage" which "today determines the lives of all the individuals who are born into this mechanism, not only those directly concerned with economic acquisition, with irresistible force."

Weber's viewpoint captured the minds of scholars and became an inalienable part of the theory of secularization that reigned in the sociology of religion almost throughout the entire 20th century. It was best summarized by American sociologist of religion Peter Berger, who said that Christianity was "its own gravedigger" as it had raised a monster that it could no longer handle and which was slowly gnawing at the social roots of both Christianity and other religions. Religion is a dependent variable, a "superstructure" in Marxist terminology, which experiences constant influence, or, to be more accurate, pressure, from the "base," that is, the economy, but also from politics that bends religion any way it sees fit to suit the current situation.

This dogma was badly shaken at the end of the 1970s when a series of events fueled the need to rethink the correlation between politics and religion, this time in reverse order, with religion impacting politics. The first landmark event of this sort occurred in 1979 when the Iranian revolution brought to power forces that were determined to create an Islamic republic. Events in Iran showed that political spirituality was a serious factor that could not easily be discarded by

assertions that Western-type modernization was irreversible and that any society undergoing modernization with time would look like the European prototype, including in terms of secularization, meaning that the social importance of religion should decrease. These views were summarized by French philosopher Michel Foucault, who had been watching the Iranian events quite closely: “With the current Iranian regime in its death throes, we are present at the final moments of an episode that began almost sixty years ago: an attempt to modernize Islamic countries in a European mode.” He then observed further: “Islam, which is not simply a religion, but an entire way of life, an adherence to a history and a civilization, has a good chance of becoming a gigantic powder keg, at the level of hundreds of millions of men. Since yesterday, any Muslim state can be revolutionized from within, from the basis of its secular traditions.”

Another landmark event that overturned prevalent beliefs about the correlation between religion and politics happened in a completely different part of the world—in the United States. In the second half of the 1970s, the emergence and rise of the new Christian Right turned into an influential public and political force. The Christian Right came into existence through American “cultural wars,” when social progressives and conservatives clashed over such issues as the traditional family, abortion, religious education, and morality in art and the mass media. Concerned about the moral degradation of American society, conservative Christians (primarily Protestants) made their way into politics by claiming the need to revive the country’s spiritual and moral values, which they believed were based on Judeo-Christian culture. Having enlisted millions of Americans, the new Christian Right quickly turned into a well-organized electoral force, which brought Ronald Reagan and the Republican Party to victory in the presidential election of 1980.

These two landmark events were not the death throes of religious traditions, which attempted one last time to remind the world of their bygone power. Rather, this was the sign of a dawning new era where religions would once again play a crucial role. The disintegration of the Soviet Union and the subsequent “religious renaissance” in the post-Soviet space, and in Eastern Europe as a whole, symbolized a

deep crisis of secular ideologies and a collapse of the very idea of an atheistic system where religion was banned from a person's life.

The trends that developed in the late 1970s did not die out, but, on the contrary, gained more strength. Political Islam turned from a factor that determined the life of individual "Muslim states" into a transnational movement that affects not only the whole of the Middle East, but also regions where Islam has never played a prominent role; for example, in Western Europe. The American Christian Right remain not just an influential force connected to the Republican Party and often mentioned with reference to George W. Bush and now Donald Trump, but they have gone global to cement alliances of right-wing religious forces around the world.

And yet the politicization of religion is broader than just the aspects mentioned above. Similar processes have affected practically all major world religions, including Hinduism (Hindu nationalism), Buddhism (confrontation with China over Tibet), Judaism (the role of the rabbinate in Israeli politics), etc. The religious factor is increasingly changing from an element of the "superstructure" into one of the structural elements of modern society.

Just as surprising as politicization is the fact that the aforementioned religious renaissance has not brought progressive forces existing within religious traditions to the forefront. On the contrary, according to Peter Berger, "it is conservative or orthodox or traditionalist movements that are on the rise almost everywhere. These movements... are precisely those that rejected an *aggiornamento* [literally bringing the church up-to-date—D.U.] as defined by progressive intellectuals." The success of conservative forces clearly challenged the forecasts made by sociologists of religion who claimed that religious traditions had only two ways to go in the modern world: sects; that is, self-isolation in a world increasingly indifferent to religion; or denomination, which means adaptation to modern world values and rejection of claims to be the sole holder of the truth. The Second Vatican Council became a symbol of such adaptation by formalizing the Catholic Church's commitment to an *aggiornamento* that was believed to be unavoidable.

Inspired by this, researchers welcomed the religious renaissance in the late 20th century with hope. In his monograph “Public Religions in the Modern World” (1994) Jose Casanova spoke optimistically about religion, which was gaining an increasingly prominent sociopolitical role and which he believed “served and continues to serve as a bulwark against ‘the dialectics of enlightenment’ and as a protector of human rights and humanist values against the secular spheres and their absolute claims to internal functional autonomy.” These conclusions were not speculation, but were based on analyzing the active role religious organizations played in public life in Spain, Poland, Brazil, etc. However the pendulum quickly swung in the opposite direction towards more conservative and even fundamentalist trends within religious traditions. For example, until the 21st century researchers in Russia often wrote that there were several major trends within Russian Orthodoxy: fundamentalist, centrist, and liberal. However, the liberal wing seems either to have vanished or gone deep underground, while the center has moved noticeably farther right.

RELIGION AS A BLIND SPOT

The “secular prejudice” of intellectuals, that is, those who are expected to reevaluate major transformations in the modern world, prevents them from realizing that religion is a full-fledged factor affecting, among other things, political processes. “Secular prejudice” does not mean a lack of personal religious experience, but a refusal to take religion seriously. There is a deep-rooted conviction that religion and religiousness are, at best, a “superstructure” over more fundamental elements of the socioeconomic “base,” which may impress superstitious old ladies, but certainly cannot become a force powerful enough to influence such a “serious” sphere as politics.

Peter Berger wrote that there were only two islands of secularism left in the modern world of raging religiousness. The first one is Western and Northern Europe, which by virtue of its specific historical development, particularly the strong influence of the anti-religious French Enlightenment, underwent deep and fundamental secularization. The second is the Westernized and highly-educated elite

that exist in all parts of the world and make prevalent interpretations of social reality—they portray the world as much less religious than it actually is. The secular optics of the elite makes their interpretations oblivious to even the most obvious manifestations of religiousness. A typical reaction to the religious renaissance is an attempt to present it as some sort of “temporary difficulty” after which the victorious trend towards secularization will continue its triumphant march. All this looks more like some quasi-religious belief in the triumph of intelligence and progress than a statement of reality.

As a result, the reevaluation of religious processes including those that directly affect politics is going slowly and lagging behind. The secular optics of intellectual elites registers upsurges of religiousness only when they simply can no longer be overlooked. A good example of that is German philosopher Jürgen Habermas, a convicted advocate of a secular worldview. It took the 11 September 2001 attacks to wake him from his dogmatic sleep. After that he finally noticed religion and came to the conclusion that it could not be ignored. Out of this awakening emerged the theory of post-secular society, which attempts to explore ways of engaging believers in the decision-making process in modern liberal democratic, constitutional states.

On the whole, the religious renaissance in the second half of the 20th century is one of the fundamental transformations missed by the social sciences, which for decades discussed imminent secularization and the incompatibility of religion and modern society.

In his lectures Peter Berger cited absurd situations illustrating how this religious blindness distorted reality. For example, at the end of the 1970s, Iran was visited by a group of American sociologists who were attending a conference. The delegation noticed large crowds of people in the streets who were carrying green flags. When asked who those people were and how important their action was, their Iranian colleagues, also intellectuals, calmly responded that these were villagers who had come from remote provinces and were not worth any attention to them. Another example concerns the aforementioned New Christian Right. A prominent American sociologist of religion was invited to a radio show before an election to talk about the influence of religious

ideas on the electoral preferences of people. The discussion touched upon Evangelical Christians and their influence on American politics. The host, one of the leading American experts on American political life, had never heard of this phenomenon before, and sneeringly asked his guest: And how many of your Evangelical Christians are out there? And got an answer: Well, some seventy million or so.

Religion is the “blind spot” of modern social science, an elephant in the center of the room that no one notices until it begins to crush the china lying everywhere around.

A CRISIS OF SECULAR IDEOLOGIES

While speaking about the growing role of the religious factor in politics, we have stayed away from the actual causes of this process. Needless to say, there are unique causes in each concrete situation, but there is one fundamental reason that pushes religion to the forefront. It is a crisis of secular political ideologies and, therefore, of the belief that secular political projects can offer convincing responses to the challenges facing modern societies. Rejection of religion is no longer considered a significant competitive advantage that can help outdo one's opponents in the fight for economic prosperity or make bureaucratic structures more efficient.

The main modernizing ideologies of the 20th century, which contained a strong secularizing component, are losing relevance. Speaking of the situation in the Middle East, Georgi Derluguian rightfully points out that there were two great political projects in the 20th century—communism and liberalism. “Each of these projects gave an answer to the question about how to build a strong state capable of confronting anyone in the world.” The dream of a strong and powerful state was a worthy enough reason to discard religious traditions and dash forward towards a progressive ideal. However, by the end of the 20th century both projects had proved futile. The Soviet-style socialist way of development can hardly attract many supporters nowadays. But the liberal way based on plain copying of Western institutions is not quite appealing either. In this situation of ideological vacuum, a return to religious traditions, to some mythical

roots looks more than logical. As anthropologist Sergei Arutyunov has smartly remarked: “When power goes out in the house, one can only go down to the basement and get grandfather’s oil lamp.”

In fact, Russia’s modern history fits perfectly into this logic: the socialist way was a fiasco, but attempts to make a democratic transition brought no positive results either. So the country has recalled its centuries-old customs and “traditional values,” a phenomenon that clearly reflects general confusion and lack of understanding as to where it should go further since the most obvious options have already been tried.

But one can dig deeper and talk about a crisis of not only secular political ideologies, but also secular outlooks as such. Faith in the omnipotence of science and scientific and technological progress has diminished noticeably or has acquired a quasi-religious nature where God has been replaced by absolute Knowledge, which humanity should attain one day. No matter how much we would like to believe the opposite, science is unable to answer key moral and practical questions that worry modern people: What is a just society? How can wars be prevented? How can the migration crisis be resolved? Moreover, many achievements such as those in biotechnology multiply ethical dilemmas that have no clear solutions within the frame of science. Furthermore, scientists have so far failed to solve the problems of death, suffering, diseases and poverty—all those problems that worry people in their daily life. These challenges make religions relevant again because they bear a high ethical, symbolic, imaginative, and poetic charge, which comes in very handy in disputes over the value of human life or voluntary termination of life.

This is why it is no surprise that active work is underway in the field of political philosophy to “disconnect” secularism from major political ideologies. For example, Jürgen Habermas is working on this in the camp of political liberalism as part of his theory of post-secular society. Representatives of the so-called theologo-political turn—Alain Badiou, Slavoj Žižek, and Giorgio Agamben—are taking similar steps on the left end of the spectrum with regard to socialism and perusing St. Paul’s legacy in the hope of leading left-wing thought out of the impasse where it became trapped at the end of the 20th century.

A MERGER OF RELIGION AND POLITICS IN RUSSIAN AND EUROPEAN CONTEXTS

The Orthodox tradition has not escaped politics, primarily due to the collapse of communist regimes and the subsequent social and political transitions. As Vasilios Makrides writes, researchers' attention became riveted on Orthodoxy and politics as former communist countries with a predominantly Orthodox population and tradition began to adapt to Western standards of liberal democracy and the accompanying models that regulated church-state relations. The politicization of Orthodoxy had its specific aspects due to the peculiarities of this tradition, at least in contrast to Western Christianity: the urge to rely on strong secular authority; relative indifference to politics in the absence of clearly-defined political theology or social ethics; inclination towards a more conservative position and rejection of political modernity; a tendency towards sacralizing the nation/ethnos and representing oneself as a mouthpiece for the interests of this nation/ethnos. However, while searching for common Orthodox features, it is fundamentally important to avoid simplification: the Orthodox world is extremely complex and diverse, tendencies observed in one Orthodox context—sacralization of the nation, anti-liberal and anti-Western sentiments, desire to become a state church—may be virtually nonexistent in another context (Klaus Buchenau writes about this in detail). In this respect, one can say that progress in the politicization of Orthodoxy is determined not so much by the internal peculiarities of this tradition as by historical circumstances of a concrete state in a given period of time.

The politicization of religion is essentially dominated by the logic of tension that exists between globalization and national sovereignty. Borders become increasingly transparent and communication gets easier, which leads to the migration of religious ideas and movements from region to region. This transforms the religious landscape significantly. Transnational religions emerge that use global arteries for quick dissemination and effective search for new followers. Everybody has heard of transnational Islam, but modern Pentecostalism is just as impressive an example. Since it is part of Protestantism, Pentecostalism is probably one of the most rapidly growing religious

movements in human history. In the 20th century, it grew from several communities in North America to hundreds of millions of adepts and megachurches across the world, including in the post-Soviet space where its proliferation started immediately after the disintegration of the Soviet Union and liberalization of religious legislation. Philip Jenkins, a renowned American religion expert, once cracked a joke about this: Why did the Soviets build huge houses of culture? So that Protestants would have a place to hold their huge meetings after the collapse of the Soviet Union.

The liberalization of religious legislation coupled with transnational trends led to deterritorialization and deconfessionalization; that is, a weakened bond between a territory and confessional affiliation. Being a Russian no longer means practicing Orthodoxy. Today the principle of religious freedom and individual choice, which can be made in favor of Buddhism or, for example, Protestantism, dominate. All this creates the problem of traditional and non-traditional religious ideas and movements on a particular territory. So confessions that consider this territory their own turf start regarding transnational influences as a threat to their survival and privileged status. This increases demand for stricter religious legislation and tighter border security against non-traditional religious trends. Traditional religious organizations start to protect their own canonical territories—spiritual sovereignty—most ardently. However, they can do this only with the assistance of the secular authorities. The state, for its part, is also concerned about globalization processes that undermine, among other things, state sovereignty. In addition, the growing social role of religion makes control over this sphere a crucial part of state policy. This process is called securitization of religion, which means turning it into one of the aspects of national security.

As a result, the state comes halfway to meet the needs of traditional religious organizations by tightening legislation concerning non-traditional confessions and limiting outside religious influences. Essentially, this means partial reterritorialization and reconfessionalization of the religious sphere. In turn, the state gets support from the religions being patronized, while the latter use their

symbolic capital to sacralize the incumbent system of government. A mixture of reterritorialization and securitization of religion produces a well-known reality of struggle for traditional moral values, spiritual security, and preservation of the cultural code by countering the propaganda of alien civilizational values spread, according to this logic, along with non-traditional faiths.

In the case of Ukraine, the process is similar, except that it is Russia that is considered a threat to its national—and spiritual—sovereignty, and close interaction between the Orthodox Church and the state is viewed as protection against this threat, both political and religious.

The politicization of religion also affects Western Europe, which was described above as one of the last bastions of secularization. In order to explain this paradox—politicization of religion amidst prevailing indifference towards religious belief and practice—let us recall one witty description of the war in the Balkans: It was a three-sided conflict among people who had a similar language, culture, and history. The only thing that divided them was religion, in which they did not believe. This description reveals a deep insight: it is not only the religion in which you believe that matters, but also the religion in which you do not believe. A person who does not believe in Islam is not the same as a person who does not believe in Christianity.

A clash with the Islamic Other generates fantasies about vigorous and robust “aliens” who are about to take the place of decrepit “hosts” who have broken away from their roots and got bogged down in hedonism. These fantasies are intensified by concerns about low birth rates among native Europeans. So they put emphasis on Christianity as their own cultural basis, as opposed to the cultural basis of “aliens,” and traditional, primarily family, values as a panacea against demographic threats facing wealthy and prosperous Europe. The Christian tradition turns into some sort of amulet against the non-Christians who are storming Europe. But at the same time, Christian symbols are also a form of protest against the European Union’s policy, which is associated, among other things, with the encouragement of different minorities.

What did Italy’s incumbent Minister of the Interior Matteo Salvini, who is also the leader of the right-wing political party League, show

at a rally as a symbol of his struggle? Catholic rosary beads! It must be said, though, that Catholic monks from a monastery in northern Italy laughed out loud when they were invited to discuss the Italian right's turn to Christianity. In fact, the traditional image of the Northern League [the previous name of the party—Ed.] could not be father from Christianity! On the one hand, this can be regarded as instrumentalization of Christian symbols for the sake of political goals; on the other hand, what other symbol can express better the rejection of both immigrants with their Islam and Brussels' policy that undermines the national sovereignty of individual EU members?

* * *

The religious discourse is pushing other debates—national, ethnic, etc.—aside harder than ever literally in front of our eyes. In Europe, and partly in Russia, the problem of Syrian, Turkish, Algerian, Uzbek, and Tajik immigrants has transformed, at least in mass media, into the issue of Islam. Not only has the religious factor not disappeared, but it has overpowered everything else. Interethnic and even interstate confrontations have once again become religious as they were in the 17th century; maybe not in substance but, at a minimum, in the public conscience. Given the crisis of secular ideologies and outlooks, there is no reason to believe that religion, like the genie, can once again be put back into the bottle where it was trapped for the last couple of centuries.

So it is not a question of religion or no religion that gains significance, including political, in this context, but what kind of religion: more rational or less rational, more democratic or less democratic, more peaceful or less peaceful, more tolerant or less tolerant? This will immediately increase the importance of theology and theological discussions. The struggle for the soul of religious traditions is underway, and its outcome is becoming increasingly crucial for peace on the planet Earth.