

## **PEERING THROUGH THE DIVIDE: RELIGION'S DAMAGING INFLUENCE ON POLITICAL SYSTEMS**

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**Abstract:** Religion's intricate relationship with politics in the modern world defies conventional expectations of marginalization under the sway of secularism or modernity. Rather, the interplay between religion and politics persists as a dynamic force, shaping societies and political landscapes across the globe. This study delves into the nuanced connections between religion and politics, highlighting diverse instances where this relationship has evolved, transformed, and retained its significance. Drawing on a range of global case studies, this research reveals the intricate nature of religion's interaction with politics. The Soviet Union's transformation during the era of Mikhail Gorbachev, from a state vehemently opposing religion to one embracing a more complex relationship, exemplifies this intricate interplay. Similarly, the Middle East's historical entanglement of politics and religion reflects the deeply intertwined nature of these spheres, particularly in the context of Islam, where religion and politics are inseparable. The exploration extends to Iran, an emblematic theocratic state, where radical religious ideas have wielded considerable influence. The Indian context, marked by formal secularism, counters assumptions that secularization leads to the relegation of religion in politics. Southern Africa also serves as a backdrop for analyzing the proximity between religion and politics. By scrutinizing the interaction between Latin Christianity and liberal democracy in Western Europe, and the interplay of liberalism and Protestantism in North America, this study underscores the diversity of relationships worldwide. Recent global events in countries such as Egypt, Cyprus, and Syria underscore religion's ongoing and potent role in politics. Notably, religion transcends being merely a social facet; it often emerges as a significant political force. While sociologists, particularly adherents of structural functionalism, have explored religion's social functions, its political dimensions have garnered limited attention within the field of political science. This article contributes to filling this gap by focusing on the negative aspects of religion's political functions. In doing so, it engages with religion's multifaceted definitions, distinguishing between substantive and functional understandings. By delving into the less explored political aspects of religion, this study enriches our understanding of the complex interplay between religion and politics, casting light on its enduring significance in shaping societies and governance systems.

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**Keywords:** Religion, politics, secularism, modernity, interplay, theocratic state, secular state, global events, political functions

### **INTRODUCTION**

The prior researches show that secularism or modernity has not marginalized religion in the modern world, it means that it has had the relationship and effect on politics. As we know, In the Soviet Union after long time fighting against religion, in the period of Mikhail Gorbachev the relationship between religion and politics began

to transform. In the Middle East, politics and religion have always had long established and intimate relationship together. Indeed, for Islam, there is ideally no sphere of religion separable from the political one. As Qarzawi, one of the famous clergies, in his book 'political Jurisprudence' has mentioned, Islam without politics is not Islam. In this regard, Iran, as a theocratic state, has been the focus of such extremist ideas. In India, although there is officially a secular state, but secularization has not led to the marginalization of religion in the country's political life. In Southern Africa, there is also an arena in which religion and politics have entered into relatively close relationships.

There are relationship between Latin Christianity and liberal democracy in Western Europe, and between liberalism and Protestants in northern America. In Latin America, conflicting pressures between political stability and social justice, and the Churches being divided within and among themselves, are a hallmark of the contemporary relationship between religion and politics (Moyser, 1991: 18-19).

Apart from the conducted surveys and investigations, the world's events during last years in some countries like Egypt, Cyprus, Syria and so on, show that religion is, and will continue to be, a major player in politics. So, religion is a consistent element in human society, that it can be considered like a part of society as a whole with some functions. And, as the historical investigations show, the politics and religion have been in interaction up to now. Indeed the most important effect of the social power of religion is that it emerges in the form of its political capabilities (Mofidi, 2005). However, after separation of various disciplines in social sciences religion and its social functions have already been investigated by some sociologists, especially the functionalists from the point of view of structural functionalism, while the attempts in political science were insignificant and most of studies, have been limited to political religion and fundamentalism. In this regard, and in the continuation of previous writings on religion in politics, this article considers the negative aspects of political functions of religion from the viewpoint of political science. For this purpose, first of all, we should mention to definition of religion and separate the substantive and functional definitions.

### **Religion; Substantive and Functional Definitions**

There are many definitions for religion. All definitions emphasize certain aspects of religion and exclude others. Here, we mention to Smith's definition that is supposed to be approximately comprehensive. In his words, 'Religion is a series of spiritual beliefs that unites its believers as a single community'. Thus, religion is one of the structures in the social system. In addition to the moral aspects, it can be discussed as a materialistic existence in religion foundations (like institutional form such as 'church' in Christianity and Mosque in Islam and temple in the Eastern religions), religious groups and religious movements (Hamilton, 2001). Hence, according to Malcolm Hamilton (2001), religion has both substantial and functional descriptions that explain religion that in this article the functional definition is regarded. The intent here is to expose religion's function and role in politics. So, in this relation, we should also mention the definition of Function.

### **Definition of Function**

The term 'function' has different connotations, but here we consider it as 'an appropriate and sustaining activity, or a part played by a unit within the context of a larger whole. The term 'function' in this sense refers to the positive and negative consequences of social institutions and processes' in Abraham's words. According to him 'function' is 'the contribution which a partial activity makes to the total activity of which it is apart. The function of a particular social usage is the contribution it makes to the total social life as the functioning of the social system' (Abraham, 2003: 74-76).

Some writers use the term ‘function’ to refer to the complex relationship between an entity and the conditions necessary for its survival. This interpretation of function is corollary to the theory of functionalism, according to which any society is conceived as an integrated whole all of whose parts have some relationship – positive or negative, manifest or latent- to the struggle for existence (Holt et al, 1958: 13). In this respect, to clarify the definition of function, I also refer to

Parsons and Merton’s definition, that they are two major thinkers in the functionalism approach. Parsons saw functions as ‘those activities that had the goal of fulfilling a need of the system’. And, Merton defined functions as ‘those consequences that lead to the adjustment or adaptation of a system’ (Ryan, 2004). Hence, functions may be eufunction or dysfunction, manifest or latent functions.

### **Structural Functionalism and Religion**

In the structural-functional approach human societies are seen as self-contained systems that maintain themselves within a framework of necessity. Religion has been regarded as one such requirement (Nottingham, 1971: 57). When such assumptions and modes of analysis are applied to religion, two emphases predominate: ‘1-religion is part of the social structure, and as such can be expected to “fit” at least reasonably well with the other parts and elements of social, and 2- religion by virtue of its presence in society performs certain functions for the society as a whole – that is, religion is beneficial in various ways to the society generally and to certain of its subparts in particular’ (Johnstone, Op.cit: 132).

In total, functional approach does not value-judge, and on the contrary, focuses on the objective role of religion. In Merton’s view, religion, like a part of society, can have positive or negative functions, and latent or manifest functions.

In this text, as it will be explained, we regard to dysfunction (negative function) in respect to the religion in the politics and political science. But before that, here, with regard to what was said above, we review religion and its function in society and politics in total.

### **Function of Religion**

As it was mentioned, in this article we are looking at the functional definition of religion, and we discuss the political function of religion among these functional aspects of religion. In a functional aspect, religion emerges ‘in both individual and collective human life’ (Karaman, 2004) that in socio-political discuss the collective aspect is important. Religion has psychological-social functions, so that Sigmund Freud mentioned the man’s need for ‘God’ (see: Lemert, 2004: 143). According to Peter Berger religion's role is as a kind of ‘canopy’ (The Sacred Canopy), a social construction which projected a sacred cosmos and in so doing served to shelter individuals and society from a seemingly meaningless existence (Fokas, 2010).

According to the abovementioned views, however, religion has many individual and social functions in society. Many of them such as psychology-social functions, and influences have been investigated by researchers before. Here, I review the social functions that have relationship with my discussion that is about political function of religion. But before this, it is necessary to mention Nottingham’s three models of society.

For investigating the role of religion in society, Nottingham uses three models; model one is a type of society in which religious values predominate, model three a type of society in which secular values are in the ascendant, and model two a combination of religious and secular values. The functions of religion in model one are its roles in relation to the group and its members especially socialization process for the individual. It acts as a factor of

cohesion, integrating and stabilizing in the society as a whole, and promotes conservatism and fighting against change (Nottingham, Op.cit: 32 - 34).

In model two societies, religion is not only a possible source of division and strife, but it also plays a creative and innovating role. It is understood as representing ethical values “higher” than the everyday standards of ordinary social life (Ibid: 39). In this model, like model one societies, the absence of highly developed scientific techniques, in one hand, leaves religion with an important function in helping to alleviate situations of stress, particularly those related to health and food supply. On the other hand, because of the stressful and disruptive nature of religious conflict, sociologists have emphasized the negative function of religion regarding such conflicts (Ibid: 67).

The functions of religion in model three societies are profoundly affected by the changing characteristic of religion. Religious divisions combined with the growth of secularism greatly weaken religion’s integrating function, and even its divisive power is somewhat blunted. Religious beliefs and practices, however, may serve an integrating function within the various organizations themselves. But values continue to contribute to the cohesion of the society. Evidence of this is the frequency, especially in times of stress, of public appeals to this common heritage of religious tradition. Presidents open their inaugurals with prayer, and in times of war or national danger the help of god is solemnly and publicly invoked (Ibid: 45).

In the modern world societies none of the abovementioned types could be found unmixed. But large part of many, if not most, of the “developing” countries of Asia and Africa today constitutes model two societies. In complex societies, moreover, the religion may play an innovative role in one part of the social structure and a conservative role in another. For instance, during the seventeenth century, according to Max Weber’s analysis, when certain Calvinistic protestant sects played an innovating role in the emergence of modern capitalism, some branches of the Roman Catholic Church showed a conservative reaction. So, religion may be viewed as performing at one and the same time both positive and negative functions (Ibid: 67- 68).

### **Political Functions of Religion**

Weber in division of ‘concept of God’ in ancient communities mentions political God that shows the background of political function of religion (Weber at: <http://www.ne.jp>). Apart from this ancient background, indeed, during history, governments generally favor those religious complexes which can be “used” for political purposes (Holt et al, Op.cit: 206). In relation to the government and politician’s use of religion, we can refer to what Bonapart and other politicians in his government did in France.

For them, ‘the Church is in the state’, whereas ‘the state is not in church’ (Bhargava, 2010: 102). It shows the importance of religion for state and indeed shows the truth in the beginning of secularism age. They didn’t say church is separate of state because they as politicians wanted to use religion. Until now this method has been continued. Although it is partially seen the separation of religion and state, but the separation of religion and politics is not seen even in secular countries.

Today, the function of religion is not the same as the past, there have been changes in each society ever since. In regard to the political function of religion, we can mention to some categories of other writers. Johnstone has mentioned six effects of religion on behavior and attitudes including social values, racial attitudes, anti-semitism, marriage and the family, religious values, and political party affiliation (Johnstone, Op.cit: 76). He has also explained the influence of religion on politics including *legislating morality*, *voting behavior*, *radical right politics* as fundamentalist movement, and different religious political parties in the Third World (see: Ibid, 201).

According to Yinger there are three possible general relationships in society; first, reinforcing relationship with other societal institutions by integrating function and reducing tensions, to the extent that religious norms coincide with political norms. In this regard religion may justify unequal success in gaining rewards and encouraging submission to the ultimate coercive power (i.e. government). Second, religion like an instrument under control of political institutions, as another instrument of coercion will be in the hand of political elites.

Marx's view of religion, as the opium of the masses, is a perfect summary of this possible relationship between religion and politics. Third, there is a sharp tension between religion and the political system. Here, Political revolution, as the ultimate expression, could even be fomented by religious factions. Here we have religion in competition with state for the allegiance of its citizens (Ibid: 175-176). So, religion is perceived as means of salvation by the faithful, but it is characterized as the opiate of the people by Marxists. What is functional for some may be dysfunctional for others (Abraham, Op.cit: 85).

In addition to what mentioned above, the relation between religion and emotion is important in politics. The connection between religion and emotion is a long and intimate one. Religion has always been a source of profound emotional experience (Emmons and Paloutzian, 2003). In politics this religious emotion and the affect of religion on the emotion is used in various ways, such as fundament of parties, revolution and creation of new state, voting and elections, segmentation, war, politicization, elections, national issue, and charismatic authority etc. These issues can be divided to negative and positive ones as Wach has classified like this. He argues that 'the influence of religion, is twofold: there is a positive or cohesive integrating influence, and there is a negative, destructive, disintegrating influence' (Wach, 1971: 35). So, as it was already mentioned, in respect to social reference of function, there are two types of functions; eufunction (positive function) or dysfunction (negative function). Thus, religion as other social arrangement can have both positive and negative consequences. On the basis of this category, here, we consider the negative aspects of political functions of religion.

### **Negative Aspects of Political Functions of Religion**

According to Marx, religion has negative function, especially, in relation to the working class. We can say that Marx was familiar with both political function for social classes and religion, and their usage in politics. In this relation, he determined the relationship between these classes and religion, thus, he named it opiate of masses. In this regard, it is necessary to say that some researchers have argued that Marxism is against the functionalism, because most of the functionalist researchers have much attention to positive functions, and the Marxist researchers have regarded negative functions of religion. Thereby, they have attempted to separate Marxism from functionalism. But, indeed, both of them are functionalists, that one of them considers the negative and another looks at the positive function of religion.

In discussion of the alien being product of labor from men, Marx explains that in the earliest times the principal production was in the service of gods, and the product belonged to the gods (Lemert, Op.cit: 35). On the other hand, in the modern world, 'bourgeoisie which is veiled by religious and political illusions has substituted naked, shameless, direct, brutal exploitation' (Ibid: 38). In these, two situational usages of religion were observed: in the first one from some perspectives such as union of religion and politics, and political God; and in the second one, religion as a means in the hands of bourgeoisie and governing class. In Marx's interpretation, religion can be simultaneously an expression of protest and a means of legitimating which defuses protest, but as an expression of protest it is ineffectual. 'It does not lead to alteration of the conditions which produce it, but, in fact, serves to perpetuate them'. It has not a threat to the status quo but is, rather, a prop to it (Hamilton, Op.cit: 95). Apart from

Marx's view, most of the time, if it converts to threat, such as a religious revolution, then it will become a factor to legitimate government, and may be create a religious government, which acts as totalitarian, and barrier to any political change. This situation is partially observable in some Islamic countries.

In respect to negative functions of religion, we can also mention to O'Dea's opinion. He has explained six dysfunctions as following: inhibition of protest against injustice, sacralising and inhibition of progress in knowledge, conservatism and prevention of adaptation to changing circumstances, utopianism and inhibition of practical action, conflict among groups and prevention of adjustment, creation of dependence on religious institutions and preventing maturity (Ibid: 138).

Hence, there are some social and political negative functions of religion such as: it is used as veil for exploitation, it has destructive and disintegrating influence, and it is barrier of social changes, segmentation and so on. Here we cast light on three of them.

### **Religion and War**

Religion has not only been cause of religious wars, but also had an effect on political wars. Weber in this relation mentions two opposed viewpoints: '...the mercenary army might be regarded as a relatively ethical institution [...] The employment of force by the state can have moral sanction only when the force is used for the control of sins, for the glory of God, and for combating religious injustice -in short, only for religious purposes'(Weber, Op.cit).

Regarding the relationship between war, religion and politics, there are some examples of political claims grounded upon religious faith. Traditional Muslims divided the world into Dar al-Islam, the abode of Islam, and Dar alHarb the abode of war. The first was included the Islamic communities and those non-Islamic communities that had accepted Muslim rule. All other communities and territories were in second abode. This division was to remain valid until the definitive transformation of Dar al-Harb into Dar al-Islam by jihad. Although, jihad in Islam is not confined to fighting, it also consists of the non-violent propagation of faith. All the same, there is a political claim of universal scope, based not upon reciprocal agreement, but upon the Islamic faith in the sovereign will of God (Davis, 1994:113).

As modern cases, during 20<sup>th</sup> century there were some examples that the clergies were encouraging people to war or justifying the wars regarding countries, and according to politics and politician's words. In this relation we can mention the Justification of war by the Christian clergies during World War I and II. During World War I, the soldiers of many nations, professing a religion of which the chief tenet is brotherly love, slaughtered each other in the name of God (Holt et al, Op.cit: 239-240). And, also, we can mention the war between two countries Iran and Iraq (1980-88), and Iran's war against Kurdish people and suppressing them on their homeland because they wanted to enjoy their basic human rights during 1980s. These two wars were interpreted as war between Islam and 'Kofr' (heresy). Another example is the Iraq's war against Kurds under "Al-Anfal operation" (1986-1989). 'Anfal' is the name of a part of Quran. According to the Iraqi prosecutors, in this operation as many as 182,000 Kurdish people were killed (see: <http://en.wikipedia.org>). While these countries and the Kurds are of Islamic religion. Thereby, the politicians attract the young people to war and justify it. Rather than two mentioned cases, the war of Al-Qaeida against U.S. is, also, in the name of Islam.

Hence, historically, war has been tied to Religion. Apart from domestic wars, and wars between various cults, in the international level, still, there are some religious controversies among some countries, for instance Iran against Arab countries and other neighbors like Afghanistan and Pakistan and turkey also, as Sunit Muslim against Shiite

Muslim, and between Islamic world and Christianity, and so on. Because of these issues, some theories like Huntington's theory "Clash of Civilizations" were emerged.

### **Barrier of Political Changes**

As Nottingham has mentioned, religion can be strong barrier to social changes. In politics, religion has potential to block changes when there is an alliance between an established religion and an established government in circumstances when both stand to gain by maintaining the status quo. It likely occurs in the case of autocratic government (Nottingham, Op.cit: 162 - 163). So, in such countries we see very little political change. This situation has been seen in Iran after revolution in 1979. In this situation, as the Marxists have mentioned, "religion is the opiate of the masses" (Holt et al, Op.cit: 225). This means the barrier to movement of mass, because they are taught by religion to be satisfied of status quo even in absolute poverty. Eventually, mass don't think and don't move against the dominant class, and we don't see an important change in society.

Regarding the political development, religion, basically, is a totalitarian institution, and acts as a barrier against pluralism. In religious societies, especially when religion gets the power, achieving democracy and political development becomes much difficult. The Muslim rulers of the modern world's Islamic countries have been able to control change and, partly to bolster their own authority by appeals to religious symbols for long time (Ibid: 165). In Iran, for example, the religious leaders believe that 'party is just Hezbollah (Allah party)' and, they emphasis on the only Islamic parties, and rejecting other parties. After the stability of government, and the thermidor of revolution in 1979, we can see just the Islamic parties. The totalitarian Islamic nature of the government in the country does not accept any opposition voice, even it is of an Islamic sort, as we can see that they suppressed the protesters after presidential election in 2009.

### **Segmentation**

Another discussion of negative function is related to religion as a segmenting factor. Johnstone in respect to the impact of religion on social structure refers to segmentation as following: *1-segmentation related to doctrine*; in this relation, religion has a possible segmenting or divisive influence in society. 'Religion may aggressively compete with other social institutions for the allegiance of people and may seriously disrupt the society.' In This extreme form of divisiveness, religion attempts consciously and directly to counter and undermine existing social and governmental forms. *2Segmentation reinforced by religion*; that is, segmentation originates elsewhere but reinforced by religion. He refers to two examples in particular: (1) segmentation inherent in social-class divisions, but enhanced by religion, and (2) segmentation inherent in racial prejudice and discrimination but reinforced by religion (Johnstone, Op.cit: 151- 154).

We, here, refer to two traditional and modern examples. First, as negative functions, for instance sectarian and religious violence that some time is used by some rulers especially in eastern political custom as a tool for governing; 'divide and rule'. The outcomes of this thinking are crisis, instability, non development and non democratic society. Sectarian movements and schisms have often been bound up with social divisions and conflicts. This is particularly true of the older sectarian movements within Christianity and Islam. The second issue is deviating the mass voting in elections and forgetting principal issues of society during important political events. In 1928 the protestant opposition gave significant credit for defeat of Alfred e. Smith's presidential candidacy in U.S.A on the grounds of his Catholicism. In the 1960 presidential campaign the anti-catholic issue was again raised. For that matter, some churchmen urged Catholics to vote for Kennedy because he was Catholic (Ibid: 153). As another example, we can point to various parts of Kurdistan especially in turkey, Iran and Syria;

While Kurdish people as a large stateless have ethno- national problem within these countries, most of the times, some religious groups have acted along with the central governments of the countries against the Kurdish nationalist groups. At the lower levels, we can also see the negative aspect of this religious segmentation. In some cities and region, people just because of religious dogma, participate in elections and it waters down other important issues, for example, in election times in some regions in Kirmashan province in the east of Kurdistan (west of Iran), because of the religious Competition between two cults of Islam (shiite and sunnit), they, as Kurdish people, forget many other problems, especially their national problem with central government. They just try to elect a candidate from their own religious group to the parliament. Thus, from the point of view of Kurdish politics, this is the negative function of religion in Kurdistan. On the contrary, the government always uses of this gap between Kurdish people in favor of its own goals. From its point of view, it is positive function of religion. In the modern history of Kurdistan this situation has been an obstacle to integrate of Kurdish movement.

### CONCLUSIONS

As mentioned earlier, religion has both substantial and functional descriptions in which the latter was the focus of this research. Religion is considered as a series of beliefs, and one of the social structures in society with many social functions. In this article, we have concentrated on a part of these functions under political functions of religion. Religion, relatively, has a dual function; positive and negative functions in politics (for example it has acted as a factor for both unification and division). And, historically it has fluctuated between these two roles. On one hand, it is possible that religion has a negative function in a society while it has positive functions in others simultaneously. Or, during various periods, it may have these two functions in the same society. On the other hand, we can't divide the functions of religion, absolutely, to negative and positive. Because it is possible that, according to time and political situation, a function is seen either positive or negative. For example, as ideology in the hand of governing class in Marx's view it is negative, but this ideology when gets revolutionary mood it gets Marxist characteristics and is seen as a positive. So we see some changes in these functions. During Marx's time it was in hand of politicians, and government to oppress the people, but in the end of 20<sup>th</sup> century and these last years it has had revolutionary function in some countries. Thus, in his view religion has negative function. In this relation, and regarding the mentioned arguments, the paper discussed the negative aspects of political function of religion in the point of view of politics. Hence, apart from some old functions, such as war, and old dimensions of segmentation, there are some new negative functions such as barrier of political development, and segmentation during elections. It means that people's voting is on the basis of religious dogma, not on other important and essential issues.

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