

The Functional Similarities Between Religious and Political Ideology

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As opposed to political parties, which are a relatively recent phenomenon, religious beliefs are a universal social phenomenon. Major civilizations have incorporated religion and have based their ideas, beliefs on a certain religious component.

Individuals possess a sense of belonging to a certain society, and his sense has deep biological and social roots. We can freely say that social interaction within a society gives the individual a true sense of existence. The isolated individual is of no consequence and is not a human being in the true sense of the word, at least not until s/he becomes a member of a societal group, or until s/he reaches a certain class of society and finds his/her place in the system of relations.

More often than not, the government and its institutions are not strong enough, and can not satisfy the needs and aspirations of society. By the same token, the wishes and needs of believers are far too great for the church to satisfy. This is why, particular segments of social life are carried out without the control of government institutions, and in the same way, certain aspects of religious life are conducted away from religious organisations.

In our presentation, we will focus on certain similarities in the expression of religious and ideological awareness. These similarities can be observed not only in the attitudes, statements and activities which are performed in the name of religious beliefs, but also and above all in

the social functions that religion and ideology perform within a society. There are similarities in the organisational order, the activities, and the rank order of individuals in the religious or political organisations. For instance: members, functionaries, dignitaries.

There are structural similarities between certain forms of atheistic and religious consciousness observed in followers who fervently protect their religious beliefs, or ideology as the case might be, and exhibit impatience towards others who have differing views or beliefs. The similarities are mostly expressed in the modes of behaviour and attitudes of these two diametrically opposed groups. The first is inspired by theism and the second believes in atheism. In essence, the atheist is also a believer who believes in the opposite to the theist. The theist is completely turned towards the supernatural being, on the other hand, the atheist focuses on earthly existence.

Radical elements in political parties, whether they are extreme left-wing or right-wing, also exhibit similarities analogous to the above structural similarities already described.

Disregarding the orientation to which the radical elements belong, the main point is the iron will and determination with which they carry out and realise their beliefs and values, usually without taking into account the facts. Moderate political elements, however, make the effort to shape their attitudes in accordance with reality. These two categories, radical and moderate, exist among believers as well as atheists, and among members of political parties and movements.

Religion and political ideology also have similarities in the functions they have in society.

The basic functions of religion i.e the church are:

The social - integrative function – the function which enables the formation of groups, and gatherings of individuals based on beliefs and practices and solidarity, or other such criteria, and how these groups relate to and form part of the larger social order.

The ethical – regulatory function, which provides the basic principles which facilitate an enable community life in society. Most religions consist of principles and guidelines for life and they contain commandments and prohibitions. The number of these rules is not really important. The important thing is that the rules are made to be concise, clear and understandable to a large number of followers. A typical example of the above are the Ten Commandments in the Christian religion.

Psychological – persuasive function. Members of the religious community or society as a whole are provided with guidelines as to their behaviour, way of life in order to achieve certain goals in their day to day living or in the after life. Every believer is considered responsible for his/her actions and behaviour, which should be in accordance with the moral and ethical norms proclaimed by the religion. In the Christian belief this is Judgement Day and the Second Arrival of Christ on Earth, and Judgement Day in the Islamic religion.

All of the above societal functions also have their political and philosophical schools of thought as their basis. The hierarchical structure and the constant struggle for social position as to who should be the next Patriarch, Pope, King or Leader of a party, are a common feature of both religious and political organisations.

One of the more distinct features between these two types of organisations, the religious and political, has been manifested in the past through the various modes of exercising discipline among its members. Those individuals who possessed a different view on certain issues and

who did not agree totally with aspects of the learning in either of the above organisations, were either charged with heresy or excommunicated, or became outcasts and dissidents.

During the reign of Constantine the Great and the proclamation of the Edict of Milan in 313 A.D, when tolerance for Christianity was established in the Roman Empire, the church established a bond with the government which still exists in some form to this day. The harmonious relations between the Christian church and government were a result of a common goal: the social and political organisation had moral justification, whereas the religious organisation provided moral support and security from internal and external perils.

In relation to the above, Ostrogorsky wrote:

...the Orthodox church and the Orthodox government act together...and as if by agreement they deal with any kind of calamity which might endanger the order in the world determined by God. It does not matter to them, whether the danger arises from the domestic or foreign enemies that oppose the Tsar, or whether it is the result of the erosive effects of the anti-Church heretics.

This union between the holy and the secular was concluded in order to preserve the social order. On the other hand, various historical moments have witnessed political or militant forces which have succeeded in overpowering 'the other' thus achieving supremacy over the truth and judicial system, whatever the religious or political group. The development of exclusive power, whether it originated from secular beliefs, or Islamic or Christian religion, was based on the understanding of the righteousness of the Pope and the ideal of democracy.

From a historical perspective, the Orthodox church has always been subservient to the government, whereas the Catholic church has aspired to gain power and has obtained right to rule. The Catholic church has proclaimed that the Holy government is older and of greater

significance than the secular government. Also, the secular ruler should necessarily be subjugated by the Holy ruler.

The struggle for power and authority is just another structural similarity between political organisations and religious organisations. In both organisations, although not to the same degree and not in the name of the same goals, there exists a struggle to exercise power and to dominate organisations and communities. Ideas were not used to explain phenomena, but to serve as instruments for criticizing and apologising in political clashes. The leading role was taken by the elite classes who have been, and still are an inevitable characteristic of political relations and processes in secular as well as church organisations.

However, there is no comparison between the elite groups who govern the church with those who govern the state. Both groups differ in their proclaimed motives, goals and the means they use to achieve them. What distinguishes these two groups the most is the monopoly over the use of force.

The state with its legal system, and the church as a key figure that organises the religious life, regulate the rights and obligations of their followers and believers. This is achieved through secular law and the judicial system within the state, and ecclesiastical law in the domain of the church. To this effect, both the church and the state have the means available to use force or to threaten to use force. The state may choose to use a form of punishment if the laws and regulations are broken or not obeyed. The church may also threaten the faithful with the Last Judgement albeit without using force.

In the Beginning, the main idea of early Christianity was the succour brought to the faithful by God the Father and Christ the son i.e the salvation of man. From the time when Christianity

became the official religion in the Roman Empire, the power of the church over public and private life grew. The church turned more and more towards secular activities, striving towards power, and neglected the holy duties to serve the people. There have been open conflicts between church and state during certain historical periods, and the church has always remained a strong and unified community of believers, whose sole aim is the salvation of mankind. In times of conflict, the church always expounds its purely religious role and expresses its disinterest in politics.

A typical example of the above situation is the clash between the church and government during the period of the Ottoman rule in Macedonia. Correlation between church and government did not exist. It was then that the church turned towards its eschatological nature.

In the first half of the 19th century, more precisely in the 1830s, the Turkish government showed greater tolerance towards the construction of new Christian temples. During this period, Macedonian fresco painting abounded in themes that had eschatological significance. The master craftsmen that created the numerous fresco compositions of that period were inspired, and used as their source religious works such as the Revelation by John, The Book of Enoch, as well as works depicting the visions of the prophets Isaiah, Ezekiel, and the Gospel according to Mathew.

The widespread use of themes with eschatological significance in Macedonian fresco painting in the 19th century, particularly the theme of the Last Judgement is the result of the domination of foreign power and the inadequacy and inappropriateness of the Ottoman legal acts and regulations. The common people found their support, security and protection, and incorporated visually the moral norms depicted in the fresco paintings in the temples of worship.

In the composition the 'Last Judgement', the ethical principle is given a clear artistic illustration, the aim being to exert spiritual pressure on the faithful in such a way as to show the faithful the rightful path that they should take in their life. The basic premise underlying the themes with eschatological content is the idea of salvation of the human soul if the soul is righteous. On the other hand, if the soul is burdened with sin, then punishment ensues.

Another common characteristic that religious and ideological awareness share, which significantly differs from scientific and philosophical schools of thought, is the fact that religious schools take as their point of departure certain premises which are not to be questioned but rather, are being given constant proof of. This means that the initial point of departure of theological and ideological thought should not be questioned. On the other hand, science and philosophy take as their point of departure certain hypotheses, which during the course of investigation may be refuted or justified.

Religious learning, and by the same token, political ideology develop on two levels. The first is the level of doctrine, i.e. dogmatic, theological, where certain concepts that have developed are incomprehensible to the wider circle of believers, and the next level which is simplified in order to be more accessible to the masses of believers. This level also includes instructions and practical guidelines for the ways of behaviour of the common people who supposedly do not have the time or the opportunity, and even the capability to delve deeply into the philosophical, quasi-philosophical and theological explanations.

Modern societies witness the existence of a multitude of religions of minor ethnical groups alongside the dominant religion of the majority people living in that state. Before the break-up of Former Yugoslavia, there were numerous political parties on its territory in the last decade of the 20th century. Having all of the above in mind, mutual understanding and tolerance is of

utmost importance, as this kind of awareness will allow the existence of different religions and political parties to flourish one beside the other, enabling freedom of thought and expression but at the same time exercising constraint.

Finally, we would like to point out that religion is a more permanent category in relation to political organisations, and represents an important element in the preservation of individual identity as well as group identity. This can be seen by the fact that in modern societies people are reluctant to convert to other religions because this would mean a change of identity. Identity, of course, plays an important role in people's consciousness.

In relation to the above, we would like to accentuate the important role that the church played in preserving Orthodox Christianity and the national identity of the Macedonian people during the Ottoman rule. This role is evident in the choice of themes for the fresco painting, the sermons, particularly the choice of depicting the lives of saints that rejected to convert to Islam. Most vivid are the lives of **St. Zlata – Meglenska, and St. George – Janinski** who are depicted as fervently rejecting to convert to Islam.

Religious faith has the power to subdue the aggressive element which exists in individuals and which is an inherent characteristic of humans representing the biological instinct for survival of the species. This violent streak in humans is particularly expressed in the everlasting quest for power and accumulation of riches.

Religion can indeed help to solve problems in society by directing people towards common values. By focusing on the common values and norms, religion contributes significantly to the removal of potentially dangerous political conflicts among the various classes or groups of society.

On the level of theological and religious learning we would like to enumerate some common universal values, or commandments pertaining to human life in general, such as: peace among people all over the world, respect of the family and possessions etc. These values can form the foundations on which to build the mutual existence of people of different religions, provided that the people adhere to their beliefs. However, the church also consists of organisations whose primary aim is to achieve power, particularly to gain dominance over other religious groups. It turns out then, that religious learning more often than not, by way of sermons delivered, as well as the attitude and behaviour of the clergy, may instigate violent behaviour and misunderstandings regarding issues of identity and other secular interests.