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Griffin, Roger

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**Secretariaat/ Secretariat:**

Doelensteeg 16  
2311 VL Leiden  
The Netherlands  
071-5277205  
[redactie@leidschrift.nl](mailto:redactie@leidschrift.nl)  
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# 'Religious politics': A Concept Comes of Age

Roger Griffin

## Political Religion in the Wilderness

The present issue of *Leidschrift* is devoted to various aspects of 'religious politics', a term whose relationship to 'political religion', 'politicised religion' and 'the sacralisation of politics' will be hopefully clarified in the course of this introduction. The quality and extreme variety of the articles that follow are a clear demonstration that the study of this topic has finally matured after an extended period of conceptual confusion compounded by the fact that it was widely ignored by historians. Even in 2004 Ian Kershaw, an outstanding historian of the Third Reich, could still dismiss the revival of interest in 'political religion' as 'a currently vogueish revamping of an age-old notion, though no less convincing for being repeated so persistently'.<sup>1</sup> Curiously, the article which contains these words, 'The Uniqueness of Nazism', supplies abundant evidence for the importance of taking religious politics seriously, however it is termed.

Most academics in the Human Sciences have now fully internalised the premise that the sacred and ritual are essential constituents of the social reality of all human societies. Moreover, these elements are now accepted as continuing to play an essential role in shaping the lives of individuals and entire cultures in the modern world, though in ways conditioned by unique historical factors to produce myriad unique permutations of the same basic processes by which human beings make sense of the world and create stable socio-political systems.

These points may seem too obvious to be worth stating, though it was not always the case. It is now clear that many 'experts' of the post-war generation adopted a conceptually challenged approach to questions relating to political religion, as they did with so many major issues. In the 1960s and 1970s the non-Marxist 'Western' Human Sciences outside the Soviet Empire were dominated by a number of paradigms that now look decidedly antiquated and bizarre, and some of them downright catastrophic, in their misreading of how contemporary history was unfolding. Despite the threat

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<sup>1</sup> I. Kershaw, 'The Uniqueness of Nazism', *The Journal of Contemporary History* 39.2 (2004) 250.

of nuclear war between 'communism' and the 'Free World' they detected a uniform overall trend in history towards 'modernisation' and 'development', the only healthy, sustainable (!) model for which was 'First World' US-style finance capitalism and trade, as the economic recovery of West Germany, Italy and Japan 'proved'. What were assumed to be 'backward' societies, which made up the whole world outside North America, Western Europe, Japan, Israel, and some former British and French colonies, would simply have to 'catch up' eventually, after languishing in 'underdevelopment' or making costly detours through 'socialist experiments' or authoritarianism. Clusters of semi-autocracies in the 'Third World' and 'Second World' outside the major power blocs (and therefore relatively insignificant) guaranteed stability: a sort of poor-man's democracy which suited the First World's military and commercial needs. After the traumas of the First and Second World Wars, the juggernaut of the Enlightenment project was apparently moving again, which had now become the sponsor of benign cultural imperialisms and an explosion of technological advances geared to militarism and consumerism.

Such 'progress' was deemed part of an inexorable movement from relatively 'primitive' cultures based on religious communities, myths, and rituals to an increasingly secular 'modern' world based on individualism, materialism and science. Islam, let alone Hinduism, was not on the map as the basis of a viable cultural or political system. Religions were like rain forests to a business man or Stalinist, destined to disappear as humanity advanced, of interest only to botanical specialists and 'ecofreaks'. Everywhere the Gods were departing. As for 'terrorism', it still had no direct association with 'religion', and remained in the peripheral vision of most citizens of the West, an irritant, not a threat to civilisation. It was identified with the Jacobin revolution and the guillotine, or with a handful of 'irredentist' causes in Ireland, Spain, and Palestine. The role of terrorism in the Ku Klux Klan or the creation of Israel did not really come into the picture for Europeans or Americans, and the notion that it would come to dominate the modern world was still inconceivable. Anthropology, sociology, history, the comparative study of art, culture and religion, were separate disciplines, which meant that the ritual or secular religious component of Nazism, so self-evident now, was ignored in mainstream history texts as having nothing to do with 'real history'. Historical interpretation was the product of a well-educated (male) intellect engaging with objective documentation and 'facts'. Fascism was a pandemic of

reactionary irrationalism or middle-class anti-socialism with no true ideology, but a sophisticated propaganda machine backed by a ruthless terror apparatus. In any case it had died in 1945, and was now 'history'.

Following the same logic, the Hitler cult was simply an aspect of an epidemic of irrational politics in Germany through which a nation was hypnotised and coerced. There was nothing particularly revealing about it as the sign that what Max Weber called modernity's 'disenchantment' had created a crisis of meaning and political legitimacy for liberal politics in times of crisis. It was assumed that the other twin tower of totalitarianism, communism, was by contrast ideologically over-determined, had spread to China, many parts of Asia, Africa, Latin America and the Caribbean (collectively known as the 'Third World'), and in the nuclear age posed an even more sustained threat to the 'Free World' than the Third Reich. Its rituals too were signs of brainwashing at work. The term political religion was a somewhat esoteric cultic concept which enjoyed a brief popularity in the 1930s and 1940s thanks to Eric Voegelin's analysis of modern politics as a form of secularised Gnosticism,<sup>2</sup> and was thus simply ignored by 'real' historians and political scientists. It was a climate in which the historical imagination was at a low ebb as far as the shattering events of the twentieth century were concerned. As a result, scholarship remained oblivious of the potentially transformative importance of several groundbreaking studies of religious politics for providing insights into a widely ignored level of causation invisible to 'real' historians. Examples are Klaus Vondung's study of Nazi political religion,<sup>3</sup> George Mosse's masterful account of the rise of nationalism as a new secular religion,<sup>4</sup> and Mona Ozouf's reconstruction of the explosion of ritual politics during the French Revolution.<sup>5</sup>

## **A Transformed Landscape**

How the academic landscape has been transformed in two generations! Solid documents and facts have been volatilised into shadowy texts and

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<sup>2</sup> E. Voegelin, *The Political Religions* (1938) (Lewiston 1986).

<sup>3</sup> K. Vondung, *Magie und Manipulation - Ideologischer Kult und politische Religion des Nationalsozialismus* (Göttingen 1971).

<sup>4</sup> G. Mosse, *The Nationalization of the Masses. Political Symbolism and Mass Movements in Germany from the Napoleonic Wars through the Third Reich* (New York 1975).

<sup>5</sup> M. Ozouf, *La Fête Révolutionnaire 1789-1799* (Paris 1976).

discourses. Russian communism, after warning bouts of angina, died of a heart attack, while communist China mutated into a highly successful autocratic capitalist state eclipsing the West's stricken economies and legitimized by a state Confucianism. The First World has found that it still hosts vast enclaves of the Third, while large parts of the Third and Second World in Asia have insidiously turned into the First. Meanwhile the whole Western vision of progress has revealed itself to be a nightmare of unsustainability and devastating climate change, placing question marks against the civilised nature of civilisation and suggesting it was not reason's sleep that breeds monsters as Goya thought, but the day-time reason of Enlightenment and the technocracy itself.

And how we misread secularisation! We have learned we are living in not a secular but a post-secular age. An age of re-enchantment, or 'de-secularisation', where fundamentalist or politicised forms of religion play major roles in several democracies from the USA to India and Pakistan and throughout the Middle East, where Iran is a theocracy and some Jewish factions would like Israel to become one. Where religious sectarianism has served as pretexts for civil and secessionist wars, ethnic cleansing, persecution and genocide, and provided a major inspiration for spectacular terrorist attacks in the metropolises of the ungodly 'West'. Terrorism and the threat of terrorism, often inspired by heterodox religious creeds, notably Islamism, have become one of the most important forces shaping contemporary events. Islam itself is recognised as one of the major forces in world history, and the serious consequences of its neglect and imperious treatment by generations of political elites in an excessively Eurocentric 'Christian' civilisation are beginning to be realised.

Clearly, rumours of God's death were greatly exaggerated. From the 1980s onwards a sea-change took place in academia in which the relationship between politics, society, modernity, and religion were extensively 'revisited' and rethought. Fascism, it turned out, did have an ideology after all. This had generally been missed in the past because it was overtly irrational, mythic and hence in Old Speak 'primitive' and 'unmodern'. But now it became increasingly 'self-evident' that modern citizens experiencing history as distressing, anarchic, and catastrophic could be attracted to a political programme and ritual at the centre of which lay the genuine belief that the nation was undergoing a process of rebirth to produce a hypermodern state in a post-liberal new order. The political rituals and cults that flourished under Nazism and all totalitarian regimes in

the twentieth century were scrutinised again and revealed to have an ideological content and purpose far more subtle than the mere brainwashing of social control. By drawing on social and cultural anthropology it became clear they were forms of social engineering, attempting to create a new society as the habitat for a new type of human being. A younger generation of scientists started realising the heuristic value of taking ‘political religion’ seriously.

One symptom of these shifts in the way the subjects of the Human Sciences were being reconstructed was the so called ‘cultural turn’. Those working in the Humanities increasingly recognised the insights of poststructuralists about the degree to which all interpretation involves subliminal acts of model building, value judgement, and conceptualisation. Voegelin was rediscovered and eminent historians such as Hans Meier, Wolfgang Hardtwig, and Emilio Gentile made major contributions to revitalising the subject. It was Emilio Gentile’s *Il Culto del Littorio*,<sup>6</sup> and especially its publication in English as *The Sacralization of Politics in Fascist Italy*,<sup>7</sup> that showed that the study of political religion had finally come of age as a specialism.

With Gentile’s book, the supreme importance of the ritual dimension of Fascist public life to the nature of the regime as a project to transform Italy’s political culture had finally been explored in magisterial fashion. Gentile followed this up with a no less seminal work, *Le religioni della politica. Fra democrazie e totalitarismi*,<sup>8</sup> translated as *Politics as Religion*,<sup>9</sup> which finally offered a lucid account of the relationship between political religion and totalitarianism, where it is presented as a manifestation of the regime’s utopian drive to create a new sort of human being. The same book offered an ideal-typical distinction between the political religion characteristic of revolutionary totalitarianism and the ‘civil religion’ of democracies. In both cases the religion of state serves to provide an affective legitimacy and (illusion of) communal cohesion to an otherwise atomised public that cannot arise from institutions or the hegemony of rational choice alone. It was a theory applied to devastating effect in Gentile’s *La democrazia di Dio*.

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<sup>6</sup> E. Gentile, *Il Culto del Littorio* (Rome 1998).

<sup>7</sup> E. Gentile, *The Sacralization of Politics in Fascist Italy* (Cambridge 1996).

<sup>8</sup> E. Gentile, *Le religioni della politica. Fra democrazie e totalitarismi* (Rome and Bari 2000).

<sup>9</sup> E. Gentile, *Politics as Religion* (Princeton 2006).

*La religione americana nell'era dell'impero e del terrore*,<sup>10</sup> which demonstrated how deeply the US's civil religion (the 'American religion') had absorbed elements of both political religion and 'religious religion' in the wake of 9/11. This was partly due to the peculiar place enjoyed by evangelical Christianity in the history of the US and the personal life of a 'born again' George Bush.

### Political and Civic Religions

Gentile would be the first to admit he was not single-handedly responsible for the revival of interest in political religion as a heuristic concept for understanding history, but he has certainly had a major influence on the way it is now defined and applied to historical phenomena within the Europeanised world. However, if we enlarge the field of vision to take in non-European or 'traditional' societies where secularisation is an exogenous force acting on deeply rooted non-Christian religions, it seems useful to add another pair of concepts to produce an even more nuanced conceptual grid. Gentile's work focuses on political religion and civic religion as products of the 'sacralisation of (secular) politics' in undemocratic modern states and modern democracies. This valuable distinction emphasises the fact that whereas in a totalitarian society religious politics serve as a major tool of social engineering in the hands of an autocratic elite, in a democratic society there is no such monopoly of socio-cultural power, and instead religious politics serves to legitimise the absence of authoritarianism and the embrace of pluralism. The razzmatazz of an American Primary is a good example of this principle in operation. Though different, both political and civic religions are essentially secular forces. They are thus distinct from another process whereby a religious tradition acquires an overtly political dimension, leading to what can be called the 'politicisation of religion'.

The complex process by which religious cultures become politicised in the modern age has been explored at length in Shmuel Eisenstadt's *Fundamentalism, Sectarianism and Revolution: The Jacobin Dimensions of Modernity*.<sup>11</sup> Once religious cultures are threatened by globalised secularisation or by

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<sup>10</sup> E. Gentile, *La democrazia di Dio. La religione americana nell'era dell'impero e del terrore*. (Rome and Bari 2006).

<sup>11</sup> S. Eisenstadt, *Fundamentalism, Sectarianism and Revolution: The Jacobin Dimensions of Modernity* (Cambridge 1999).

specific forms of imperialism which challenge their autonomy, they tend to intensify both components: the religion is fundamentalised and often acquires both a millenarian and militant dimension in a form of ‘defensive aggression’, while the politics are radicalised to assume utopian, revolutionary, Jacobin elements. Case studies in this are provided by the Shi’ite Iranian theocracy, the penetration of radical Hinduism or Hindutva into Indian politics, the Israeli far right, the Taliban, and Al Qaeda. It should be noted, however, that all these phenomena are ‘modern’. Throughout history every religion has had a secular social, and very often a political aspect, legitimising kings, emperors, social hierarchies, and feudal systems, so that politics and religion become indivisible, something true for all upholders of absolutism in Europe right up to the twentieth century. However the religion was not ‘politicised’, it was already political. It is secularisation, or the threat of secularisation, under the impact of modernity that has produced a hot-house climate growing many lush varieties of religious politics where religion has had to *adapt* to globalisation by incorporating elements of Western modernity without abandoning its root tradition.

Another manifestation of the politicisation of religion occurs when, out of expediency or conviction, an indigenous religious tradition enters into collusion with a modern regime, which corrupts the religion but makes it easier for a ‘modern’ form of authoritarian state, whether communist, ultranationalist, or a bizarre blend of the two, to be grafted onto a traditional society. The role of Catholicism in Dollfuss’s Austria, of elements of the Catholic under Mussolini, of Shinto in Imperial Japan, and of Confucianism (which in Imperial China assumed the role of a state religion) in contemporary Communist China are worth studying in this respect.

### **Religious Politics Revisited**

In the light of these considerations I would propose the following conceptual framework. The generic phenomenon ‘religious politics’ subsumes four sub-categories: a) the ‘political religion’ of totalitarian regimes (where it becomes part of the social engineering of a new society) and authoritarian regimes (where it is part of the apparatus of social control); b) the ‘civil religion’ of democracies where it upholds and celebrates

pluralism; c) religious cultures which have undergone 'politicisation' to become part of the modern world; d) the symbiotic interpenetration of religion and politics in a pre-modern society where no adaptation to secularisation has taken place. Each specific example of religious politics in the modern age thus involves either the 'sacralisation of politics' or the 'politicisation of religion' conditioned by unique constellations of historical factors.

In the case of fascism, for example, historical conditions dictated that the British Union of Fascists was an overwhelmingly secular, technocratic phenomenon. Meanwhile the Romanian Iron Guard gathered popular momentum in a far less secularised country thanks both to an extensive sacralisation of its own secular creed through the 'ritualisation of politics' (leader cult, military ritual etc) and to its success in securing the collaboration of extensively politicised elements within the Romanian Orthodox Church. The result was a form of political religion which many historians have erroneously assumed to be a form of religious fundamentalism, but which reveals both overtly secular and pseudo-religious elements appropriated from the Orthodox Church but distinct from it. Similarly, fascism and Nazism manipulated Christianity without the slightest intention of ever becoming genuinely Christian, and perverted by association the faith of those Christians who, displaying the profound human capacity for what George Orwell calls 'doublethink',<sup>12</sup> became compromised by or even servants of what was at bottom a deeply anti-Christian religious form of religious politics.

### **The Contribution of the Present Articles**

It is against this background that this issue of *Leidschrift* takes the international debate about political religion further in two respects. First, it is resolutely un-Eurocentric in its scope, with articles case studies drawn from countries which are rarely encountered in the standard literature: Mexico, North Korea, Imperial Japan, Russia's Central Asian Republics, the late medieval Safavid Dynasty of Iran, the Empire of Charlemagne, and three city states of the Ancient World. As in the case of totalitarianism,

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<sup>12</sup> 'Doublethink' is the expression used by George Orwell in *1984* to refer to the act of simultaneously accepting two mutually contradictory beliefs as correct, often in distinct social contexts.

fascism, modernity, capitalism, feudalism, religion, millenarianism, nationalism and other concepts too often applied uncritically laden with preconceptions drawn from the Western experience, such 'peripheral' cases are essential to test and refine models of generic processes and phenomena. Second, the inclusion of topics from the pre-modern world underlines the need to consider the extreme variety of modern forms of religious politics in relation to an ancient world which was not monolithically 'religious', but which admitted a wide range of subtle connections between the sacred and secular power. Indeed, it is vital for political scientists attempting to understand the religious factor in contemporary politics to taken into account how power was institutionalised 'naively' before secularisation had generated the need for states and nations to set about consciously developing totalising visions that replaced what Peter Berger in *The Sacred Canopy* (1967) calls the 'nomos', the cosmic order vital for providing a communal sense of meaning and purpose.

Raymond Buve's essay demonstrates the way the new democratic state in Mexico undertook deliberately developing what Gentile would term a 'civic religion' to legitimate itself within the minds of the masses and the middle classes, one which clashed with the revealed religion of the Catholic Church which had enjoyed centuries of hegemony as a legacy of the Spanish imposition of it on the culture of indigenous populations. However, the Church retrieved some of its influence once the legitimacy and popularity of the new regime waned. It is a story that emphasises that, as with the relationship between totalitarian political religions and the established Church, a spectrum of possibilities can exist between revealed and civic religion, from violent hostility to collusion and symbiosis.

We then move to North Korea, Boudewijn Walraven providing a remarkable case study in the deliberate creation of a new state religion (*Juche*) as a tool of social engineering, one that draws on a blend of Confucianism and Marxism-Leninism as the basis of an extensive leader cult and an intensive ritualisation of politics that rivals anything produced in inter-war Germany or Russia. This demonstrates the importance of treating each specimen of religious politics as produced by a unique constellation of historical, cultural, religious, and political factors and thus adapted to a specific cultural and political ecology with almost Darwinian sophistication. This is particularly important when a scholar with a European education attempts to understand phenomena familiar in a European context (totalitarianism, communism, charismatic leadership) that have surfaced in a

non-European culture. The stress that some scholars, notably Shmuel Eisenstadt,<sup>13</sup> place on the biodiversity of modernity applies to all aspects of modernisation, which should never be approached simply as adoptions of Western models as a naive 'diffusionist' model of modernisation would suggest. Juche on paper fulfils Rousseau's demands for a 'religion civile'<sup>14</sup> to replace established religion within the process of revolution. However it is important to stress that in the case of North Korea the repression that the Jacobins deployed for ten months has been applied. The result has been an even more sustained and grotesque contradiction between the declared 'socialist' ideals of the regime and its brutal realities than the one between liberal ideals and the era of the Terror in revolutionary France.

Aike Rots shows in his essay on the complex relationship between Shinto and the Japanese state how simplistic it is to draw a basic distinction between a 'religious' or real Shinto and a politicised, secular version legitimising state power. Such distinctions, though second nature to Western academics living in a society exposed to centuries of secularisation, make as little sense in the context of a society like interwar Japan still in the first throes of 'modernisation' as they did in the European High Renaissance or during the Wars of Religion, when the tectonic plates of the metaphysical and the secular had still not torn apart from each other. By highlighting the new lease of life Shinto has enjoyed as a 'civil religion' under Japanese democracy, where it has assumed traits of a New Age environmentalist movement, the article emphasises how religions are generally politically neutral or polyvalent. They may remove themselves from the political process altogether, or serve as the rationale for ultra-nationalist, racist, or fascist regimes, just as much as extreme left-wing ones, or alternatively legitimise premises of compassion and transnational solidarity. Again, it is the specific historical context that determines the nature of its politicisation. As events in Sri Lanka have shown, even Buddhism can serve the rationalisation and implementation of genocidal state policies.

In an article that probes into an aspect of modern political history rarely encountered in studies of political religion, Irina Morozova shows

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<sup>13</sup> See in particular, S. Eisenstadt, *Tradition, Change and Modernity* (New York 1973).

<sup>14</sup> In chapter 8 book 4 of *The Social Contract* Jean-Jacques Rousseau coined the expression 'civil religion' to refer to the secular cult of the state or nation necessary to fill the void left by the destruction of traditional religions and thereby assure social cohesion.

how the Central Asian Republics of the Soviet Union not only resisted the destruction of Islam by the official atheism of communism but survived to enter the post-Soviet era strengthened by adopting the discourse of national awakening and independence. The pragmatic entente and cohabitation arrived at between Russian ruling elites seeking to impose a new secular socialist order and indigenous Muslims perpetuating their traditional faith not only challenges assumptions about the fate of religion under Soviet communism, but also is an instructive counter-example both to the persecution of Islam in Chechnya and the tendency of Islam to mutate into Islamism in the aftermath of the Soviet occupation, the most famous example of which is the Taliban. The democratic 'nationalisation' of Islam shows that a symbiosis can occur between traditional religion and modernity, a 'politicisation of religion' in a civic, non-totalitarian, anti-fundamentalist direction.

Gabrielle van den Berg's article on the Safavid dynasty as creating a template for the establishment of a Shi'ite theocracy by modern Iran is an indirect warning to Western academics and politicians to adopt a nuanced and historically informed attitude to the country which is obscured by operating ultimately obscurantist block categories such as Islamisation and fundamentalism. It also implies that modern Iran, like so many nations, is a unique blend of modernity with powerful historical traditions and myths that together form powerful collective assumptions about identity, historical destiny and power. These may prove to be resistant or impervious to internal forces of democratisation and modernisation, external political and economic forces however advanced the industrial military complex of the country.

### **Before Religious Politics**

Reaching back even further in historical time, Carine van Rhijn's article on Charlemagne reminds us that both political and civil religion arise as responses to the crisis of legitimacy caused by secularisation. For many centuries the Christian nexus of temporal politics and a divinely ordained cosmic order remained intact, and formed the basis of political power. The Charlemagne Empire was thus a theocracy in a way directly comparable to contemporary Iran, except that it did not have contend with the forces of globalising materialism, Western 'imperialism', Darwinism, or iPhones.

Political religion theory thus has little to say about Charlemagne, then, apart from drawing attention to vital role played by the ritualisation of politics in his ability to impose himself as God's representative on earth in an ethos which now would be interpreted as a fundamentalist politicisation of religion, but then was simply the way religion acted as both an earthly and cosmological basis of stability.

The irrelevance of Gentile's schema to pre-modern history is also underlined by Kim Beerden, who throws into relief the indivisibility of the sacred from the temporal in the ancient world by focusing on the role of divination in Greece, Mesopotamia and Rome, and tentatively proposes a schema appropriate to societies where tectonic forces have not yet forced apart the temporal from the religious.

All in all this issue of *Leidschrift* provides political scientists and cultural anthropologists with an advanced course in religious politics, simultaneously expanding and refining the parameters of the term 'political religion' while producing a succession of sparkling insights that invites us to look at the relationship between politics and religion in democratic and non-democratic societies with fresh eyes. It promotes a long overdue maturing of the Human Sciences which will eventually aid it to shed ethnocentric prejudices and engage seriously with non-European cultural, religious and political realities and so deepen the understanding of our own history.