

The Nexus between Religion and Politics: A Christian Perspective

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Abstract: When religion and politics are discussed, one wonders as to whether these two fields of human active are mutually exclusive. Academically, these concepts are treated as independent of one another. In practical terms, the interplay between religion and politics is equally not always self-evident.

I have argued, through thematic analysis of literature, that religion and politics are grounded in the integral nature of the human person. Human life is a project or task to be accomplished. On the one hand, politics helps us to organise the conditions within which this task is performed, for good or worse. Religion, on the other hand, gives meaning to human activities in this pursuit, politics inclusively. This is because the human person has a natural end in whose to cause politics proper belongs. However, the human person also possesses a supernatural end to which religion substantially contributes. Religion thus elevates the human earthly strivings to a transcendent level.

Keywords: Religion, Politics, Human Person, Natural and Supernatural Ends

I. INTRODUCTION

When religion and politics are discussed, one wonders as to whether the two subjects are mutually exclusive or unconnected. Academically, these concepts are treated as independent and existent in their own individual rights. In the practical sense, their relations are equally vague. In Zambia, for instance, when church leaders have spoken out against the government concerning some matters of governance, political leaders have argued that issues of politics have to be left to those in politics (Nkomesha, 2021). The impression that such reactions create is that politics is unreligious and a reserve of those who assume political positions or those are actively involved in partisan politics. For all purposes and intents, the interplay between religion and politics is not always self-evident.

In this article, we have argued that integral human nature is the fundamental point at which religion and politics intersect. Whereas religion and politics are intimately bound up with the human experience, they both play a critical role in the development of human societies and in fulfillment of individual human beings. As such, there is an enduring link between these two spheres of human life. Thus, to demonstrate this overarching relationship, this article begins with a discussion on the concepts of religion and politics. It then makes a treatment of the holistic nature of the human person, and, ultimately demonstrates its inherent implications for religion and politics. In so doing, it puts the spotlight on

human nature, integrally viewed, as the nexus between religion and politics.

II. THE CONCEPTS OF RELIGION AND POLITICS

Inevitably, sound attempt to understand the relationship between religion and politics should begin with the meaning of the concepts themselves. We need to clarify for ourselves the contents of these terminologies to interrogate the relatedness of the actual fields of human experience.

2.1 Religion

From the onset, it must be understood that there are various definitions of religion. This problem is compounded by the rise of various religious groupings such as sects, cults and other spiritual movements. Furthermore, it is also worthwhile to note that religion has been defined from diverse perspectives. These have included anthropology, psychology, sociology, culture, theology, to mention but a few.

However, our understanding of what religion is can be guided by making recourse to the etymology of this term. According to McBrien(1981), the word religion is derived from Latin noun *religio*. Though this word is associated with different Latin verbs (*relegere, religari, reeligere*), it can reasonably be deduced that it ultimately suggests respect for what is sacred, reverence for the gods or God, and the bond between man and the gods or God. On the basis of these implications of the root term, there are two definitions worthy considering because of their closeness to the meanings of the original term.

The first of these definitions is what was advanced by McBrien. He defined religion as “[t]he external, social, institutionalized expression of our faith in God” (McBrien, 1981: 1254). This definition, though not comprehensive, has ample merit in that it captures the visible structural aspect of religion and its centeredness on God. It also touches on faith, an element that involves an attitude of reverence and an outward expression which can manifests itself in conduct of worship. The second definition of interest was formulated by Spiro. The latter defines religion as an institution, which contains culturally determined interactions, with culturally postulated superhuman beings (Spiro, 1987). This latter definition compliments the one of McBrien in the sense that it at least takes into account the existence of an established way of life which revolves around some supernatural being. On both counts, what this means is that religion cannot only be God-centred, but also may involve belief in a god or gods. More accurately, it entails that religion is a set of attitudes,

beliefs, and practices pertaining to culturally postulated human beings (Neusner, 2006). On this understanding, religion is the manifestation of the culture within which it exists and is expressed.

Meanwhile, we must hasten to add that the above definitions are somewhat more abstract than empirical. This assessment becomes particularly apparent when we factor in Mbiti's definition. The latter defines religion in a way that provides an additional facet in that it gives more prominence to the existential characteristic of religion. In this elaborate manner, Mbiti defines religion as "a believing view of life, approach to life, a way of life and therefore a fundamental pattern embracing the individual and society, man and the world, through which a person...sees and experiences, thinks and feels, acts and suffers everything" (Mbiti, 1975: 194). In this sense, religion forms one's world view, attitude towards the world as reality that is permeated by the divine presence and activity. For Mbiti, this stance towards reality elicits a response of gratitude, reverence and appropriate moral conduct. This accounts for worship that accompanies religious life, and morality. Thus, Mbiti's notion of religion gives us a glimpse into what it means to be religious in practical terms. Livingston (2006) also supports this perspective when he contends, from a standpoint of rational supernaturalism, that the function and goal of religion rest in providing sanctions for morality. Religion impresses on us an obligation to live virtuously.

In this connection, we can conclude that religion revolves around an institutionalized set of beliefs, which explains the existence and meaning of the universe. This system of beliefs usually involves devotional and ritual observances, and often contains a moral code governing the conduct of human affairs. On the basis of this understanding, we would be right, in the final analysis, to assert that "religion is a cultural system resting on belief in the supernatural being, a system composed of (1) the way of life and (2) the world view of (3) a group of people that sees itself as set apart for the divine service (Neusner, 2006: x)." As such, all religious traditions is characterised by a unique narrative or worldview, its own distinct pattern of life or behaviour, and its own self-understanding as a society. They also contain rites or practices of worship.

Existentially, religions constitute various forms of expressing human religious experience. These are "distinct in their essential content and each demands by its nature a total commitment on the part of the person" (Dupuis, 1997, p. 6). They, however, also share certain common elements. In any case, the main religious traditions are Judaism, Christianity, Buddhism, Hinduism and Islam. These are the religions that are referred to as world religions. Other religious faith traditions, worth mentioning, include those found in Africa, the Americas, Asia, the Middle East and Oceania. Under these, we can locate the likes of African Traditional Religions, Bahai faith and Taoism.

Furthermore, it is vital to concede that none of these religious traditions are homogeneous. Within each of them, there are sub-traditions. In other words, their nature include inherent variations. Christianity, for instance, is fragmented by various denominations such as the Roman Catholic Church, the Orthodox Church, and Protestant churches. Islam consists of three major strands: the Sunni, the Shiite and Wahhabism of Saudi Arabia. Similar variations are true of Judaism which is divided into Reform and Orthodox Judaism.

With this general discussion on religion, we can now turn to politics.

2.2 Politics

As similarly observed about the notion of religion, the term politics is complex and difficult to define. Originally, the word "politics" was derived from the Greek word "πολιτικός" (*politikos*), meaning amongst others "of, for, or relating to citizens", "civil", "civic", "belonging to the State". *Politikos* was in turn a derivative of the word "πολίτης" (*polites*), "citizen" and that from "πόλις" (*polis*), "city" (McBrien, 1981). Based on this linguistic backdrop, politics is therefore about things concerning the city, and πολίτης (*polites*), "citizen" (McBrien, 1981). It is also little wonder, as we will further explain that politics is associated with terms such as 'interests', 'State', 'authority', 'consent' and 'power'.

Generally, the term politics has come to be applied to the art or science of running governmental or State affairs. This involves various means that are employed in the management of these affairs. In reality, it refers to behaviour within civil governments in that it focuses on how governments interact with their own people and institutions. Governments, for one thing, make laws and enforce them to maintain order and foster the common good within state boundaries. They command the loyalties of citizens and by so doing they are able "to tax resources, to conscript manpower, and to innovate and execute policy (Huntington, 1968: 59)." At any rate, politics also includes the manner in which governments interact with other governments or international relations. On this front, politics encompasses how governments design different foreign policies that guide them in the way they relate with governments of other States. Consequently, politics is both domestic and international.

Besides, as behaviour within and among governments, politics is about the art of navigating through tensions among multiple individuals and groups of individuals to achieve collectively desired ends. It concerns itself with regulating and harmonising diverse interests, which are existent within a State and among States. As such, politics inevitably comprises conflict and cooperation over the allocation of resources (Heineman, 1996). As a process by which groups of people make collective decisions, politics requires the presence of formal organization with defined structures of authority and decision-making. Politics thus arises when there is a clear decision-making centre and evident conflict of interest.

Politics is necessarily bound with governmental power, that is, the ability to influence citizens to obtain one's desired outcome for the country. As observed by Macquarrie and Children (1986: 484), "[p]olitics is about the exercise of power and the conflicts that arise from it". On this score, culture and ideology are indispensable elements because they relate to the manner in which power is exercised over the definition of interests. Ideology includes religion, which play a vital role in shaping political space and decisions. Furthermore, political leaders often seek the collaboration of religious ones to advance development of societies.

Nonetheless, various political systems exist in different cultures of the world. Generally, there are three main categories of political systems: democratic, authoritarian and totalitarian. Within each of these systems, political power is exercised, and this could be authoritative power, coercive power, political influence or persuasion, and political manipulation (Heineman, 1996).

Democracy normally abides by the principle of the rule of the majority in elections. At the same time, however, democracy involves respect for the rights of minorities including political rights. Besides, political processes tend to be decentralized and flexible; politics generally occurs through political parties and interest groups (Heineman, 1996). France, England and the US are among some the longstanding democracies in the world.

Unlike democracies, authoritarian systems have strong central governments, which to some extent curtail political activity such as free discussion and association. "More often than not, they are one-party state, which means that only one party, that which supports the government, is allowed to engage in political activity (Heineman, 1996)." Examples of such systems include Saudi Arabia and Kuwait where virtually all important public offices are held by relatives of the monarch. In these countries, authoritative power, coercive power, and political manipulation are typically used to control governing process. As for totalitarian systems, they endeavor to subordinate all forms of belief and individual behavior to the needs of government. They manifest the most centralized control over political processes and culture as well as the greatest claim on individuals. There is state control of the economy, state monopoly of information and education, and restrictions of freedoms such as of dissent. They also tend to be opposed to religion in their ideology especially when they perceive religion or forms of it as a threat to their policies and power (Macquarrie and Childress, 2001). They also can take to widespread propaganda of ideas in order to brainwash citizens. For instance, the German Nazi party used propaganda to proclaim the superiority of the Aryan race and the importance of total dedication to the German state that eventually led to the extermination of several Jews.

Despite these distinct forms of political systems, it should be conceded that there are general trends or patterns. Huntington (1996) has been explicated one of these characteristics by observing that the disparities between democracy and dictatorship are not as pronounced as the difference between those countries whose politics involves consensus, community, legitimacy, organization and effectiveness, stability, and those countries whose politics is weak in these qualities. Finally, the legitimate aim and function of political authority is the realization of the common good, legitimate aim and function of political authority is the realization of the common good, that is, "the sum total of those conditions of social living, whereby men are enabled more fully and more readily to achieve their own perfection (Pope John XXIII, 1961: 65)."

With this background understanding of politics, the platform is now set for a discussion on what constitutes the nexus between politics and religion, the nature of the human person.

III. THE HUMAN NATURE AS THE CONTEXT OF RELIGION AND POLITICS

3.1 *Understanding Human Nature*

Inherently, we can only fully comprehend the intimate relationship between religion and politics when we locate them in the holistic nature of the human person. The radical identity of the human person is that he/she is a spirit incarnate, an embodied spirit. This means that the human person is both body and spirit/soul. The human person is thus a composite of body and soul. In this sense, the human person is a unified totality, and there is no dichotomy between body and soul (Gula, 1989).

Even as a unified entity, the human person experiences himself/herself as both physical and spiritual or corporeal-spiritual. As corporeal, the human person is biological and historical; he/she is a living being like all animals. However, unlike animals, the human person is much more than bodily. The soul, which the human person possesses, gives him/her the capacity for knowledge and freedom and because of these two elements the human person is able to know and choose. The human person is intelligent (rational) and can as a result deliberate and make choices. By virtue of the soul, the human person transcends his/her physical nature, and is able to project himself/herself into the future and the spiritual sphere. Consequently, taking into account this unified totality of the human person entails that he/she cannot or may neither be reduced to his/her biological aspect nor to his/her rationality (May, 2000). The human person is simultaneously both of these aspects.

From a religious point of view, the human person possesses the spirit because he or she was created in God's own image. The human person is not self-made; he/she is a creature of God. God breathed into the human person his own spirit (Genesis 1: 27-28 and Genesis 2: 7). Consequently, as a body-soul reality, the human person has two ends or goals in

life. These are the natural and supernatural ends. The latter is fulfilled in death whereas the former in the ultimate union with God from where one originally emanated as in Christian understanding.

Furthermore, having a natural end, it entails for Christians that the human person lives out earthly life as the duty to fulfil the potentialities that God has given him/her so as to become fully God's representative on earth. Incidentally, this project of self-realization can only be fulfilled in conditions of justice, hence the necessary role of political authority. As for the supernatural end, the human person lives his/her earthly life with the knowledge that there is another form of life that comes after his or her death or expiry. In this light, physical earthly life has no absolute value. There is always something more to being human life than the earthly experience. Politics thus has real significance when it is exercised in the service of this supernatural goal, which is naturally religious. Incidentally, human history has demonstrated "[w]hen God drops out of the picture, the world becomes without ground and without goal and everything threatens to become meaningless...once the reality of God...has been removed, every individual reality also becomes ultimately meaningless" (Kasper, 1984: 10-11). From this standpoint, God is the ultimate ground and goal of every reality.

Albeit being body and spirit, the human person is constantly in relation with other human persons. He/she does not exist like an isolated atom, but is rather essentially social. There is always a communal dimension to being human as one's personal existence is always a shared existence. For one thing, the human person is a product of relationships and he or she fulfils himself by means of relationships (Curran, 1999). For Christians, relational aspect of human nature is augmented by the belief in God who is Trinitarian (that is, Father, Son and Holy Spirit/Ghost). As such, to have been created in the image of this God also entails being communal, relational or social human beings. The consequent responsibility of being imprinted with this image of God is, therefore, to live out the fullness of who an individual is and by moving out of oneself and into the world of relationships (Gula, 1989), which inevitably involves politics. On this front, politics are indispensable in that it constitutes the platform upon which appropriate just conditions that enable human fulfillment are created and fostered. It is in this context that human rights are necessarily affirmed and promoted.

It is, therefore, evident that when considered fully and religiously, the human person exists in relation to the world, to other persons, to social structures, and to God. He/she is bio (bodily or biological), psycho (intelligent and free), social (relational), and divino (spiritual). Indeed, "[t]o say that these dimensions constitute an 'integral and adequate' consideration of the person means that the human person is always, and at the same time, every one of these dimensions interacting to form a synthesis which is the integral human person" (Gula, 1989). By extension and of necessity, politics and religion are rooted in this comprehensive notion of the human person.

Furthermore, as contended by Kasper(1984: 14), a "persons who believes in God as the reality that determines all else cannot acquiesce in the bourgeois separation between a secular public sphere and a private sphere in which alone religion is given a place".

Speaking specifically about politics, it should be recalled that, on the one hand, that religious conflicts caused several wars on the European continent, including the wars of the Reformation that came to an end with the Westphalia Treaty in 1648 (Chilufya, 2012). Even prior to this, religious goals had fueled the Crusades that were intended to win back Christian territory that had been taken by Muslims. They also had driven the expansion of Europe, through exploration voyages, to the Western hemisphere to propagate Christianity. On the contrary, religious beliefs "shaped the arts and architecture, music and literature and culture and politics of the West (Neusner, 2006: xi)." Indeed, as Neusner (2006) observed further, until the eighteen century, religion was the sole decisive force that shaped politics, culture and society in the West, and this role of religion, though supplemented by other forces such as secularism, has continued to this day.

In Islam, Judaism and African Traditional Religion, there is no dichotomy or separation between religion and politics, or "between institutions of this-worldly power and those that exercised the other-worldly kind (Neusner, 2006: xii)." The inseparable relationship between religion and politics is well-summed by Neusner(2006: xiii) when he further asserts that "[t]here is no understanding the world as we know it today without a clear account of what religion has been and has done, what it is and does today." Put differently, in arguing that religion and politics are development are bound together, we are effectively making a statement that God and human fulfillment must be translated in human condition in its total social and political situation in compliance with the demand of the holistic human nature. Thus, social progress can only be consequence of a healthy interplay between good politics and authentic religion.

One last and important point to note about the nature of the human person is that it is not static but dynamic. In this sense, we talk about the human being as one who is in a state of flux or becoming. There is constant change taking place at every strata of the human person (bio, psycho, social and divino). As bio, an individual changes in that he/she is born, he/she grows in age, height, weight as well as in other physical areas, and will ultimately die at some point. On the social level, the change is normally from dependence on others, to independence and finally to interdependence. Lastly, on the divino level, spiritual life undergoes changes in that your image of God does not stay the same as one grows – their understanding of God's revelation in the scriptures is also ongoing. As holistically defined and becoming, the human person is, therefore, complex. Religion and politics are nonetheless always bound up in this complexity.

3.2 Human Nature and its Implications for Religion and Politics

Politics, on the one hand, is a result of the fact that we exist in the world and that we are essentially relational. We live in groups, and we need to cooperate with one another in order to fulfil ourselves as individuals and to enjoy the common good. Good politics represents an attempt by human beings to structure, construct and institutionalise our personal and interpersonal social relationships so that they could live humanly and justly, thus realize our fullest potentialities as responsible citizens (Maimela, 1987).

On the other hand, religion comes in because we are not self-made, but are rather creatures of God. All major religions, as we have noticed affirm this fact as well as our dependence on the Supreme God, the Creator. Our earthly existence always involves the creative activity of God; this is the God who has created us and always sustains us in existence (John Paul II, 1987). As such, human life is to be revered because it reflects God's nature and activity. As depicted in God's furious response – in the book of Genesis –to Cain's slaughter of his own brother, Abel, every attack on human life is an attack on God Himself because of this intimate relationship. According to Christianity, genuine religion safeguards and promotes human dignity with all the rights that go with it. As such, it instills values in both politics and development agendas lending them with human-rights centred approaches.

They both concern the same human person, and no one can be dispensed from them. Whereas religion deals with the spiritual needs of the human person, politics concerns itself with the secular or temporal welfare of the same human person in historical conditions in which he/she exists.

IV. CONCLUSION

As consistently argued in this treatment, there is interconnectedness among religion and politics. Clearly, these two aspects of human person are not mutually exclusive. Though pursuing different goals, they all contribute to either the fulfillment or the impoverishment of the human person as integrally or adequately conceived. Human life remains a project or task to be accomplished. Politics helps us to organise the conditions within which this task is performed, for good or worse. On this score, religion gives meaning to

human activities in this pursuit, politics inclusively. As such, politics share a common foundation with religion, and this resides in the very nature of the human person. The human person has a natural end (death) to which politics proper belongs. However, the human person also possesses a supernatural end (union with God) to which religion belongs. Religion thus elevates the human aspirations to a level that transcends the natural order.

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