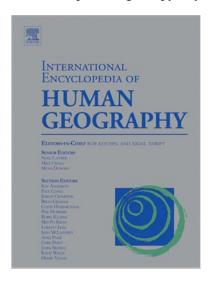
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Theocracy

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Glossary

Clergy The class of people constituting the formal leadership and functionaries of a particular religion.

Iranian Revolution The 1979 overthrow of the Iranian monarchy that eventually led to the establishment of an Islamic theocracy under Ayatollah Khomeini. Khomeini died in 1989, but the status of Iran as an Islamic Republic persists to this day.

Islamism The political ideology that modern states should be reconstituted constitutionally, economically, and judicially in accordance with what is posited as a return to authentic Islamic practice.

Laity Followers of a particular religion outside of the formal clergy.

Majority Catholic/Muslim States Countries where the majority of the population formally identify themselves with these particular religions, whether or not that influences constitutional government.

Permanent Observer Mission (at the United Nations) An entity that is not a member state of the United Nations, but which has received a standing invitation to participate as observer in the sessions and the work of the General Assembly and maintain permanent observer mission at the Headquarters. These include entities such as the Holy See, the Palestinian Authority, the African Union, and the Community of Portuguese-Speaking Countries.

Religion A set of beliefs about the divinity, practices emanating from these beliefs, and institutions that represent them.

Secularization The name given to a process whereby a previously highly religious society becomes increasingly less religious.

Taliban Political movement emerging from Islamic schools in Pakistan that ruled most of Afghanistan from 1996 to 2001, enforcing a strict form of Islamic Shari'a law.

Vatican City The world's smallest state, governed by the Pope as Bishop of the See of Rome.

Voluntarism Voluntary action for the common good.

Introduction

Theocracy is the exercise of political power by the clergy of a particular religion, usually (although not necessarily) claiming to be acting primarily on behalf of a divinity and governing according to its principles and requirements. Although the worldwide influence of religious political ideologies has grown over the past three decades, there are very few theocratic states, or theocracies, in the world. Nonetheless, those that do exist can have profound and highly idiosyncratic impacts on development.

Three Definitions of Theocracy

Theocracy at first appears to be a simple concept clerics ruling a state instead of, say, the general population via a professional class of politicians (democracy) or hereditary potentates advised by appointed specialists (monarchy). Based on this definition, there are hardly any theocracies in the world today. Even states that enshrine religious legitimization or codes in their legal existence or practice of statehood fall short of this standard. The monarch of the United Kingdom is crowned by the country's senior cleric (the Archbishop of Canterbury), and some other clerics have seats in the upper chamber of Parliament (the House of Lords), but the clergy's actual political power is negligible. Saudi Arabia enforces a strict form of adherence to a variant of Islamic Shari'a law, even to the extent of forbidding non-Islamic worship, yet is ruled by an extended royal family, not a class of clerics. Likewise, the Je Khenpo, the highest Buddhist religious official of Bhutan, is traditionally considered to be the king's most important adviser, but the state is formally a monarchy. Such a strict definition leaves few states in the world as theocracies.

However, this traditional definition is more problematic than it first appears due to complications regarding the meaning of the word religion. Although the term religion is an old one, its contemporary usage is heavily influenced by medieval Christian conceptions of separate spheres of power exercised by the church and the civil authorities, and enlightenment classifications of epistemic communities. The word religion is therefore an attempt to demarcate a specific sphere of belief, practice, symbols, and institutional organization, separate from other such religious systems or from what therefore becomes defined as the secular – the realm of law and government of a specific jurisdiction.

If the disciplining of knowledge implied by the traditional definition of religion has been called into question, then religion (and the sacred) can be seen as a more diffuse set of practices, beliefs, and symbols, and social formations that embrace a wider range of phenomena. It also permeates supposedly secular civil society in fluid ways, rather than being hermetically sealed from it. Such an understanding has recently provided the basis for a reworking of the idea of theocracy. Rather than being simply formal clerical rule, it can be considered as the multiple patterns of the intertwining of religion in the language, practices, and substance of the politics of modern statehood. From the 1960s and 1970s, for a variety of complex reasons, the increasing importance of religion in national politics can be seen in polities as diverse as the USA, Israel, Lebanon, and the Palestinian territories — a phenomenon that Giles Kepel has memorably termed, 'The revenge of God'.

A number of authors have thus seen fit to describe the USA under the presidency of George W. Bush as a theocracy. In the longer term, this reflects the adaptation of Republican Party policies to appeal to an increasingly important conservative Christian support base. This process advanced under George W. Bush as the most personally deeply religious president for many decades. Under the Bush Presidency, the influence of Christianity in the White House grew markedly, from prayer meetings to formal and informal links with notable Christian leaders. George W. Bush's personal religiosity arguably influenced both domestic and foreign policy. Some scholars and commentators have seen fit to label these processes as instances of theocracy.

A certain school of political thought has described some Western European and North American states as secular theocracies. According to this argument, these societies are therapeutic states that attempt to redesign social conscience by legislating morality. This is performed by moral crusades to re-educate populations away from what become constructed as social pathologies such as sexism, racism, homophobia, and the questioning of multiculturalism. This is a feature of contemporary Western governments that can be understood as part of the historical trajectory of secularizing Protestantism. Just as protestant cultures dwelt upon the individual finding divine grace by confessing one's sins and cleansing one's soul, the therapeutic state works by allowing the majority to dwell on its collective sins of the past yet feel personally righteous by expiating them in enforcing tolerance. This governmental practice arose within the cultural milieu of secularizing Protestantism and is thus deemed, oxymoronically, secular theology.

However, there are analytical disadvantages to redefining theocracy to mean any trace of the influence of religious discourse or practice in the field of formal state politics. It would be difficult to identify a society where the influence of religion or the sacred, widely defined, would be entirely absent from political culture. Furthermore, genuine theocracies in the classical sense of the term where clerics have captured state power produce modalities of governance startlingly different to those of absolute monarchies and democracies merely influenced by religious ideas, and map different geographies of development. The failure of many European and American thinkers to grasp the significance of the Iranian revolutionary theocratic movement headed by Ayatollah Khomenei, which took power in 1979, was arguably due to their inability to comprehend the importance of the religious context. Paradoxically, redefining theocracy could reduce our sensitivity to certain intersections of politics and religion, not increase them.

Theocracy and Geography

The geography of religion has been a recurring, if somewhat marginal, topic of cultural geographical analysis over many decades. Traditionally, geographers mapped phenomena such as the spatial incidence of religions measured by demography, and temporary migratory patterns of pilgrimage. More recent analysis has afforded greater sensitivity to the multiple intersections of religion/the sacred in constructions of space and place, and to geopolitical imaginings of the world.

Theocracy, however, has been of marginal interest to geographers. The founder of modern political geography, Friedrich Ratzel (1969, 1896: 17–28), wrote that, "All the ancient states and all states on lower cultural levels are theocracies," dismissing analysis of them as an unworthy task for the modern discipline. However, presently existing theocracies (or movements to create them) present fascinating examples of the reconfiguration of the political geographical relationships between territory, sovereignty, and (religious) identity. They are increasingly hard to overlook in debates about the re-making of the world map and the emerging shape of contemporary patterns and processes of territory and sovereignty. This article considers two examples in relation to development: the Holy See, and movements for the restoration of a Caliphate/the construction of Islamic states.

Modern Christian Theocracies

Christianity emerged in the context of Roman imperial oppression of first-entury Palestine. Unlike contemporary violent Jewish nationalist movements, its establisher, Jesus Christ, did not seek to capture state power and create a theocratic state. His immediate followers adopted the same position, which has been described by twentieth-century theologians as pacifism or non-violence. However, by the fourth century, this position was reversed as Christianity came to play an increasingly important role in the Roman Empire. A contemporary inheritor of this legacy is the Holy See.



Figure 1 The Papal States in 1861. Copyright Nick Megoran.

Roman Catholicism and the Holy See

The largest branch of Christianity, the Roman Catholic Church, meaning in effect all churches in communion with and under the spiritual authority of the Bishop of Rome, is unique among world religions by virtue of its relationship to the territorial expression of the Holy See in the form of the State of Vatican City. Crucially for this article, the association of these entities with various Catholic relief and development agencies, and the alliance of these agencies and the Holy See in international lobbying, creates a network able to have profound and unique impacts on the development process.

The Holy See is a nonterritorial entity composed of the Roman Catholic College of Cardinals and the Bishop of Rome (the Pope). The two bodies are not to be confused – the Roman Catholic Church is composed of its members around the world, while the Holy See is the supreme organ of government of the Roman Catholic Church. The Holy See has acquired a juridical personality which permits it to sign treaties and receive and send diplomatic representation with states – in effect, it has achieved the juridical equivalence of statehood.

Although the Holy See has engaged in diplomatic exchanges with rulers and states at least as far back as the late fifteenth century, part of the reason that it has been able to accrue this unique power is its territorial expression in the State of the Vatican City (Vatican City). This is a legacy of the Pope's territorial possessions in Central and North Italy, the Papal States (see Figure 1), held until the creation of the modern united kingdom of Italy in 1861.

Vatican City, an enclaved state in the city of Rome, is the world's smallest microstate with a mere 0.44 km² territory and a population under 1000, entirely male. It was created in 1929 by the Lateran Treaty between the Holy See and the Kingdom of Italy. The Treaty also recognized extraterritorial rights of noncontiguous properties deemed necessary for the functioning of the Holy See, such as the Pope's summer residence of the Palace of Castel Gandolfo and administrative buildings in other parts of Italy. The Pope, who is elected by the College of Cardinals, governs as 'Sovereign of the State of Vatican City', with full legislative, judicial, and executive powers, through a commission of cardinals nominated by him. Vatican City's system of government, which is

highly anomalous, may thus be regarded as both an elective monarchy and an elective theocracy (although its representatives would be unlikely to accept that label). The Pope is head cleric in the Roman Catholic Church as incumbent of the Holy See and sovereign of Vatican City. This dual role of head of the world's largest religion and sovereign of the world's smallest state can be confusing (especially as, colloquially, the central authority of the Roman Catholic Church is shortened to 'The Vatican'). Nonetheless, understanding it is crucial to grasp the remarkable juridical position that the Holy See occupies as a state. Indeed, since 2002, when Switzerland joined the organization, it has been technically the only nonmember state to maintain a Permanent Observer Mission at the United Nations Headquarters in New York, with all the privileges and opportunities that this entails.

The nexus of various state, quasi-state, religious, and NGO structures of Roman Catholicism/the Holy See/the State of the Vatican City and nonstate development agencies such as the Catholic Agency for Overseas Development (CAFOD) has created a unique political geographical network. As the next two examples show, this can result in range of different forms of engagement with development.

The Holy See at the Cairo and Beijing conferences

The Holy See's engagement at two United Nations development conferences, the 1994 International Conference on Population and Development in Cairo and the 1995 Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing, exemplify the ambiguities of this theocracy cum religion cum nonstate actor. The Cairo conference was intended to stabilize population growth. The Holy See, reflecting the Catholic Church's long-standing opposition to both contraception and abortion, lobbied strenuously against language in the draft and final documents that legitimized forms of both practices. Before the conference, it did this in official pre-conference meetings and through bilateral diplomatic negotiations with individual states. During the conference, it fought over wording at every stage, allegedly attempting to form an alliance of majority Catholic and Muslim states (although the Holy See itself denied this). The final document represented a compromise between the militant pro-abortion position advocated by the USA under President Clinton, and the militant anti-abortion policy of the Catholic Church under Pope John Paul II. Pro-abortion delegates not merely criticized the Holy See's negotiating position (criticism which was unsurprising), but also its presence at the conference as a state rather than as a religious NGO. It was questioned whether a microstate with zero natural growth rate, indeed with no permanent

population, women or children, had a legitimate voice at a conference of states on population growth.

Likewise, at the Beijing Conference the Holy See's position was controversial. It allegedly lobbied to exclude certain religious NGOs, such as 'Catholics for a Free Choice', from attending - an example of different elements of Roman Catholicism at odds over a contentious issue. Along with certain majority Muslim states, it also challenged references in the final document to abortion and sexual orientation. Objections to its policy position are part of the normal process of debate, but the conference again raised questions about the Holy See's participation as a state. Essentially, the Holy See derives its authority from its position as the world's largest religious organization, yet it uses its association with a tiny enclaved state to act as a state, obtaining privileges in negotiation that no other religious body possesses. Commentators such as Yasmin Abdullah have questioned whether this unusual arrangement ought to be allowed to continue.

Liberation theology and development in Latin America

A very different form of impact on development can be seen in the Catholic Church's 'Basic Christian Communities' in demographic strongholds, Latin America. The 1960s and 1970s saw the growth of liberation theology in the continent, a Marxist-informed structural critique of poverty and political repression in Latin America combined with the praxis of a traditional Christian commitment to assist the poor. At a time when much of the continent was ruled by repressive dictatorships, grassroots resistance and pressure for change was often conducted through the movement for Basic Christian Communities (Communidade Eclesial de Base). These were small grassroots groups of Catholics who met for Bible study and to reflect and act on pressing social problems - illegal arrests and land expulsions, lack of basic services, etc. Activism - hiring lawyers to defend rights, pressing for healthcare facilities, building schools, founding trade unions, forming the basic constituencies for democratic opposition politicians – arose from these bodies, which numbered in their tens of thousands across the continent. Commentators such as Thomas Bruneau thus argued that these bodies had a profound potential for grassroots-led development in the continent at a time when formal church structures were relatively weak compared to the violence of oppressive regimes.

Basic Christian Communities, although grassroots organizations, were often initiated and encouraged by the Roman Catholic priests and nuns disseminating politically radical theological ideas and practices under the gaze of state apparatuses. Although far from the formal structures of the Holy See and the theocracy of the State of the Vatican City, this grassroots development initiative

was, ultimately, part of the same network. The Roman Catholic Church can thus be conceived of as a network of diverse entities, incorporating often conflicting nonstate actors, theological structures, grassroots communities, and a theocratic state. This multiplicity opens up numerous spaces for multiple forms of intervention in processes of development.

Modern Islamic Theocracies

The unusual case of the Holy See notwithstanding, there exist no formal Christian theocracies today, nor important or widespread movements advocating their creation. The same is not true in the majority Muslim world, where the relationship between religion and state has been one of the major topics of debate among Muslim intellectuals for the past two centuries. Unlike Christianity, the establisher of Islam, the Prophet Muhammad, sought to lay the foundations of a polity based on religious teaching to displace other forms of political power, a polity that was to be defended, where necessary, by military force. Although this historical precedent is very important, the recent intellectual situation can be explained to a significant degree by the struggles of Muslim peoples against Western colonialism, and disappointment with forms of self-rule that replaced formal foreign sovereignty with often corrupt, authoritarian, and incompetent patrimonies supported by ongoing forms of Western political and military intervention. The failure of secular political paradigms such as nationalism and Marxism to deliver tangible benefits in majority Muslim countries has intensified this process since the 1970s, particularly in promoting Islamism.

Hizb ut-Tahrir: Resurrecting the Caliphate

The Caliph was the title given to the leader of the Islamic community, although since the death of the Prophet Muhammad in the year 632 there was no unanimous agreement at any one time about who that should be. A key moment in debates about modern Islamic theocracy was the abolition of the Caliphate in Istanbul by Mustafa Kemal secularist republican Turkish government in 1924.

This move prompted many differing reactions. Some Muslims sought to adopt European and American models of secular governance, while others devised new concepts of the Islamic state. Some argued for the restoration of the Caliphate as being the only theologically legitimate political goal for Muslims.

An active group that advocates this latter position today is Hizb-ut Tahrir (Party of Liberation). Founded by the Palestinian jurist Muhammad Taqiuddin al-Nabhani in 1953, it seeks to re-establish the Caliphate as a single state sovereign over all lands where Muslims form a

majority of the population. It considers the modern map of the Middle East to be the work of Western imperialist powers intent on dividing the Islamic community by supporting corrupt and un-Islamic rulers, and considers it the duty of Muslims to work, using political means, for their abolition. It is thus repressed in most majority Muslim states where it represents a threat to the incumbent regimes. It is also banned in some countries without majority Muslim populations.

Development is an important concern of Hizb-ut Tahrir. A key appeal of the Caliphate to its modern advocates is that it would redistribute wealth from the rich to the poor, in sharp contrast to rulers who have often lived lives of indulgence and opulence while ordinary Muslims have suffered in poverty. Opponents of this group argue that Muslims have never agreed on a single legitimate Caliph and would be unable to do so now, but the appeal of this form of theocracy persists for many Muslims.

It is worth observing that Hizb ut-Tahrir itself rejects the label that it is advocating a theocracy. It argues that the Caliph is a representative not of God but of the people, as he would be elected by them, and that ultimate sovereignty belongs not to the clergy but to God.

Islamism in Egypt and the Horn of Africa

Another major reaction to the abolition of the Caliphate was the emergence of Islamist ideas in Egypt associated with the Muslim Brotherhood. Islamism is a political ideology which posits that modern states should be reconstituted constitutionally, economically, and judicially in accordance with what is held as a return to authentic Islamic practice. Founded in 1928, the Muslim Brotherhood sought to establish a modern Islamic theocratic state by political means. It wields considerable influence in Egypt although it is formally banned and repressed by the state, wary of a group whose members have assassinated, among others, President Sadat in 1981, and attempted to assassinate President Nasser in 1954. Its ideas have subsequently spread into neighbouring Sudan and Somalia, as well as elsewhere.

Abdel Salam and Alex de Waal argue that the project of Islamism has failed in Egypt and the Horn of Africa. They point not only to the failure of an Islamist leadership in Sudan to maintain a competent, peaceful, and popularly legitimate system of rule, but also of Islamists in Egypt to gain formal state power. This 'impasse', they suggest, is an indication of the intellectual failure of the project to move from generalizations and resistance to designing structures for establishing secure and popular successful rule.

This impasse has had two consequences. The first is a tendency to violence and repression of dissent, by those in power, or the intimidation and murder of anti-Islamist Muslim intellectuals. The second impact of the failure of

political Islamism is the growth of nonstate voluntarism which has led to a culturally specific form of development. Islamism sees political and social action as inseparable, and the failure to secure power in Egypt and elsewhere has channelled energy into the nongovernmental field.

In the field of education, Islamists in Egypt have provided free public transport to ferry students to university. They introduced segregated seating in lectures to protect women from sexual harassment, and distributed subsidized veils and long robes to women for the same reason. They have established hospitals and healthcare provision, and taken over professional associations supporting the causes of groups such as engineers and medical professionals. Multiplying Islamist NGOs have supported commerce and become involved in disaster relief. The strength of Islamist voluntarism was demonstrated following a devastating earthquake in 1992 that killed over 500 people. While the state response was slow and ineffective, Islamist volunteers swiftly set up tents, and distributed food, blankets, and medicine. All of these activities increased support for the Islamists by embedding them in civil society.

Such strategies have given Islamists unprecedented control over many areas of life in Egypt. However, de Waal and Salam argue that they are still unable to get beyond the impasse – they nurture intolerance and reinforce practices of censorship that deepen authoritarianism – allowing the Egyptian state to continue to repress them. Furthermore, the exploitation of Islamic NGOs by violent terrorist organizations such as Al-Qaeda has, since 2001, brought the activities of these organizations under the tight scrutiny of criminal investigators throughout the world.

Conclusion

From Bhutan to Britain, there are some states in the world in which the clergy play a formal role in politics and from the USA and Russia to Israel and Egypt, many where explicitly religious political ideologies are increasingly important. Some thinkers would describe these processes as 'theocracy'. However, there are very few theocracies, as classically understood in the sense of the formal exercise of political sovereignty by the clergy. In the case of the State of the Vatican/the Holy See, this appears a unique historical aberration — for revolutionary Iran, Taliban Afghanistan, and Sudan, a highly contested project whose medium term durability remains uncertain.

Nonetheless, the mobilization of Islamist ideologies, with their promise of social renewal and economic justice, has made theocracy an increasingly realistic alternative to other forms of government in some parts of the world. The general inability of these projects to capture states and establish popular legitimate and stable and peaceful systems of government has led many commentators to proclaim the failure of modern Islamist variants of theocracy. However, in spite of their relative rarity on the global stage, theocracies have been able to influence geographies of development at different scales.

See also: Political Geography; State.

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