

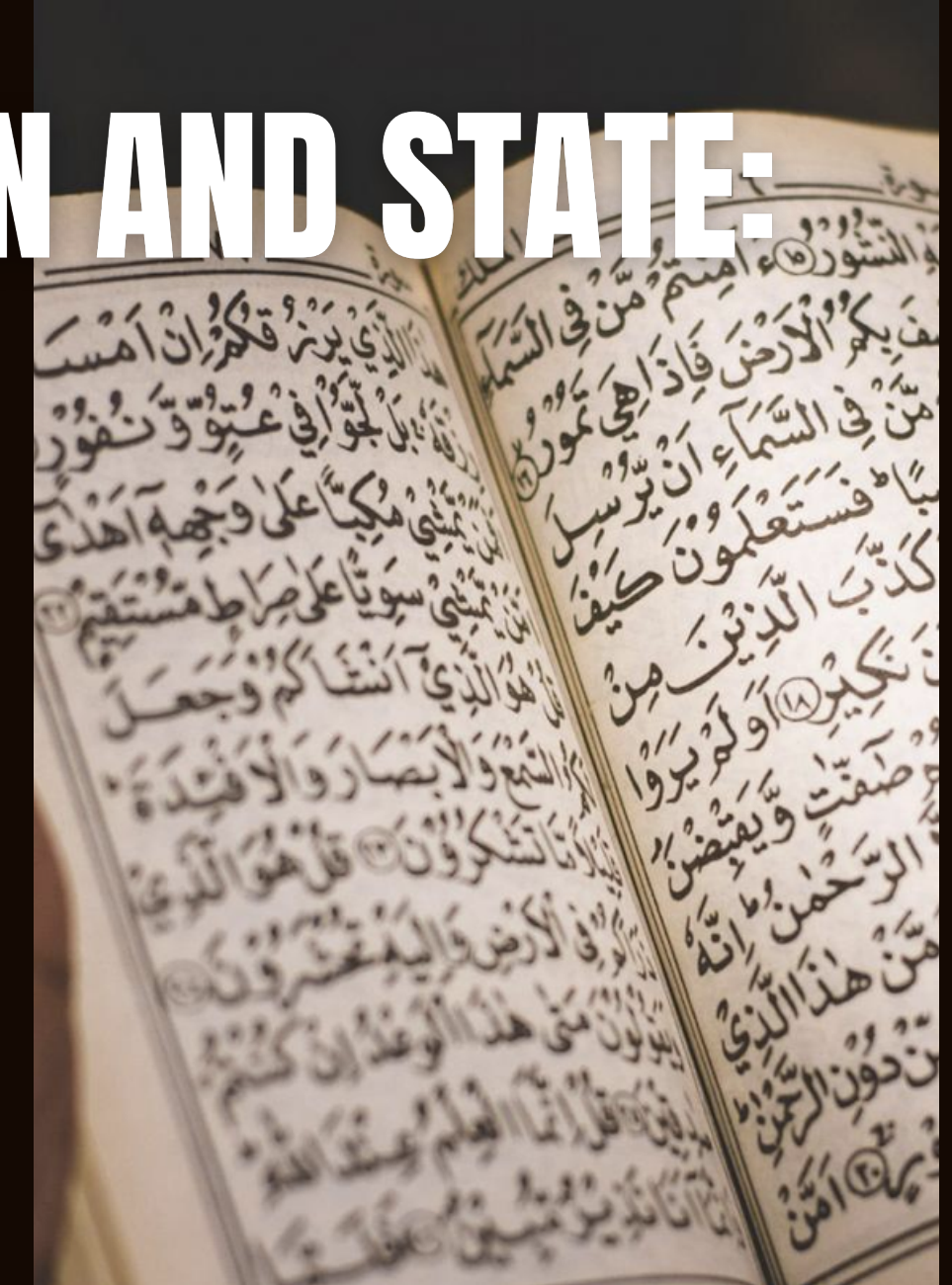
RELIGION AND STATE:

CAN THEY EVER BE SEPARATE?

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The views expressed in this essay are personal and subjective

Religion is faith, and perhaps the reason why it is hard to separate from politics, is because politics requires faith too. These two social constructs shape an individual to believe in an imaginary system. Scientifically, there is no religion, nor is there any government. It is simply a string of belief that creates it. In democratic politics,



this faith underlies the belief that our elected representatives will do good for us, and in religion, it is with regard to how God will do good for us. In this essay, I further deliberate upon this concept through an analysis of various forms of governments—whilst trying to answer the core question: can religion and state ever truly be separate?

God, Religion and Creation

Allah, in Islam is said to have created the heaven, the earth, and all its other elements. In Hinduism, Brahma created the universe. He created evil and good; earth and heaven, and all the creatures residing within it.

All these stories of creation instill a purpose within each of us.

They tell us that a supreme God created us for a reason.

One of the major reasons why religion is still practiced today, though we are far beyond tribal societies, is because our dignity is enhanced by faith.

When a religion manages to convince us that we have been created by God for a purpose, our purpose often comes to be the protection of that religion

With the origin of dualist religions like Zoroastrianism, Manichaeism and some parts of Christianity and Hinduism—there came to be the realization that there is a supreme God who is good, and there are other gods who are evil.

This dualist theory influenced people to fight against evil--however that may be interpreted.

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Ghanaian Times

An individual is obviously molded to believe in the speciality of God, but as religion builds up their self worth —they also begin to believe that they themselves are special. This marks the birth of the *self proclaimed protectors of faith*.

When the government too identifies this situation, it is incredibly easy to utilize the now strained contract between the voter and leader as a vote bank.

India

India, the largest democracy in the world —has Bharatiya Janata Party as its central government. This party uses cultural nationalism i.e. *Hinduvta* so as to gain support of the majority community.

There is even a study conducted by Yale that shows how after every communal riot in India, the vote share of the Bharatiya Janata Party increases.

Often in street interviews in India, we see that Hindus are afraid that Muslims will take over India. Thus, they want India to be a Hindu country.



Photo credit
Bharatiya Janata Party- Britannica

Why does this fear of being taken over by a minority religion exist amidst a majority religion constituting 80% of the masses?

When we look at the disputed Kashmir region—which is also the world’s most densely militarized area—the geo-political reasons behind the conflict are simply on the surface level. The root here, although subtle, is that of religion.

With the abolition of article 370 in 2019 and the conversion of Kashmir, the largest Muslim majority area of India, into a union territory—although the economic aspects of this step seemed bright, the voices of the elected representatives were taken away and a centralised control established.

France

France has a different idea of secularism and a rather extreme approach of separating religion from state. France’s secularism does not allow public display of religious symbols, with the intention to keep public affairs completely separate from religion. It also advocates for complete freedom of speech—including the right to criticize other religions.

The Charlie Hebdo comic controversy; the murder of Samuel Patty, and the general resentment of the Muslim population towards the government—all prove how controversial this system is.

The question that arises here is: do we risk upsetting another religious community or do we uphold freedom of speech? But can this even be called freedom, since religious symbols aren’t publicly allowed. Isn’t that a mere compromise upon freedom? And if people don’t even have the right to display religious symbols, how do they have the right to insult other religions?

China

In China—the international community has been a witness to the religious persecution of Uyghur Muslims.

This has various geo-political reasons. The Uighurs have been speculated to have separatist ideals, hence the Chinese government seeks to suppress that. Also, it can also be linked to the fact that the region of Xinjiang is a crucial trade route which China cannot afford to lose.

Two million Uighurs have been kept in detention centers. Although the communist party of China claims itself to be atheists, this persecution continues.

Reports point out that along with this, five-thousand Christians have been detained, and so have Tibetan Buddhist monks and nuns who refused to denounce the Dalai Lama .

United States of America

In the United States of America– the first amendment separates church from state, but people are free to display religion in public. Though there is no clear law against blasphemy, there are several states like Massachusetts, Michigan, Oklahoma, South Carolina, Wyoming and Pennsylvania that have certain restrictions

Massachusetts retains a law that threatens fines and imprisonment for “whoever willfully blasphemes the holy name of God by denying, cursing or contumeliously reproaching God...”

In 1928, Charles Lee Smith distributed literature that mentioned the words: “Evolution Is True. The Bible is a Lie. God is a Ghost.” He was arrested for blasphemy but the court later changed the charge to: distributing obscene, slanderous, or scurrilous literature. He repeated his crime and was arrested once again for the charges of blasphemy, but Smith repealed —and was then dismissed.

This was the last case of prosecution on the charges of blasphemy in the United States of America.

Man and Religion

Now when we come back to the original question—can religion and state ever be completely separated?

The truth is that as mortals, our lives are fragile. Religion often breathes meaning into it. Faith guides us. And what is a government if not an organ meant to guide the people of a nation? I believe that the more things get uncertain—the more people will rely on God, and the more religious extremism will arise.

But even with certainty and peace, rises a discomfort about the endangerment of religion. Even in a prosperous society, there will always be individuals who are not content.

Religion at the end of the day, is a blatant contradiction.

It is the beam bursting through a dark tunnel. We hold onto it as we walk, but once we escape the tunnel and find light everywhere—we fail to find that one particular beam.

When surrounded by light, how will we know which beam signifies religion? What purpose shall our God have then? Who will He save us from?

We humans will rebel no matter where we live—be it the light or the dark, for it is human nature to not be satisfied. But with religion, a concept which is so open ended and is primarily meant for discussion, deliberation—the light for some, is darkness for another.

And perhaps, religion is grey.

This is what religion does to us.

We made it, yet we know so little about it.

Does religion play a role in the most politically unstable states?

To further understand the consequences of the involvement of the state with religion, we can analyze the correlation between religious conflicts and political instability in certain countries.

Yemen

The most politically unstable country in the world is Yemen.

Yemen has been in civil war since 2015. And yet again, the starting point of the war began with a deadly combination of religion, politics, and rebellion.

The civil war began as more of a proxy war between Saudi Arabia and Iran over the control of the Yemeni territory. But beneath it lay, once again, religion—and more specifically, the fight between Shia and Sunni Muslims.

Houthi rebels backed by the Shia Iranian government demanded equality from the Saudi Arabia backed Yemeni government that was predominantly Sunni.

Saudi Arabia, which is ultimately backed by the United States of America—bombed various important places—including hospitals and ports to suppress the Houthi rebellion. This caused a massive humanitarian crisis with severe shortage of food and medical facilities.

Militants from Al Qaeda and local groups also took advantage of this situation, by seizing power in certain areas.

And though it has been years, the political unrest still exists. The Yemeni land still drips with the thirst for power, while 2.3 million children under the age of 5 suffer from acute malnutrition.

Somalia

Through military coups and Barre's dictatorship—various social programmes were introduced in the second most unstable nation of the world, Somalia. The government also tried to maintain diplomatic ties with the Soviet Union.

After their loss in the Ogaden war with Ethiopia, the government under Barre began to weaken. Due to internal conflicts amongst clans, Barre was overthrown and Al Shabab, an Islamist extremist group took its place.

The power vacuum in Somalia caused religious extremism to flourish. With the human capital slowly eroding, as the intellectuals of Somalia fled the country—it was as though the citizens were left with no choice but to make peace with terrorism.

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Something worth pointing out is that religion alone is obviously not the only cause for the instability in these nations. It does nothing wrong when used moderately, however, religious extremism is dangerous.

The moment we glorify ourselves and our religion to such an extent that we are willing to draw blood in the name of devotion—the lines of ethics get blurred. In the most unstable countries of the world, there is always a violation of democratic ideals by the government as well as an interference with religion. This point on the Cartesian plane, is where terror leaks lose.

The violation of democratic ideals by an elected representative, can logically only happen for one major reason—and that is to stay in power.



Photo credit
Yemen's Houthi rebels attack Saudi oil facilities, military sites- Daily Sabah

To do so, governments need distraction and diversion. A failed state would rather divert attention to other matters, than fix their own shortcomings. And it is incredibly convenient to have that “other matter” be religion.

If a democratic government is failing, they will almost inevitably revert to faith.

Religion and Communism: The Soviet Union

The Soviet Union had a complicated relationship with religion. If we look at Lenin and Stalin—the infamous communist dictators of the Soviet Union, we see they followed Marxism, and Marx was a great critic of religion.

With descriptions like “the opium of the masses”, and “the spiritual gin”, Karl Marx and Lenin have criticized the very basis of religion, calling it an ideological apparatus.

With the ban of religion in the Soviet Union, it did not make the empire any less stable.



Photo credit

The german churches and the nazi state-
Holocaust Encyclopedia

Even without religion, Stalin and Lenin were still dictators.

Dictators following a different kind of religion—Marxism.

Marxism, at the end of the day, is an ideology, and so is every religion. Every religion has its own set of morals and values, and so does Marxism. Lenin and Stalin banned religion, but they still followed something else.

There have been debates about whether Marxism can be called a religion, with most of them resulting in no clear consensus.

But Marx described religion almost perfectly. He claimed that religion always disguised the exploitation of the masses. Concepts like “*karma*” in Hinduism have been used to justify the exploitation of individuals based on their past deeds.

In Christianity, the Divine Right of King, compared monarchs to God—justifying their behavior towards their masses.

According to his perspective, religion has been used to legitimize suffering.

Communist dictators of the Soviet Union wished to expel that. With the demolition of churches and the trial of various clergy members, they wanted to remove the entire religious base of the Soviet Union.

Was there political stability even without religion? No.

The overpowering ideology of Marxism birthed a power vacuum—and that in turn, created dictators. And dictators never brought political stability. Even if the economy is stable—when members of the opposition are being killed off, that cannot be called stability.

Religion in Fascist Dictatorships

Nazism is the prime example.

Under Hitler, Germany witnessed the mass genocide of Jews (an ethnic minority following Judaism) and the Nazi ideology.

It was almost a simulation of religion. There was a supreme Lord who was good, and other smaller Lords who were classified evil. The people needed to help fight against evil. The evil happened to be Jews.

Can we Ban Religion?

What we can infer from the above examples is that faith, when strong enough, justifies things that under normal circumstances— are inherently wrong.

The Vedas never actually justified caste-based oppression. The people did.

It has never been proven that the Jews were responsible for the Black Death, yet the Christians strongly believed so.

The Quran never explicitly encouraged violence other than situations of defence, but some people still do it.

And Marxism unveiled this irony.

Yet banning religion is not a step towards development. Instead, it is a violation of one’s rights.

Religion is hope. It is simply not feasible to take it away.

In the case of Mussolini, we see that he wasn’t particularly religious, however, he was obliged to maintain good relations with the Catholic Church, since it was a great power in Italy. So, getting the support of the church was equivalent to getting the people’s support.

In the Soviet Union, despite the extreme measures implemented to propagate atheism, most of the people’s faiths remained unchanged. In 1937, a survey of the Soviet population found that 57 percent of the people self-identified as a “religious believer.”

By the eve of World War II, religious organizations had ceased to be a political threat to the Soviet state.

In 1927, the Orthodox Church had pledged support for the communist government, and by 1941—most churches had been closed down and thousands of priests had been arrested or executed. Stalin had been tactically neutralizing the power of the church and when he noticed that they were no longer a political threat, he didn't need to propagate extreme atheism. He instead began to see the church as a tool to promote patriotism.

Conclusion

From this analysis, we may conclude that faith is an important instrument in the functioning of a government. This faith is not only that of religion, but any strong ideology, or faith in the government itself.

We can also observe a correlation between political instability of certain nations and the lack of separation of state from religion.

It is important to note that one may desire stability and steady development in a nation, but to attain these things— it is

not recommended, and also— not possible to try to forcefully dislodge religion as a whole.

However, it is possible to construct our government in such a way that people do not have to rely on religious extremism to fulfill their aspirations. In a state like this, logic, reason and sensitivity go hand in hand whilst all religions co-exist peacefully.

This is a utopia of course, but the duty of a government is to promise utopias. The actual implementation is far from reality— just like religion.

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