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Asia Pacific: Perspectives is a peer-reviewed journal published at least once a year, usually in April/May. It welcomes submissions from all fields of the social sciences and the humanities with relevance to the Asia Pacific region.* In keeping with the Jesuit traditions of the University of San Francisco, *Asia Pacific: Perspectives* commits itself to the highest standards of learning and scholarship.

Our task is to inform public opinion by a broad hospitality to divergent views and ideas that promote cross-cultural understanding, tolerance, and the dissemination of knowledge unreservedly. Papers adopting a comparative, interdisciplinary approach will be especially welcome. **Graduate students are strongly encouraged to submit their work for consideration.**

* 'Asia Pacific region' as used here includes East Asia, Southeast Asia, South Asia, Oceania, and the Russian Far East.

Religion and Secular Society: A Comparison of Eastern and Western Perspectives

by Thomas D. O'Sullivan, Ph.D.

Abstract

This article presents a critique of the history of church-state relations in the West, and discusses the differences between Western ways in which such relations are conceptualised and the ways they are seen in East Asia. By studying the Christian Church's explanation of its relationship to the secular power, it argues that a key to understanding the dynamics of church-state relations in Europe and America is the distinction between religious and secular authorities. This distinction has continued to shape the interaction between religion and politics in the contemporary world.

The appearance of a journal issue specially devoted to essays about relationships between church, state, and community in East Asia prompts a little reflection on the differences between Western ways in which such relationships are conceptualized and the ways they are seen in non-Western cultures. Indeed, the issue of the relationship between religion and society seems for centuries to have had a very different character in the Western world than it does elsewhere – in East Asia, for example, or in the Islamic countries. The perennial question of the relations of “church and state,” of the relationship between the two realms “sacred and secular,” seems much less meaningful once we leave the Western context. Other societies have generally viewed human social experience in much more unitary terms. Three possible ways of explaining this difference come to mind.

The simplest, but in many ways the least satisfactory, would require that one adopt a thesis of Western exceptionalism. It is the sort of “explanation” that is very often heard on the popular or semi-popular level: the Islamic world never had a Renaissance; China never had a Reformation; India never had an Enlightenment. At the end of the day, I suppose, the Tarim Basin never had an Era of Good Feeling. When the history of the world needs to be summarized in a few minutes, such formulas may become tempting, but they always have the weakness of meaning much less than they seem to do. Only someone with an uncontrollable mania for periodization can forget that all these renaissances and enlightenments have been nothing more than the useful intellectual constructs of historians, and that in themselves they have had no power to affect anything.

A more interesting approach would be one rooted in texts considered sacred. Certainly, in Jewish, Christian, and Islamic studies the fact that there is in each case a book held to be literally the Word of God gives to textual citations an importance that must never be underestimated. The key text here, I suppose, is a saying of Jesus reported by all three of the

synoptic gospels: “Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s, and to God the things that are God’s.” (Mark 12:17; Matthew 22:21; Luke 20:25) Already in this text we seem to see a real sense of the existence of two distinct realms whose divergent claims should not be allowed to come into conflict. On the other hand, there are many texts in the Bible from which to choose, and it seems to me doubtful that people are really influenced by Scripture texts quite as much as they think they are. Scripture has been read, presumably with equal reverence, by the advocates of everything from regicide to Erastianism. One is tempted to suppose that thinkers actually derive their views from Scripture texts rather less often than they select texts to support the views they already wish to defend. Perhaps this is not the case with fundamental questions of dogmatics and soteriology, but in the world of social and political theology, it seems likely enough.

The most satisfactory explanatory framework, in my opinion, would be one rooted in the distinctive experiences of two of the most influential religions to survive in the Western world from antiquity to the present, Christianity and Judaism – in particular in the historical and never-forgotten circumstances of their origins and early development. As is well known, Christianity and Judaism (at least in the form that we would describe as Orthodox or Rabbinical Judaism) both arose among late Hellenistic Jewish communities in Palestine and in the Diaspora under Roman rule.

Before the Babylonian captivity, sacred and secular elements appear to have been rather thoroughly integrated in the society of Israel. The problematization of the monarchy reported in 1 Samuel 8 (Can Israel have another king besides God?), and the alternation on the throne of kings who practiced polytheism and/or iconic worship with kings who campaigned against both polytheism and idolatry in no way diminishes this integration, and may perhaps better be taken to illustrate it.

After the fall of Jerusalem and the destruction of the Kingdom of Judah, however, Jews lived in drastically different circumstances. One of the most essential tasks of Judaism was resistance to the assimilation actively promoted first by the Babylonian and subsequently by the Seleucid authorities. The fact that the future of the Jews was for many centuries to be as a religious community rather than as a secular society living on its own land under a government of its own was finally established by the two wars that the Jews fought, unsuccessfully, against the Roman Empire. Whatever may have been the case in the distant days of David and Solomon, the Jews of late antiquity, of the middle ages, and of early modern times were deeply and inescapably aware of the fact that there was a government – and that the government was alien to them.

One highly significant characteristic that Christianity shared with Rabbinical Judaism was the fact that it began under Roman rule. From the very beginning, Christianity was an object of hostility on the part of the Roman authorities. Jesus Christ was of course put to death by the Romans and, according to tradition, so were most of the early leaders of the Church. The scriptural accounts of the Passion of Jesus, as well as the veneration of the early saints martyred under

Roman persecution, made it impossible for any member of the Church ever to forget the initial conflict between Christianity and the state power. With the passage of time, Christianity was legalized. Eventually the state became in some sense a Christian state. Nevertheless, it remained very clearly the successor of the Roman state, both professedly and in fact. This continuity was of great importance. Emperors like Constantine and Theodosius may have favored Christianity, but they were unequivocally the successors of persecutors like Marcus Aurelius and Diocletian. The world of late antiquity saw itself as an instance of a unique model: a society with a fundamental continuity of political institutions, but one in which the religious institutions were professedly new and fundamentally distinct.

In a sense, one could argue that the division of labor in late fifth and in sixth century Europe between Germanic kings (commonly Arian Christians, regarded as very dangerously heretical by the vast majority of their subjects), who with their ethnic armies wielded the power of the sword, and post-Roman civilian aristocracies in which the highest dignity to which Catholic Christians could normally aspire was that of bishop helped to perpetuate in the West this division between state power and religious authority.

The early Christian Church's explanation of its own relationship to the secular power is summed up in the formula of Pope Gelasius I (494): "*duo sunt quibus principaliter mundus hic regitur*" (there are two [powers] by which this world is ruled). According to Gelasius, the clergy are to be subject to the ruling power in profane matters, kings and emperors to the priestly power in matters pertaining to eternal salvation. This formula expresses rather nicely the uneasy balance which, in one form or another, has predominated in the West ever since. The proponents of the Gregorian reform tried in the eleventh century to subordinate secular rulers to the moral (and, indeed, the political) authority of the papacy. In the sixteenth century the mainstream of the Protestant Reformation declared that the True Church was invisible, leaving whatever of Christendom might be visible under the control of princes and kings. But the eleventh-century papal reformers lacked the political clout to carry out their program—and Dante was not the only important Christian thinker of the high Middle Ages who rejected their position. And the Reformation of the sixteenth century was very far from being a monolithic movement; groups as theologically diverse as Mennonites and Gnesio-Lutherans stood up for what we would today call a church organization independent of royal control. It was really not until the beginnings of modern secularism in the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries that any significant challenge to the Gelasian worldview appeared.

Militant secularists in modern times, whether among the adherents of the French Revolution, or among subsequent Anarchist or Socialist movements, have at times proposed the restriction or abolition of religious belief and practice, through the use of influence or force by political movements or state agencies. These moves have represented the only really serious attempts in the history of the West to abolish the traditional distinction between the two realms. And they

have met with only very limited and temporary success. It seems that the distinction between the secular and the religious dimension of society is one of the most characteristic and enduring features of Western civilization. The United States of America illustrates this phenomenon more drastically, perhaps, than any other major country. In America one of the most religious societies in the modern world lives under the rule of one of the most secular governments in the West. It is a nice question whether the United States would have maintained so robust a commitment to the separation of church and state had it not been for the remarkable diversity of religions practiced by Americans. The question is moot.

The interesting thing, for our present purposes, is that this distinction between the two realms is specifically a phenomenon of Western history. It seems that we cannot convincingly claim to find parallel developments in non-Western cultures. It is obviously up to specialists in the histories of East Asia, South Asia, and the Middle East to provide authoritative interpretations of the distinctive characteristics of those societies. It will perhaps be appropriate, however, to offer a few hints here.

Islam began as an integrated movement that organized the lives of the faithful in the religious, political, and cultural spheres, and it seems that it was not really until the intrusion of European imperialism into the Middle East and North Africa in the nineteenth century that large numbers of Muslims were confronted with the problem of living permanently under a government dominated by non-Muslims. Turkey under Atatürk represented the first indigenous experiment with the notion of a secular state in any predominantly Muslim country.

East Asia has probably in the course of its historical development seen a somewhat more diverse mixture of influences than the Middle East, but continuity has been one of the most conspicuous hallmarks of that development. In China, already more than half a millennium before the time of Christ, Confucius and his followers rejected originality as a value, and defended their views about ethics, government, and education precisely by underlining the continuity or supposed continuity between their values and the culture of previous generations. The most far-reaching ideological innovation that appeared in traditional China, Korea or Japan was surely Buddhism. The Indian background of Buddhist thought made it initially in some ways quite alien to Chinese, Korean or Japanese thinking. In spite of occasional frictions, these professedly conservative societies were able to assimilate Buddhism into indigenous cultural complexes.

There are some interesting coincidences between the history of Buddhism in East Asia and the history of Christianity in the Mediterranean Basin and Europe. There was, for example a simultaneous "golden age" of translation: Saint Jerome and Kumarajiva were almost exact contemporaries. What we do not see in East Asia, however, is any parallel to the suppression of Greco-Roman paganism in the West. There was never, even when rulers were heavily influenced by Buddhism, a systematic, government-sponsored, and effective attempt to root out older indigenous religious practices.

The Western distinction between religion and secular

society lies, of course, predominantly in the area of concept. The Western world has been equipped with a theory of the distinction between church and state, a theory that is coherent enough to serve as an analytic tool – or, for that matter, as a political program. Other, equally sophisticated societies have not produced such a theory. Unfortunately, a coherent theory does not solve the problem of ensuring that religious bodies

are actually free of inappropriate state interference, or that governments are free of inappropriate influence from religious authorities. Western experience shows that having such a theory may be a necessary, but it is not a sufficient, condition for a wholesome relationship between religion and secular society.

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