Religion and Politics The Debate at the end of the Century

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RELIGION AND POLITICS - THE DEBATE AT THE END OF THE CENTURY

by NINAN KOSHY

I consider it a great honour to have been invited to give the Second Rev.Dr.M.A.Thomas Memorial Lecture. I had the privilege of associating myself with Achen over a long period. I value most the privilege of encouragement and support I received from him. I owe to him a great debt of gratitude.

I have chosen to speak on "Religion and Politics - The Debate at the End of the Century". The relationship between religion and politics has emerged as one of the most crucial issues of our times. This is an important issue globally and in our nation. However this is a highly complex issue and we can hope to look only at some aspects of it.

In choosing the topic I had another important consideration. Achen was involved in politics, in the broader sense of the term. He believed that Christian faith demands involvement in politics. At crucial stages in the life of the nation he took clear positions in a public manner on the basis of his Christian faith. The courageous stance he took during the Emergency in India is particularly remembered.

In the address that Achen gave on the occasion of the Diamond Jubilee Celebrations of the West Bengal Christian Council in January

1984, he recalled J.H.Oldham, one of the founders of the ecumenical movement who had said "A return to religion is a return to politics". And Achen added, " a true church cannot escape political involvement".

That is why I chose the topic religion and politics.

The title speaks of the debate at the end of the century. The debate is about a new relationship, a new equation, a new nexus between religion and politics. This new relationship seems to be in the process of evolution.

According to the historian Eric Hobsbawm, the twentieth century has already come to an end. His recent book "The Age of Extremes, The Short Twentieth Century" says that the century began with the First World War in 1914 and ended with the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, There can be no doubt that in the late 1980s and early 1990s an era in world history ended and a new era began. So in a way we are talking about religion and politics at the beginning of a new era rather than at the end of a century.

Today the term religion and politics conjures up before us dramatic and disturbing images in Bosnia, Algeria, Rwanda, Sudan, India and a host of other countries. The new debate on religion and politics is so intense in many parts of the world that political discourse invariably has to deal with religion, though most often in negative terms. In ethnic conflicts, in the challenge to the secular state, in the new manifestations of nationalism, in the political developments of a number of countries and in international relations, religion plays an important part. In India, the debate continues from Ayodhya to the uniform civil code.

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One might speak of a religionisation of war in the recent period. More than any other war of the twentieth century, the Gulf War called forth a profusion of moral argument and religious discourse. President George Bush made explicit and persistent use of the concepts of 'just war' tradition in justifying his policies in the Gulf and religiously legitimising the political decision to go to war. He struck a religious posture during the war in public addresses, meetings with Christian evangelists, prayer breakfasts and proclamations of special days of prayer.

Saddam Hussain who for years had styled Iraq as a secular state affected a holy war posture against the US in calling for Arab solidarity in a *jihad.*

In the United States a T.V. evangelist dressed up in desert battle fatigue eloquently spoke about the war against Iraq and compared it with the spiritual war against the devil. The Palestinian Islamic movement Hamas said that the war was another episode in the fight between good and evil, a Christian plot against our religion, our civilization, our land. On both sides there was demonisation of the enemy.

The struggle between religion and politics is age-old. Both are about power though not necessarily about the same kind of power. But their roles as they deal with human affairs have always been overlapping. Both often vie for the same territory. The contest varies in nature and intensity from time to time and from country to country. Both religion and politics can make absolutist claims. Both can be totalitarian.

In the early stages of human society the influence of religion was all-embracing - economics, ethics, law, philosophy, art, architecture, food - all were controlled and determined by religion.

But as society evolved and the political expression of the state developed, lines had to be drawn and new equations had to be found. In the process both religion and politics have manipulated each other.

Are we at a new stage in human history when new equations are emerging and some lines may be disappearing? If so what are the reasons?

Throughout the world there are several conflicts, many of them violent, in which religion is a factor, though not necessarily the cause or origin. Massive human rights abuses, wars, atrocities and genocide continue. At the same time movements for freedom and reform have brought new life to millions. These too, often, have a religious dimension. The map of the world has changed radically and so has the pattern of events. There is a sense that what is happening in the world is a siesmic shift in the dynamics of war, the direction of history and perhaps in the very destiny of humanity. The rapidity and the seemingly chaotic quality of events often defy explanation. Steep waves of violence caused by the invisible currents and winds of change, erupt in far-flung places for seemingly different reasons. In many of these places an accusing finger is raised against religion.

How do we look at this historical context in which the new debate on religion and politics takes place?

The Cold War ended. The demise of the Soviet Union which came about soon after also broke up the largest multinational state. Other multinational states also broke up. The nation-state entered a new crisis; some said it was terminal. In many countries nation-building failed. New struggles for self-determination, national and sub-national identity emerged; old struggles were revived. Ethnic struggles

proliferated. All these also brought new dimensions into the discussions on national sovereignity, legitimacy and territorial intergrity. Boundaries of states considered almost sacrosanct after the Second World War were redrawn. But there was no international system or powers that could impose or enforce the new boundaries.

Thus for the first time in two centuries the world of the 1990s lacked any international system or structure. The very fact that after 1989 dozens of new territorial states appeared without any independent mechanism for determining their borders speaks for itself.

Where are the borders between Bosnia, Serbia and Croatia? Where is the boundary of Azerbarjan? Why is Georgia independent but not Chechanya? Historical memory and claims are intertwined with religious memory and sentiments.

The new debate on religion and politics takes place at a time of crisis of the nation-state. Since the French revolution, nationalism has been the main spiritual and emotional force cementing all the elements of statehood into nation-states which have become the typical political unit. Like all great popular faiths, nationalisms require invention of symbols, heroes, even martyrs.

Not every nation has its own state. There may be several nations in one state. A nation may be divided into two or more states (formerly Germany, still Korea).

Nation, one may say, is an elastic concept; its elasticity has three dimensions; cultural, political and psychological. The cultural and political dimension can be assessed by internally observable criteria.

Stalin's definition of nation, in terms of historical continuity, shared culture and common language, is still useful.

A subjective definition describes nationalism as 'a state of mind'. It is a feeling that one belongs to a nation. In India during the independence movement nationalism was called territorial nationalism, the sense that all who live in the territory of India belong to the nation irrespective of religion. Renan's 1882 description of the nation as 'soul', 'a spiritual principal whose existence is a daily plebiscite' is often quoted.

There has been a failure of nation-building in many countries. Large sections, especially ethnic groups feel they do not belong to the nation. The process of state building has marginalised many sections.

The role of nation-state has also been challenged by other actors on the scene. There have been threats inside and outside. The free market poses challenge to the state often from outside through transitional economic forces. Ethnicity poses challenge from inside.

Secularism in terms of separation of religion and state has been the ideological ally of the nation state. Today both secularism and the nation state are under threat.

A secular state is one that guarantees individual and corporate freedom of religion, is not constitutionally connected to a particular religion and does not seek either to promote or interfere with religion.

In the relation between religion and state five aspects of religion are important. First, the view of history taken by a religion ; whether

human history is regarded as real and important. Second, attitude of a religion to other religions. Third, the capacity a given religion has demonstrated for effective eclesiastial organization. Fourth, historical traditions of separation or fusion of political and religious functions. Fifth, the extent to which a religion has tended to regulate social life.

The opposition to the secular state in many countries is that it is Western. That it is Western in origin is not denied. But it has been conveniently adapted to particular situations and clearly accepted in many regions as a legitimate expression of indigenous sentiments. Historians like Dr. S. Gopal maintain that secularism has strong roots in India.

One prominent Christian theologian has suggested long ago that the idea of secular basis for politics is not only culturally European but specifically Christian. In "Christianity in World History" Arend Theodor van Leeuwen argued that secularism in the sense of separation of religious and temporal spheres for political organization of the state was Christianity's gift to the world.

Today it is interesting to hear Hindu nationalists and Muslim nationalists, without any reference to the ideas of van Leeuwen, reject secularism on the basis of the argument that it is essentially Christian. The secular state is opposed because it is perceived to be Western and Christian and as part of the package of modernization from the west.

The secular state seems to be under threat in many countries. It appears that religion defines nationalism and provides its basis in a number of situations. Many believe that religious nationalism has emerged as the biggest challenge to the secular state.

"The New Cold War" by Mark Juergensmeyer is about the confrontation between religious nationalism and the secular state. He says that one of the features of the new world order is the resurgence of identities based on ethnic and parochial religious allegiance.

We hear a lot about ex-Yugoslavia and the 'ethnic cleansing' there. Nationality there is closely linked to ethnicity and religion. 'Ethnic cleansing' is a sanitized European term for genocide. One is made to feel that some purifying process is going on whereas what happens is killings, rapes and other atrocities. The term gives also the impression that 'cleansing' is on ethnic lines. This is not true. In a way the Serbs, the Croats and the Muslims in Bosnia are all Slaves. The vast majority of Bosnian Muslims are actually Serbs.Religion is misused in the war to gain territory.The Bosnian Serb Leader speaks of "fighting against Muslims to defend Western Christian Civilization'. He claims to be a nationalist fighting against fundamentalists.

There is an impression that there is a world-wide religious resurgence and this has led to political mobilization on religious lines. Is this correct?

In the 1950's and 60's it was fashionable to speak about secularization and the decline of religion. Western theologians joined sociologists in arguing that modernization would weaken or even destroy religion's grip over traditional cultures, reduce the political significance of religion and diminish individual attachment to religious values.

Harvey Cox eloquently described what happened to these theories. In 1965, he wrote a book called 'The Secular City' about the world of declining religion. In his book 'Religion in the Secular City' in the early eighties he admitted that rather than an era of rampant secularization and religious decline it appears to be more of an era of

religious revival and the return of the sacred. Some commented that 'the gods have come back with a vengeance'.

Many observers saw religious resurgence as a response to crisis that stems from the inconclusive modernizing efforts of secular elites in the third world, growing disillusionment with secular nationalism, problem of legitimacy, and political oppression.

Two important qualifications are called for here. One is about the limits of religious resurgence. The belief that we are witnessing a global revival of religion with far-reaching political consequence has to be qualified by careful analysis.

The other, perhaps more important qualification, is that the resurgence is largely political. Or rather than the revival of religion what we are witnessing is a political revival in the name of religion. In theory the distinction may not apply so much to Islam, the political dimension of which occupies the centerstage in the current debate.

This may be the place to examine in some detail what is usually known as 'Islamic fundamentalism'.

Religious fundamentalism is a much discussed term. There is however a serious problem of definition. Religious fundamentalism as known today is basically a media term, used in a variety of meanings, which has gained some academic respectabiltiy. This is an issue which has to be addressed with sensitivity and care.

The general impression is that it is a global phenomenon of increasing importance in international relations.It has to be mentioned that

what is often referred to as a global reality is not religious fundamentalism in general but specifically Islamic fundamentalism. This perception is contributed largely by Western preoccupation with the politics of Islamic countries and Islamic movements. This has much to do with the predicament of the West and its political agenda.

Fundamentalism stems from the attempt of a group of conservative Protestants in the USA early in the century to define what they held to be the fundamentals of Christianity. The terms 'fundamentalism' and 'fundamentalists' were originally coined in 1920 by a US Baptist and harked back to a set of 12 booklets of essays entitled 'the fundamentals'.These essays defended conservative Christianity against liberal views in addressing such topics as scriptural authority, Christology and evangelism. The term is too much loaded with Christian presuppositions and Western sterotypes and has serious limitations when applied to other religions and across cultures.

The term fundamentalism is used to describe political movements in which there is the use of religion, its symbols, motifs and scriptures for political purposes. But it is important to note that it is a selective use.

Two examples may be useful. In former Yugoslavia, Serbs who use symbols of Christianity and specifically that of Orthodox Christianity are called nationalists. Muslims who defend their nation are called fundamentalists.

During the time of the intifada (uprising) of the Palestinians, as a result of the repressive measures of the Israeli authorities, often the mosque provided the only facility for communication among those in the struggle. The media often used the term fundamentalists to describe sections of Palestinians.

In the late seventies and early eighties in many countries of Latin America and Asia (Korea and Philippines) and in the late eighties in East Germany, churches provided the space for protest, dissent and communication. But the Christians involved were not known as fundamentalists. They are radicals, reformers, democrats and liberationists.

Fundamentalist Islam is portrayed today as the new enemy of the West.

Islamic political movements are called fundamentalists and fundamentalism is equated with militancy and militancy with terrorism. When the Oklahoma federal building in the US was bombed it was immediately assumed to be the work of Islamic fundamentalists. There was considerable disappointment in some sections especially of the media in the USA and Israel when it was found that the bomb was actually planted by home - grown right - wing extremists. At one time the phobia used to be 'a red under every bed'. Today it is 'a Muslim behind every bomb'.

However the conceptualization of an Islamic fundamentalist threat does not sit well with the reality of the situation. It does not seem to be based on a clear understanding of either the nature of the Islamic faith and the radical movements it has given rise to or of the social and economic conditions in the countries concerned.

The term Islamic fundamentalism is ambiguous. It is all too often employed in the same simplistic all-embracing and emotive fashion as the term communism once was and it falls far too short of capturing the reality of the complex social movements. It has mainly been used to delineate the position of two distinct types of forces

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within the Muslim World; those who have used Islam merely as a cover for violent anti-western action that cannot find justification within the bounds of Islamic dictates and those who have used Islam as an active ideology both of resistance and assertion and repudiated foreign ideologies as unworkable.

The ambiguity and inadequacy of the term Islamic fundamentalism are illustrated when the term is applied to governments of Libya and Saudi Arabia, Pakistan and Iran.

What does that really tell us about these states other than the fact that their leaders have used Islam to legitimate their rule or policies? Quaddafi of Libya has claimed the right to interpret Islam, questioned the authenticity of the tradition of Prophet Mohammed, silenced the religious establishment as well as the Muslim Brotherhood and advocated populist state of the masses. To the United States Libya is fundamentalist and terrorist. Rulers of Saudi Arabia by contrast have aligned themselves with the 'ulama' (the clergy) preached a more literalist and rigorous brand of Islam and used religion to legitimate a conservative monarchy. It is definitely the most fundamentalist of all the regimes in the region. As someone commented Saudi Arabia may be fundamentalist but it is our own fundamentalist. Pakistan became constitutionally 'Islamic fundamentalist' two years before the Islamic revolution succeeded in Iran. But USA continued its friendship with Pakistan while it became hostile to Iran.

Washington thus draws a distinction between those Islamic forces it cannot influence and therefore rejects as enemies and those it can influence and therefore embraces as friends and allies. So there seems to be nice fundamentalists and bad fundamentalists. I have already mentioned that the use of the term fundamentalism in relation to political activism inspired or undergirded by religion is selective in the

sense that it is usually applied only to Muslims. The one exception may be Christian fundamentalists in the USA. In the begining the fundamentalist in the USA did not deal with politics. Even today, Christian fundamentalists in many parts of the world are apolitical. But in the late twentieth century Christian fundamentalists in the USA are playing an increasingly visible role in support of right-wing policies domestically and internationally. At the moment they are making a concerted effort to 'capture' the platform of the Republican convention prior to the Presidential elections.

A perceptive analysis by Ashis Nandy is very helpful here. He says that each religion in South Asia perhaps all over Southern hemisphere as split into two: faith and ideology. By ideology he means religion as a sub-national or cross-national identities of populations contesting for or protecting non-religious, usually political or socio-economic interests.

This analysis helps to explain the fact that it is often misleading to describe 'religious' nationalist movement or other so-called 'religious' political movements as religions. Only in a few cases are they linked to main stream religious organizations or theological thought. Many of them just use or misuse religion for political ends. It is often politics that decides and not religion.

Nandy's analysis also helps us to understand communalism. Communalism is the political mobilization on the basis of the ideology of religion. It has little to do with faith.

There are several popular misconceptions or half-truths in India about religion as a result of a shallow debate on secularism.

It is said that religion is a private affair or personal affair. There are at least two difficulties about this proposition. First of all Christians and for that matter followers of many religions do not accept that religion is a private affair. Our relation with God has its implications for our relations with our neighbours. It affects our relations to society. It has a societal character. Secondly, most constitutions including the Indian constitution and international law provides for religious freedom individually and corporately making it a public affair. Perhaps it is the only fundamental human right which is both individual and corporate.

The second misconception is that all religions are equal. When we discuss the secular state, all what we have to say is that all religions are equal before the law. There are no discriminations on the basis of religion. Whether they are equal or not in their essence is a different discussion.

The third misconception is that religion has nothing to do with politics. Politics is usually defined as just elections and political parties. Politics is a large process. Politics is an area in which decisions about our lives are made, decisions about people, about their needs, their aspirations. When we talk about politics we are talking not just about elections but about the institutions, about the mechanism, about the values which are the basis of this process. Religion should not be used for sectarian political ends or to capture political power. That is different from saying that relgion has nothing to do with politics. Religion has much to do with ethics and morals in public life including politics.

When the Prime Minister of India and other leaders spoke of delinking religion and politics during the introduction of two bills in the parliament two years ago, to them religion appeared to be nothing

more than communalism or misuse of religion and politics nothing more than elections.

Religion in the recent past has also shown its capacity for social transformation and liberation. In the struggle for human rights in Latin America, in the heroic fight against apartheid in South Africa, in the expansion of freedom in several countries of Eastern Europe, in the movements for peace and disarmament in a large number of social action groups around the world, sections of the churches and other religious bodies and thousands inspired by faith have been actively engaged.

As Raimundo Panikkar says politics is always more, or other than just 'politics'. Religion is always less or other than religion. But the manipulation by the one or the other is equally self-destructive of both religion and politics.

How do we express our Christian concern in politics today? In the fifties and sixties we spoke of Christian participation in nation-building. That formulation may not be appropriate now. Today not only new formulations but new forms of witness are called for.

We are living at a time of crisis of institutions and crisis of governance. The nation-state in India also is in a crisis and there is a withdrawal of state from social issues.

Politics is an inescapable duty. It is no service therefore to denigrate politics nor to be starry-eyed about. To be non-political or neutral in the sense of doing nothing is tacitly to support the status quo and to do so irresponsibly without thinking about it.

Politics is decisive in the lives of people, and it is one realm in which a Christian can visibly express faith. It is an important vocation for the individual Christian and for the churches. Obedience to the gospel demands such an expression of faith. The church must always emphazize the necessary and useful nature of politics while pointing out its temporal and relative character.

It is in that sense that J.H.Oldham spoke of return to religion as a return to politics.

We need a new discussion of religion and politics in this country. That should involve a new discussion on secularism. Secularism in India has to be a secularism that takes religions and religious traditions seriously.

That discussion should also involve a redefinition of, a reconceptionalisation of both religion and politics. We have to speak in a language of faith that is not domestic. We have to see politics in the larger perspective. We need to have faith in politics.

It is in that sense that M.A.Thomas Achen understood the role of faith in politics. He acted accordingly. The best tribute that we can pay to Achen, whose memory we honour today, is to uphold faith in politics.

Starting his career in 1958 as a college lecturer in Kerala after graduating from the Agra University. Ninan Koshy was General Secretary of the Student Christian Movement of India (1968-73) and Director-in-charge of the Ecumenical Christian Centre (1973-74) before joining the staff of the World Council of Churches (WCC) in Geneva.

He served as the Director, Commission of the Churches on International Affairs, World Council of Churches (1981-1991) and was a Visiting Fellow at the Harvard Law School for an year soonafter retiring from the WCC.

*Religious Freedom in a Changing World (*1992) and *Churches in a World of Nations* (1994) are two of the six books he has authored besides several articles and commentaries. He was conferred the Degree of Doctor of Divinity *(Honoris Causa)* by the Serampore College, Calcutta in 1995.

Ninan Koshy now lives in Trivandrum and is associated as one of the Visiting Faculty of the National Law School University, Bangalore offering courses in Human Rights.