IL PENSIERO STORICO. Rivista Italiana di Storia delle Idee, nº01, 2016 [1-7] ISSN 2531-3983

Political Religion

A. James Gregor *

> "The State is based on religion....It is only when religion is made the foundation that the practice of righteousness attains stability, and that the fulfillment of duty is secured. It is in religion that what is deepest in man, the conscience, first feels that it lies under an absolute obligation, and has the certain knowledge of this obligation; therefore the State must rest on religion....In this aspect, religion stands in the closest connection with the political principle."
>
> -Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel[1]

Since time immemorial, thinkers have acknowledged, directly or indirectly, explicitly or implicitly, an intimate relationship between religion and politics. The relationship has not

* A. James Gregor is Professor Emeritus of Political Science at the University of California, Berkeley and Knight in the Order of Merit of the Italian Republic (2004).

[1] G. F. W. Hegel, *The Philosophy of History* (New York: Dover Publications, Inc.), pp. 50, 51; *Philosophy of Mind*, Part 3 of *The Encyclopaedia of the Philosophical Sciences* (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 2003), para. 552, p. 283; and *Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1962, 1, p. 102. Editors of Hegel's works in English have not consistently capitalized technical terms like "State," "Reason," and "Will" in their texts. The difficulty is, of course, not being able to identify their technical use. All nouns are capitalized in German, and in his narratives, Hegel never specifically signaled their technical use. Below, for the sake of consistency, technical terms will be capitalized throughout (even in English language texts where they are not). The term "state" presents special problems. It is clear that Hegel spoke of a "proper" state that clearly required capitalization. The difficulty is trying to determine when he was speaking technically of the "Idea of the State" and when he was referring to the empirical states with which we are all familiar. To complicate the issue further, Hegel held that all states had something of the State in them, however transient and distorted—so that in speaking of states, one found embedded in them features of the State.

been characterized to everyone's satisfaction, but few have denied that it exists. Preliterate societies have rarely, if ever, attempted to consistently distinguish the sacred from the politically profane--and the fact is that the sacred and the political overlap in intricate fashion in the least, as well as the most, advanced communities. In tribal societies, as in pharaonic Egypt and imperial Rome, rulers were cloaked in the trappings of divinity. In modern times, the industrializing Japanese chose to imagine their emperors as linearly descended from the sun god.

Among contemporary social scientists, there is easy talk of "civil religions" and "sacralized politics," by virtue of which politics in industrial democracies is imbued with some of the features of faith. Belief in the sacred is invoked to render business transactions more reliable, institutions more just, witnesses more truthful, and children more obedient. Belief in the divine prompts citizens to conform their conduct to public law, moral sanction, and collective conscience. Faith prompts individuals to sacrifice in the service of the community. Public ceremonies often take on the properties of worship, and things—flags, songs, and offices—become invested with special significance, requiring unusual deference and respect.

Although sometimes intricate and often inscrutable, the relationship between faith and politics in industrialized democracies is generally functional in character. In such environs, the profane allocation of responsibilities, for example, is often legitimated by invocations to one or another divinity through the swearing of oaths. Politicians speak, with easy familiarity, of "God," the "Almighty," and "Providence"—and their declamations are thereby held to be more binding.

Among citizens in industrial democracies, God is expected to provide stability and respect for law and common practice in peace, and protection and victory in conflict. All of

which is advanced with sufficient imprecision to allow any and all citizens the freedom to choose each their own divinity, as well as their own church affiliation. In general, "valid" laws are understood to somehow conform to some set of ill defined, but divine, enjoinments. All these forms of sacralization are readily recognized, granted, and, in general, considered benign, if not beneficent.

Conversely, throughout history there have been practices associated with sacralization that have been, and are, deplored: the ritual sacrifice of human beings to demanding deities; the insistence on absolute conformity to dogma; the attendant punishment of heresy; as well as the explicit or implicit call for the immolation of all that, and all those, considered offensive to powers transcendent.

It has been considered the unique accomplishment of the industrialized democracies to have rendered sacralization, at least in large part, inoffensive to modern sensibilities. Young men and women still imagine themselves directed by the Almighty to defend their countries with homicidal violence. Moral evil is still, more often than not, defined in terms of a decalog found in a revered text. Amid all that, individuals are allowed choices, and offenses to public morality and security are judged by regulations conceived fair rather than sacred. However it works, sacralization in industrial democracies is generally expected to contribute to the stability, promise, and predictability of organized society, redounding to the benefit of everyone.

Unhappily, over time, and most emphatically over the past two centuries, the sacralization of politics in modern settings has taken on ominous features. Since at least the end of the nineteenth century, political sociologists and theorists, in developing or industrialized countries, have chosen to identify a category of political movements and

institutionalized systems of governance as "political religions."[2] Political religions are understood to be phenomena essentially peculiar, though not exclusive, to the twentieth century. Though secular in character, such "religions" are understood to share some properties of generic religion—properties conceived negative in import--fanaticism, intolerance, and irrationality.

Some contemporary political systems, industrialized or not, are avowedly religious—informed by legal systems that are dictated by revelation (a form of *jus divinum*)—in which, behaviors and systems of observances are prescribed in order to provide for collective and individual redemption and salvation. They are systems in which priests and prophets have an affirmed place. Such systems are overtly religious and license their political power through their candid and overt religiosity. Their populations are animated by faith, and infused by a sense of duty. Citizens perform individual and group rituals in order to evoke, maintain, and renew a sense of collective identity. The priests and prophets of such a system are the embodiments of an ineffable *charisma*, the proper recipients of adulation and unqualified obedience. "Islamic republics" are contemporary members of such a class.

All political systems, to some degree, feature at least some of those properties. As has been suggested, some of the symbols and rituals in industrialized democracies are treated with seemingly religious deference; presidents and political leaders in such systems

[2] The nomenclature varies, but the content of the discussion is clearly recognizable. Some of the most illuminating discussion can be found in Gaetano Mosca, *Elementi di scienza politica* (Bari: Gius. Laterza & Figli, 1953), 2 vols., available in English as *The Ruling Class* (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1939), particularly chap. 7; see Gustave Le Bon, *The Crowd: A Study of the Popular Mind* (London: Ernest Benn Limited, 1952), particularly bk. 1, chap. 4; and Vilfredo Pareto, *A Treatise on General Sociology: The Mind and Society* (New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 1935), 2 vols., particularly vol. 1, chap. 4. Pareto's discussions concerning the relationship of religion to politics are engaging and instructive. Among the many modern and contemporary authors, the works of Emilio Gentile, *Politics as Religion* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006), and Michael Burleigh, *Sacred Causes: The Clash of Religion and Politics*, from the Great War to the War on Terror (New York: Harper, 2006), recommend themselves.

certainly enjoy a measure of respect denied others. Nonetheless, analysts insist on the qualitative and quantitative differences between explicitly "politicized religions," as such, and the "civil religions" of industrial pluralisms. There are clear differences between an unqualifiedly religious system that has assumed sovereign political power, and an industrial democracy animated by a "civil religion." There are manifest differences in allowable public conduct between religious systems that have assumed jealous political power and the systems that permit the religious pluralisms with which we are familiar. What those differences imply for public policy and public conduct need not detain us here. For present purposes, it is important to acknowledge that there are also arresting qualitative and quantitative differences between avowedly religious systems, the civil religions of industrialized democracies, and the political religions of "totalitarianisms."

"Totalitarianism"[3] is a term that refers to a relatively distinct set of political arrangements that, while professedly secular, have an unmistakably religious cast. They are systems led by the inspired—those who are considered possessed of unassailable truths, as well as being invariably wise in calculation and correct in judgment. The leaders of such systems are spoken of as "charismatics"[4]—and generally assume leadership responsibilities for life. They are addressed, deferentially, as "the Leader," and their behaviors understood to fully embody the will of the community.

Of the movements they lead, each is infused by a faith that brooks no reservation or opposition; any suggestion of an alternative politics is abjured. In principle, such movements aspire to single party control. The aspiration is vindicated by a conviction that

[3] The literature devoted to "totalitarianism" is vast. Some of the more interesting examples, that are relatively easy to obtain, include Michael Geyer and Sheila Fitzpatrick (eds.), *Beyond Totalitarianism: Stalinism and Nazism Compared* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009); Abbott Gleason, *Totalitarianism: The Inner History of the Cold War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995); Leonard Schapiro, *Totalitarianism* (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1972); and Ernest A. Menze (ed.), *Totalitarianism Reconsidered* (London: Kennikat Press, 1981).

[4] Charles Lindholm's, *Charisma* (Cambridge, Mass.: Basil Blackwell, 1990) is helpful in dealing with a difficult concept.

the charismatic leader and his party boast qualities that assure flawless judgment and unmatched virtue. Obedience and sacrifice in the service of such leadership will assure the movement, and its party, merited success.

Because the instruments of special purpose, the movement, the party, and the state it constructs, conceive any opposition, however bland, to be indecent at best, and immoral at worst. Given the political environment of the totalitarian state, any opposition is held to be either the product of ignorance or malevolence—alternatively requiring reeducation or punishment.

Animated by an irrepressible conviction in the rectitude of their cause, totalitarians feel compelled to marshal all others to their mission. Totalitarians tend to seek total control of all aspects of life lived and business conducted. Those ends are pursued through monopoly control of production and distribution, education and communication, as well as welfare and wellbeing. What results is a real or factitious sense of community—a seamless unity of all members of a body of believers—each prepared to obey and sacrifice in faithful service.

Clearly each such system differs in its particulars. Each leader will have unique properties; each movement its own belief system. Controls will vary in extent and intensity, and punishment with frequency and lethality. Nonetheless, the sense is that the twentieth century was host to a peculiar set of political systems that shared the general species traits of religious fundamentalism. They are not accounted religious. Many, if not most, claim to be antireligious and secular in principle. Many, if not most, disclaim interest in transcendent matters—with questions of immortality and final judgments. Nonetheless,

the features of religion are unmistakable. Totalitarian systems are animated by "political religions."[5]

[5] Theologians have not succeeded in supplying a generally accepted definition of what a "religion" might be taken to be. In that, they are little different from intellectual historians or political theorists when they attempt convincing definitions of generally contested terms like "totalitarianism," "political," "democracy," or any number of other notions. For a discussion of some of the problems, see A. James Gregor, *Metascience and Politics: An Inquiry into the Conceptual Language of Political Science* (New Brunswick, N. J.: Transaction Publishers, 2003), chaps. 3, 4, and 8.