

RELIGION WOULD SERVE US WELL BY FADING AWAY FROM PUBLIC SPACES

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Combined with politics, it tends to result in forms of exclusion that could shake the foundation of the most powerful society

Religion has been one of the core facets of human existence. It has defined individual identities and helped build the shared identities of communities. Religion has been one of the strongest influencers of human behaviour.

Religion has always acted as a beacon of hope in times of distress. According to Gallup research, the proportion of US citizens who believe that religion is increasing its influence on American life increased to an all-time high of 71% immediately after the twin tower attacks of 9/11. This just shows that religious beliefs act as a hedge against the onslaughts of life. Just as religion is playing a significant role in the lives of individuals, should it also play a similarly important role in framing the policies of a democratic country and, thereby, mould the behaviour of a whole country?

Democracy is all about inclusiveness. Equality of all citizens is an essential characteristic of all democratic processes. In a democratic country, no attempts should be made to grant favours to one group while taking favours away from another and, thus, make one group "more equal" than others. Can religion really contribute to building an equitable, harmonious society, or will it harm the peaceful coexistence of various groups in a culturally diverse country?

According to Winfried Brugger, professor of public law, philosophy of law and theory of state, Heidelberg University, there are six types of relationships between a state and religion. In the first one, the state is completely opposed to religion. Albania, where in the 1970s and 1980s religion was officially banned, might be an example of this.

The second model is characterized by a "wall of separation" between the two, not only in theory, but in practice as well. France, which has barred all displays of religious symbols in public, belongs here. The third model is less drastic: "Separation" and "allowing for" are linked. The government may neither advance nor obstruct religion. The fourth model combines separation with some kind of cooperation. Germany, where the government, for example, takes care of "church tax" collections for recognized religious denominations, may serve as an example. The fifth model is characterized by a more formal unity of state and church in the form of an established church. The state and church still have different aims, however—citizens' welfare and their salvation, respectively. In the last model, that difference disappears, and the state and church actually converge to form a theocracy. What model best suits a country like India? To answer that question, we should take a closer look at the fundamental construct of religions.

Almost all religions have their followers thinking that the deity they believe in will take care of only those who follow their own religion. The believers of some major religions are led to see those of other faiths as opponents from whom one should protect their own belief system. Consider Judaism, Islam and Christianity, the Abrahamic three that profess a common beginning. Each seems uneasy with the existence of the other two. In general, the beliefs of one religion tend not to offer much scope for the accommodation of another religion. In that sense, exclusion is at the core of most religious belief.

Inherent to this exclusionary behaviour is the assumption that one's own religion is superior to all others. So, evangelization, an active process of converting those who belong to other religions to one's own, is the focus of many organized religions. At the same time, religious leaders also try to protect their home turf by thwarting any attempt at converting their members. There are few religions that do not allow outsiders to join. For that matter, as soon as someone marries outside their religious community, they are often excommunicated. It is very rare for one religion to promote love towards another. Many of the world's longest wars and periods of civil strife can be attributed to differences between religions.

India is one of the few countries that had a culture of warmly welcoming those with different religious beliefs. There are excellent examples of an amalgamation of assorted religions' rituals and practices. A pilgrimage to the famous Sabarimala temple in Kerala, for example, is not complete without an offering at Vavar's mosque. The Mar Thoma cross, the crucifix used by Syrian Christians in the state, has a lotus flower at its bottom. But today's religious leaders do not encourage this integration process. They are keen to widen the differences between religions.

This exclusionary aspect of religious conduct is an extremely useful tool for politicians to create a solid in-group, a vote bank. During an election, one of the core strategies is to consolidate such a vote bank. Behavioural scientists have pointed out that an effective path to group consolidation is to create a sense of an in-group as opposed to an out-group. Opportunistic politicians are adept at surreptitiously creating out-groups by clubbing people of other religions together. So, religion has become one of the most cynical and efficient ways of acquiring and retaining political power.

Politics is a game of one-upmanship: "I win only if you lose." At the same time, religions sometimes end up fostering the thought that "if you are not with us, you are against us". Given beliefs that result in keeping "the other" out, the coming together of politics and religion can create truly worrisome forces of exclusion. The combustible power of this combination could destroy the foundation of even the strongest society.

In times of monarchy, the religion of the ruler was what most citizens also followed. But under a republic, with a democratic form of government, where people of different religions coexist in peace, state leaders should not wear their religion on their sleeves; nor should religion be the basis for state policies. Ideally, religion should fade away from public domain, and limit itself only to the private sphere.

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