

RELIGION AND POLITICS IN SOUTH ASIA

The Design of the Emerging Patterns

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The relation of religion and politics in South Asia is a subject of unusual complexity, with a richness of phenomena which at once intrigues and embarrasses. In the West we are concerned chiefly with the major branches of the Christian church; in South Asia we find a compact geographical region which is the meeting place of three major world religions. The majorities in the three most important South Asian countries, India, Pakistan and Ceylon, profess respectively Hinduism, Islam and Buddhism. From a comparative point of view it is important to note that the three countries share a similar colonial background: all three were part of the British Empire. British policies with respect to religion in undivided India and in Ceylon were not identical, but they did follow the same general lines. In terms of the basic policies inherited from British rule, then, the three new independent states shared a common legacy. In spite of important differences it is possible to offer some generalizations concerning religion and politics which appear to be valid for all three countries.

Religious Communalism in Politics. Religious pluralism is a basic characteristic not only of South Asia as a whole but of each of these three countries. In India the minorities include the Muslims, Christians, Sikhs, Buddhists, Jains, Jews and others. In Pakistan there are sizable numbers of Hindus (only in East Pakistan, however), Christians and Buddhists. In Ceylon the largest minorities are the Hindus, Christians and Muslims.

Donald Smith has been engaged in a three-year research project on the relationship between religion and the state in South and Southeast Asia, a project which the Council on Religion and International Affairs launched in 1960, with a grant from the Carnegie Corporation. Two books have resulted from this project, *India as a Secular State*, 1963, and *Religion and Politics in Burma*, to appear in 1965, both published by Princeton University Press. The final phase of the project was the organization of a seminar on religion and politics in South Asia. The five-day seminar was held in Colombo, Ceylon, in July 1964, with 15 participants from India, Pakistan, Ceylon and the United States. The present article is one result of that seminar.

What is the nature of these communities and how are they related to religion? First, religion provides each group with a focal point of identity and social solidarity, and large areas of its culture are intimately associated with religion. A member of the Muslim community may be an atheist, but the social institutions, personal laws, customs, traditions, history, art and literature which have helped to mold his individual and social existence have been closely related to Islam. Secondly, religious symbols represent group interests and group self-esteem. Religious symbols continue to be emotionally powerful in unifying the group in the face of real or imagined threats from other groups, and they are frequently used to disguise conflicts based on economic interests. The Sinhalese Buddhist who declares that Buddhism must be restored to its rightful place in Ceylon is saying, in part, that his community must enjoy unrivaled dominance in the fields of education and government service.

Religious communalism is related to politics in four basic ways: 1) communities are legally recognized as political units through separate electorates and quotas in government service, or there is demand for such recognition; 2) in the absence of such devices, communal loyalties play a significant role in the selection of candidates, voting behavior, the formation of cabinets and the making of appointments; 3) communal political parties defend and promote the interests of particular communities; and 4) communal violence often creates major problems for a government—problems of law and order internally, and of complications with the governments of neighboring states in which the majority-minority relationship may be reversed. India, Pakistan and Ceylon have all faced problems involving these political manifestations of religious communalism.

Ecclesiastical Organization and Politics. In the countries of South Asia, relations between government and the religious leadership tend to be informal, unstructured and sporadic. There is nothing comparable to the Western phenomenon of sustained relations between state and church because the organizational cohesiveness and institutional con-

tinuity of religion in South Asia is so limited. Because Hinduism, Buddhism and Islam do not have highly organized ecclesiastical institutions, they are precluded from certain kinds of political involvement. Hinduism has the least organization and Buddhism the most; the differences between the two on this point are indeed very important. But even in the latter case the organizational development has not proceeded very far. The Sangha, or monastic order, is divided into several sects, with no supreme patriarch. There is very little disciplinary authority which can be imposed on the individual monk outside of his own monastery. And the monk's direct authority over the Buddhist layman is limited to a poorly defined and informal spiritual influence.

Organizations of the *ulama* (those learned in Islamic law) in Pakistan might protest specific policies of the government, just as a group of temple priests in Madras might condemn governmental decisions which adversely affect their interests, or Buddhist monks in Colombo might stage demonstrations to denounce unpopular legislation. But the Western phenomenon of sustained power struggles between church and state, each armed with its own weapons, has no real counterpart in South Asia. Religion in this region simply lacks the organizational means necessary to confront the state with a serious challenge.

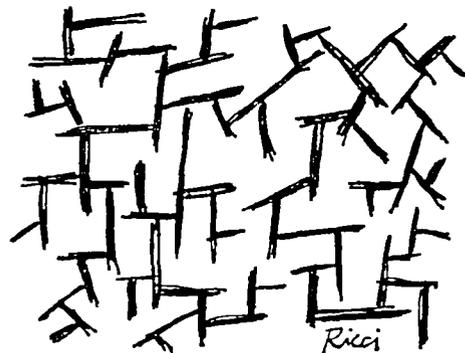
Government and Religious Reform. In all three countries the state has assumed, or has had thrust upon it, the role of religious reformer. In marked contrast to the British colonial policy of religious neutrality—in pursuance of which the government declined to interfere with any religious practices except those of an extremely anti-social nature (e.g. *sati*, or widow-burning)—the governments of the independent states are urgently required by public opinion to do something positive by way of religious reform. This is clearly the case in India and Ceylon; in Pakistan the initiative has come from a military government which sees Islam in its present state as an obstacle to the modernization of the country. In the absence of effective ecclesiastical organizations, Hinduism, Buddhism and Islam cannot reform themselves; this task must be undertaken by the state.

It is ironic that India, the only country of the three which has committed itself to the ideal of a secular state, has engaged in the most extensive governmental intervention in religion in the interest of reform. Legislative measures have dealt with the social evils connected with caste, the drastic alteration of Hindu marriage law, various practices connected with temple worship, and the financial administration of Hindu temples. In Ceylon, the official

Buddha Sasana Commission recommended in its 1959 report the creation of a Buddhist legislative body, a system of ecclesiastical courts to deal with cases in which monks were involved, and a new government department to manage temple lands. In Pakistan, President Ayub Khan created a Central Institute of Islamic Research which was required "to define Islam in terms of its fundamentals in a rational and liberal manner and to emphasize, among others, the basic Islamic ideals of universal brotherhood, tolerance and social justice. . . ."

Religion and Ideology. The dominant political ideologies of South Asia (nationalism, democracy and socialism) have been readily reconciled with the major religions (Hinduism, Buddhism and Islam). On the whole Marxism has been held to be incompatible with the religions of South Asia, although serious efforts are being made in Ceylon to demonstrate its compatibility with Buddhism.

Almost any highly elaborated system of thought, whether a political ideology or a set of religious doctrines, will have some assumptions or ideas in common with other systems of thought. A basic compatibility is established, consciously or unconsciously, by emphasizing these common assumptions or ideas and minimizing differences. One might think that Hinduism with its caste system would be impossible to reconcile with democracy and socialism. Yet Dr. S. Radhakrishnan and others could point to the Hindu emphasis on individualism in the search for truth as an important value supporting democracy. He found the idea of equality in the metaphysical assertion of Vedanta of the ultimate unity of all beings in the Absolute. If all individual souls are part of the same ultimate Reality, all are equal. Gandhian thought gave rise to the remarkable Sarvodaya movement led by Vinoba Bhave, which in many respects is a kind of Hindu socialism aiming at a radical transformation of society by noncoercive means. Modern interpreters of Buddhism and Islam have similarly built ideological bridges to the West.



But if there are similarities in the way religion is related to politics in these countries, there are differences which are possibly more significant.

Religious Functionaries and Politics. Religious functionaries, both individuals and organized groups, have assumed a significant political role in Ceylon and Pakistan. There is nothing comparable to this pattern in India.

One of the most remarkable political monks in Ceylon in recent years is the Reverend Mapitigama Buddharakkhita. Buddharakkhita came into national prominence in 1956 through an organization of Buddhist monks for political action, the Eksath Bhikkhu Peramuna (United Monks Front). In the election campaign of that year Buddharakkhita and his group campaigned vigorously for the coalition headed by S. W. R. D. Bandaranaike. After Bandaranaike's victory, the United Monks Front applied constant pressure on the new government to pay its political debts in terms of appointments and favorable policies. Serious differences arose between Buddharakkhita and Bandaranaike. When the prime minister was assassinated by a monk, Buddharakkhita was convicted as one of the conspirators.

In Pakistan the *ulama* have played a significant political role since independence, especially in the prolonged effort to hammer out a constitution. Muslim League politicians, not the *ulama*, had declared that Pakistan would be a state in which the Muslims could mold their lives in accordance with the Quran and Sunnah. But who was competent to spell out the implications of the commitment to become an Islamic state? The political influence of the *ulama* declined sharply, however, with the military coup of 1958.

Religion and Law. The governments of India and Pakistan have legislated important, even drastic, changes in laws based on religion. The state has thus expanded its jurisdiction at the expense of traditional Hinduism and Islam, over the vehement protests of the orthodox. In Ceylon this problem is non-existent, since there is no Buddhist law concerning marriage, divorce, inheritance, adoption, etc.

In independent India, Hindu personal laws have been radically amended by legislative action. The Hindu Marriage Act of 1955, for example, made polygamy illegal despite the religious sanctions which had traditionally justified it. Disregarding the sacramental view of Hindu marriage, the act made provision for divorce. Inter-caste marriages, explicitly forbidden by the religious texts, were made valid by this law.

In Pakistan the civilian governments were unable to tackle this difficult problem, but Ayub Khan in

1961 promulgated the Muslim Family Laws Ordinance. Despite the Quranic provisions which permit a man to have four wives, this ordinance made polygamy all but impossible. Under the traditional Islamic law a man could divorce his wife merely by repeating "I divorce thee" three times. Under the new ordinance the divorce procedure is made so difficult as to effectively discourage quick divorces.

Religion and National Integration. The governments of Pakistan and Ceylon regard the majority religion as a unifying factor of great potential effectiveness, and have identified the state with religion to promote national integration. In India, the belief is that national integration can only be achieved through a secular state.

The relationship of religion to national integration is a much more meaningful classification than the question of whether or not there is an official state religion. Ceylon gives no special constitutional recognition to the majority religion, but the essential thrust of governmental policy is to identify Sinhalese Buddhist religion and culture with Ceylonese nationality. This can be seen in the extensive Buddha Jayanti celebrations (1954-1956) organized and financed by the government, the creation of two Buddhist universities based on traditional monastic institutions, and the numerous religious functions of the Ministry of Cultural Affairs. A recent Minister of Cultural Affairs wrote an article entitled: "Our Culture is Based on Our Religion," and made it clear that the promotion of Ceylonese culture meant the promotion of Buddhism.

In Pakistan, both history (the forces and ideas which led to the creation of the state) and geography (East and West Pakistan separated by 1,000 miles of foreign territory) have driven the political leadership to emphasize Islam as the one factor capable of holding the country together. While Ayub Khan would like to see a radically transformed Islam, he has come to the conclusion that Islam, however defined, is the only cement which can create a sense of Pakistani nationality. Thus it was that the 1962 constitution which he promulgated provided for an Advisory Council of Islamic Ideology. Pakistan, it is asserted, is an ideological state, and its ideology can only be Islam.

In summary, the three countries of South Asia have much in common in terms of emerging patterns of religion and politics, but just as significant are the major differences. Perhaps it would be fair to say that the word that needs to be most stressed in my title is "emerging," for it is quite clear that there will be further changes in the patterns before they are completed.