

RUSSIA AT THE CROSSROADS: UNDERSTANDING SECULARISM AND THE ROLE OF RELIGION IN THE RUSSIAN CONTEXT

Apurvashree B Kujur

*Research Scholar, Department of Center for Russian and Central Asian Studies, School of International Studies,
Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi, India*

Received: 21 Jun 2018

Accepted: 27 Jun 2018

Published: 04 Jul 2018

ABSTRACT

Religion has been recognized as a very crucial weapon in the 21st century. In the era of liberalization and democracy where secularism as the concept has been a topic of discussion and debate, the pivotal role of religion in influencing the political structures cannot be overlooked. The post-1990 period has been a remarkable phase in the history of Russia, it offered a space for freedom and equality for the religions to grow and flourish in a multicultural society. The revival of religion in the context of the secular notion in Russia presents a very unique model of separation between politics and religion. Despite declaring itself as a secular country, Russian political system can be witnessed strongly getting influenced by Russian Orthodox Church. Such model of secularism defies the basic ethic of separation of politics and religion. Thus, the role of religion in Russia offers not only an understanding of religion to a specific context of multi-religious societies but its predominance in International relations and politics as an influencing weapon.

KEYWORDS: *Religion, Politics, Secularism, Russian Orthodox Church, State, International Relations*

INTRODUCTION

In the manner in which world politics is both studied and practiced, focus continue to be centered around issues like human rights, security, terrorism, democracy and other socio-economic political aspects. As a consequence, there are few debates and discussions which are often neglected in the mainstream International Relations. In the context of International Relations, one has to go beyond the factors which tend to define the power structure among the key players on an international level. In understanding International Relations by focusing only on agreements, treaties, and policies between nations, it presents a limited picture of what international politics is all about. It is not to state that these are not part of International Relations, but to understand that both the study and practice of International Relations is not restricted to these issues alone. It is crucial to open up and broaden the subject matter to include issues which have been marginalized and yet is central to both the theory and practice of International Relations. Religion is one important aspect which has had a significant impact on both the theory and practice of International Relations.

In the context of Russia, religion holds a very pivotal position in defining its identity on an international level as a superpower. Under the shadow of secularism the dynamic nature of politics which is existing presently raises questions regarding the role of religious bodies in the Russian political system. The secular nature of Russia becomes skeptical on the grounds that the present political system is strongly manipulated by the Russian Orthodox Church. Thus, if Russia defines itself as the secular nation, the question that is supposed to be addressed is whether the politics of

Russia is guided by religious norms or the separation of politics and religion in Russia as the secular ethics define is just a myth considering Church's influence?

ROLE OF RELIGION IN INTERNATIONAL RELATION

Before we start analyzing the secular political behavior, it is important to comprehend the role of religion in International Relations as a decisive element. By the end of cold war, few theorists of International Relations or policymakers put an effort to investigate the links between cultural variables like religion and ethnicity on one hand and international affairs on other but it was not sufficient enough to contribute in the mainstream International Relations (Nukhet A Sandal and Patrick James, 2010). The centrality of religion in IR cannot be denied. As liberals and realists argue the negligible presence of religion in international affairs is questioned in the context of secular spaces in this work. As Therborn argues, there are two basic ways in which religions can affect this world. The former is the doctrine or theology, the latter refers to religion as a social phenomenon working through variable modes of institutionalization, including political parties and church-state relations and functioning as a mark of identity (Jeff Haynes, 1997: 710). It is very difficult to isolate religion's influence, it is more than a subjective meaning to an individual, rather it has taken a form of politics which unifies and balances the conflicting areas and often used for shared common interests to secure power, autonomy, and legitimacy. However, the silence on the non-existing nature of religion is no longer a subject of controversy anymore.

Prior to the 18th century and the subsequent development of the modern international state system that is rooted in the dominance of secularism and sidelining of religion amid dissemination of western directed economic and political modernization, religion was a source of political competition and conflict within as well as between states (Jeff Haynes, 2005). Since 9/11 the international spotlight has been more firmly fixed on the Muslim world and specifically its Middle East heartland. All aspects of life in Muslim societies became a central subject for policy commentators and analysts to unearth the cause of Islamist militancy. Thus, Islam has tended to adopt a more skeptical position. However, in the process of understanding the threat to international security with a specific context to Islamic hostility (Anoushiravan Ehteshami, 2004), the post 9/11 incident has resulted in growing numbers of scholars and institutions that have recognized the presence of religion in IR.

In maintaining the significance of religion, Scott Thomas and Jeffery Hynes have contributed to the subject by perceiving religion as the transnational idea. By critically evaluating the aspects of religion applicable to IR as in religion in terms of identity, soft power, culture or civilization, Thomas establishes that in order to avoid essentialism and account for change religion is best conceptualized as interpretive communities (Mona Kanwal Sheikh, 2012). Realizing the crucial role of religion in state affairs and policies Haynes states that religion constitutes a kind of soft power which could be values, culture or ideas, the domestic or foreign policies are bound to be manipulated by religious groups. Therefore, religion becomes a primary marker of identity which in the context of Russia has been a crucial aspect in defining the national identity of the country as a Christian nation.

It has to be kept in mind that while studying the role of religion, it should not be perceived in terms of its theologically defined definition. To keep the focus restricted to human behavior and society, in one of the works done by Jonathan Fox and Shmuel Sandler, establishes the ways through which religion marks its influence on society and politics as a basis for identity, a belief system that influences behavior through formal religious doctrines making itself a source of

legitimacy through its respective institutions (Jonathan Fox and Shmuel Sandler, 2005). The main motive of embracing religion is to justify the events occurring in IR, but a very fine difference is essential to maintain here between seeking to explain religion and incorporating religion in the analysis (Mona Kanwal Sheikh, 2012: 370).

RELIGION AND POLITICS

The resurgence of religious elements in International Relations opens up a new debate for scholars to question the established meaning of secularism. Both have a very complex and paradoxical relation with each other which cannot be marginalized. Both are meant to maintain and secure power except their contrasts in their objectives. They imply an awareness of social relationships and integration whereas one deals with the relation of men with other men and the ideas of profane, religion focus on the relation of men with gods and aspects of sacred. Summing up the points, religion and politics are the private affairs but equally a political matter, there are examples of religious communities seeking to shape the policies or power politically sometimes within or outside the constitutional structures. Denying their intersection would be a lose loop to analyze the political arena in today's International Relations where religious forces and sentiments often guide the political direction. Both Marx and Webber stress on the contingent nature of the relation between content of an ideology and social position of the body who are its carrier, in relation to religious groups it suggests that religious leaders will be concerned with securing and promoting a message which is often an ideology of domination to preserve and strengthen their own socio-political and theological ground and if necessary they will be using secular powers (Jeff Haynes, 1997). Liberals and realists argue the negligible role of religion in the International Relations, while when talking of secularism one needs to understand that instead of perceiving religion and politics as opposing forces we should look at the points of their convergence. This makes secularism questionable, moreover, the degrees to which the separation operates becomes ambiguous which needs to be examined.

Unlike the assumptions and beliefs that as a process of secularization religion has been eliminated from the organized political spaces, religion continues to play a primary role in these spaces. The modernization theories and liberal arguments which suggest the slender contribution of religion in today's era have been challenged not because of the random chain of events but the inseparable relationship between religion and politics which keeps questioning and doubting the structures was never recognized as two sides of one coin. In the wake of democracy and secularism, one needs to observe crucially the evolving meaning and value of the concepts in the context of 21st century. It is one of the traditional understandings of secularism which defines the separation of religion and politics, in the modern world it has to be contemplated beyond its orthodox foundations. The question that needs to be asked here is what is the nature of separation between religion and politics? or Is it possible to separate religion and politics practically? What kind of secularism is primarily understood and opted for by different states in different contexts. One has to move beyond this Eurocentric understanding of absolute separation of religion from politics.

Discussing secularism makes it inevitable to draw a line between religion and politics despite their converging points; Michael Walzer has underlined three requirements which he offers to separate religion and politics. According to his work, a) state must be granted monopoly of effective coercive power so it can be neutral to every religious organizations, b) religious organization will be prohibited from this coercive power except for their form of social pressure and c) the state's affair and religious affair's should be recognized distinctively so that the significance of state's authority will not fade away. This approach jeopardizes the balance between politics and religion since the point of

separation becomes ambiguous putting the state in between the conflicts of religious and political institutions. Secularism has to be understood as a concept which varies from different spectrum of perspectives, locating the point of separation between religion and politics by drawing a line still opens up a debate. Secularism, religion, and politics clearly run at parallel directions with different ends which this work has attempted to analyze by using theories and debates established by western and non-western thinkers. It is under this broad framework this paper will test the nature of secularism in Russia.

LOCATING RELIGION IN SECULAR RUSSIA

In January 2012 Putin mentioned the role of religion in state building in his manifesto article 'Russia: The National Issue'. In the same year during his meeting with the participant of All Russian Youth Forum by Lake Seliger, Putin very clearly stated the special role of Orthodoxy in state-building process. The present circumstance is one of absolutism. Russian Orthodox Church enjoys more support than any other religious denomination or even state structures; therefore, it is in a very comfortable position to dictate its terms and conditions from the political authority. As *ecclesia dominants* (the dominant church), the Russian Orthodox Church today is offering itself as *instrumental regni*, (instrument of state), asking for and receiving in turn *potestas direct in temporalibus* (the right to involve itself directly in secular affairs) (Giovanni Codevilla, 2008:121). Dietrich Bonhoeffer one of the theologians defines the relationship between Russian Orthodoxy and the state theologically unique as the church in Orthodoxy holds a very strong spiritual organ of the state and protector of the ethnos. According to his argument by the end of Stalinist era, the Soviet state and Orthodox theology would have produced a diffused political culture of church and state, and that in the post-communist era the state would have a propensity to rely on the Russian Orthodox Church to establish a national standard for ethics and values, he even argued the major crisis that Russian Orthodox Church would initially face in the beginning with regard the pluralistic character of the society which western societies have dealt with throughout the twentieth century. In the 21st century what Bonhoeffer argued has become relevant with the Russian context (Andrew Evans, 2002).

There have been works conducted to assess the current situation of Russia's model of de-secularization by scholars such as Davis, Filatov, Furman and Kaariainen, Garrard and Garrard, Johnson, Marsh, Papkova. Their works have produced an inconsistent and contradictory picture of religious transition in Russia. The undefined role of Russian Orthodox Church often doubts the nature of separation between religion and politics. However, the relationship between church and state is thriving on a mutual cooperation which is evidently visible in the present Russian political scenario. Looking back at the historical journey of the Church and state in Russia, the inseparable feature between both cannot be overlooked. The issue that needs contemplation in the given political circumstances is that if Russia is a secular country, how it is justifying the basic ethics of "secularism" which is the separation of power between religion and politics. Considering the powerful and influential role of Russian Orthodox Church in Russia's internal and external policies, is Russia presenting a unique model of secularism? Church has been a very integral part of Russian political system but being a secular federation it is very genuine to be suspicious about the position of other traditional religions in the political arena. This hierarchical priority given to religions is a remarkable characteristic of Russian secular model around which the whole secular politics is based upon.

It cannot be denied that even though a secular state is separated and kept independent from the religious aspects, a state is always attached to a system of morality which is an intrinsic quality of any cultural heritage of the society whom

the state represents. According to Arturo Jemolo, any civilization's values are determined through religious concepts and a state cannot neglect the civilization where it exists. Despite the fact that secularism is enshrined in the constitution of Russia, the state has never detached itself from the moral values of religious ethics which it considers unique from any other civilization. Russian Orthodox Church today has become a diplomatic tool in the hands of the state in the international political arena. Where the state fails to interfere where the church takes up the responsibility to intervene. For example, with the case of Iraq when Russian government was constantly criticizing the Western military intervention and economic sanctions but could not afford to have any direct negotiations with the country's official. It was represented by the members of Russian Orthodox Church's members who made a number of official visits to Iraq after the 9/11 attack and stated harsh anti-American criticisms, thus very subtly voicing the position of Russia without even endangering the country's reputation within the international community. In one of the other instance with Palestine, the stable Russian Orthodox Church and Palestine relation, concerning the Christian heritage in the region and economic issues and interests of Russia on the one hand and official inter-state Russian-Israeli relations on other has enabled Russia to avoid criticisms as a double player and yet remain a strong political factor in the conflict. This kind of instances is reflective of the symbiotic relationship between the church and the state in Russia. It reflects not only the interdependence of one on the other but also the intimate intersection between these two spaces which is in direct opposition to the European values of secularism.

The centrality of religion is also a reflection of the manner in which religion continues and more so has become a force and a primary marker of identity in its quest to define a purely Russian identity. Such return to traditional values represents Russia's search for an identity where religion is recognized as a symbol of cultural identity. John Anderson has elaborated this argument through his work in which he has presented that in defining a Christian nation the role of the Russian president and other religious leaders have been very significant. To ensure the religious roots of national identity, there have been campaigns and several public speeches made to convey the importance of religion among young generations. A statement on social and political life in 2000, the church established that Russia was an Orthodox nation and President Putin and Medvedev constantly kept emphasizing on the importance of Russia's spiritual heritage (John Anderson, 2012). The crux of this work justifies the fact that identities are subjected to evolution, the political and religious actors contest their meanings which have the potential to either unite or divide communities. Thus, this fact that state and political leaders itself are in the quest of defining the identity of the Russian nation which is clearly a specifically Christian identity. Instances like Pussy Cats Riot undoubtedly reflects the internal attitude of the government which is guided by religious morals. The way the whole issue was addressed and handled on a public platform clearly gives the glimpse of religious ethics. As already discussed, the diplomatic role played by the church makes it an agent of the government, such kind of loyalty and support is very well visible in Russia's external policies too. The matter of concern that needs to be addressed is that is Russia trying to identify itself as a Christian state? Even if it is implying it then what is its stand on secular principles?

IS SECULARISM THREAT TO RELIGION?

What does this prominence of religion in the political spaces mean for the values of secularism? Does this pose a threat to religion or vice versa? With reference to Russia, secularism poses a threat to the Christian identity of the state, if state fails to act on that then it would not be just an identity which will wither off but the "Christian" identity. There have been many works that defends secularism in a multi-religious society. The concept is felt under threat in the

presence of complex religious structures. But there is another perspective to it which needs to be analyzed from a different vantage point. So far there has been a chase to see multi-religious society a threat to secularism, what if it is the other way around? It is not that the role of secularism as an idea to keep political and religious extremism in check is undermined, but it is the relationship of the state and religion which is unpredictable on which the contrasting perception of secularism is based upon. In the context of Christian states Weber classified three kinds of relations between secular and ecclesiastical power; first, hierocratic, where secular power dominates but cloaked in a religious legitimacy; second, theocratic, where ecclesiastical authority is pre-eminent over secular power and third, caesar-papist, where secular power holds sway over religion itself, (Jeff Haynes, 1997). However, for multi-religious societies Mitra offers four categories of relations; first, hegemonic, where single religious group dominates tolerating others; second, theocratic: this is the one where the state power is dependent over its relationship with the dominant religion; third, is where a formal separation is maintained between the dominant religion and the state but in practice a certain relation endure between them; fourth, neutral, where government adopts an equal approach to all religions, including the dominant. Depending on these diverse relationships secularism acquires the meaning in a particular context; hence, an absolute rigid model of secularism might vary, at the same time the flexibility of the separation between politics and religion differs accordingly.

CONCLUSIONS

The theoretical framework is given by Rajiv Bhargava which establishes the principled distance of the state from the religious groups justifies the secular model adopted by the multi-religious nations. In the context of Russia, to some degree, this theory can be applied but the hierarchical preference given to Russian Orthodox Church defies Bhargava's theory at a certain point. Secularism in such circumstance becomes a means for the state as well as for the church to achieve their specific ends rather than a threat that challenges the religious structure of the country. Despite, the presence of other traditional religions in Russia such as Islam, Buddhism and Judaism along with other religious minorities Russian Orthodox Church has managed to maintain its superiority. This opens up a space to discuss the relevance of secularism in Russia where politics of religion seems to be a game played by two key players.

Since the period of Byzantine, Christianity in Russia never lost its essence. Throughout the history of Russia, religion held a very firm position despite efforts to exterminate it from every public and social sphere. The role of religion in Russia is a very crucial aspect in the contemporary era. It has always justified Russia's unique civilization in defining its identity on different levels. The Christian identity which Russia is trying to portray not just reflects the distinctive cultural and traditional character of the country but also the supremacy of religion in International relations which is often sidelined from the mainstream subject. The role of religion in secular politics of Russia put forward a very intriguing position for scholars and intellectuals to contemplate upon the indisputable influence of religion which according to the secular ethics is suppose to be separated from the political domain is witnessed to influence the political aspect without even bending the intrinsic spirit of secularism. It will not be wrong to assume that secularism has provided a protective shield to religion where it can operate without being shot down.

REFERENCES

1. Sandal Nukhet A et al, "Religion and International Relations Theory: Towards a mutual understanding," *European Journal of International Relations*, vol. 17(1), Sage Publication, 2010.
2. Haynes J, "Religion, Secularisation, and Politics: A Postmodern Conspectus," *Third World Quarterly*, vol. 18(4), Taylor & Francis Ltd, 1997.
3. Haynes J, "Religion and International relations after '9/11'," *Democratization*, vol. 12, Routledge, 2005.
4. Ehteshami A, "Islam, Muslim polities and democracy," *Democratization*, vol. 11, Routledge, 2004.
5. Sheikh M.K, "How does religion matter? Pathways to religion in International Relations," *Review of International Studies*, vol. 38, Cambridge University Press, 2012.
6. Fox J et al, "The Question of Religion and World Politics," *Terrorism and Political Violence*, vol. 17, Routledge, 2005.
7. Codevilla G, "Relations between church and state in Russia today," *Religion, State and Society*, vol. 36, Routledge, 2008.
8. Evans A, "Forced Miracles: The Russian Orthodox Church and Postsoviet International Relations," vol. 30, Carfax Publishing, 2002.
9. Anderson J, "Dreaming of Christian Nations in the U.S.A and Russia: the importance of history," *Journal of Transatlantic Studies*, vol. 10, Routledge, 2012.

