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The Political Appeal of Religion: A New Awareness of What is Missing

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Much of philosophical reflections about the relations between religion and politics fall within the liberal tradition of religious restraint, which generated both the backlash of a new traditionalism and the critical turn in the study of religion. Moving beyond the real or imagined isomorphism of religion and politics, I show how the political functions of religion are closely connected to the anthropological reflections about culture and politics. The aim is to provide political theory with a new “awareness of what is missing” by revealing the deeply political significance of religion, not merely as an instrument used in political contexts for political purposes but a total political fact, which remain hidden behind the moral discourses of religious advocates, political leaders, and academic scholars.

Introduction

In this paper, I call for expanding the critical investigation of religion and politics beyond political philosophy, whose liberal strands tend to dominate debates and models of analysis. Taking issue with various and interconnected approaches and topics related to the presence of religion within modern liberal secular society, I highlight the critical import of an anthropological approach to religion and politics as integral to political theory and philosophical analysis. The value of a political anthropological approach lies in its attention to context and power, and more broadly to the political functions of religion, regarding both the politics of religious

Keywords: religion, politics, culture, anthropology, secularism

representation and the political representation of religion within the public space created by the secular liberal democracy. I owe “an awareness of what is missing” to Habermas, but the question here is not merely to challenge secular reason in its relation to religious experience and to engage religions in a constructive dialogue (Habermas 2010). The global challenges posed by different forms of religious and ideological fundamentalism compel rather to seek another “awareness of what is missing” in the inherently political function of religion and its hidden implications in society.

I first engage with the literature on political philosophy to identify the limitations attached to the existing liberal approaches and the emerging new traditionalist perspectives on religion and politics. I then examine the critical turn in the study of religion to show the limitations of secular liberal democracy in dealing with contemporary religious diversity and illustrate how religious advocates are often encouraged by critical liberalism to use secular liberal arguments in public space. To overcome these limitations, rather than considering religion and politics in a kind of fetishized historicism and institutional isomorphism, I treat them as a total social fact that set in motion the totality of society and its institutions. Eventually, I argue for anthropological investigation and problematization to provide political theory with a new “awareness of what is missing” by revealing the deeply political significance of religion, not merely as an instrument used in political contexts for political purposes but a total political fact, which remain hidden behind the moral discourses of religious advocates, political leaders, and critical experts.

The nexus of religion and politics

The philosophical and anthropological problems raised by the intersection of religion and politics are more pressing for contemporary political thought, although they have been important in previous eras. Political issues of establishment and separation of church and state have been central since the days of *In Hoc Signo Vinces* “in this sign you conquer,” which was the *Chi-Rho* sign of Christ, after which Constantine won the battle that paved him the way to the throne of Rome (Doja 2019). The relation between religion and politics is closely connected to the philosophical reflections about the nature, extent, and justification of political authority grounded in the claims of either revelation or reason (Eberle and Cuneo 2017). A standard view within the liberal tradition is referred to as a doctrine of religious restraint (Eberle 2006). It argues that in contemporary liberal democracies citizens and legislators ought to put sig-

nificant restraints on the political role of religious reasons and restrain themselves from making political decisions solely on religious grounds (Larmore 1987; Gutmann and Thompson 1996; Audi 2000; Macedo 2000; Rorty 2003; Habermas 2006; Taylor 2007; Nussbaum 2008).

However, religious war and hostility to the right to religious freedom are not always grounded in religious considerations, but the other way around, religion has been more often camouflaged by politics (Burleigh 2005, 2007). In addition, keeping religious convictions completely out of the public square may stop the conversation with religious citizens, which makes “religion as a conversation-stopper” and therefore more likely to create social discontent (Rorty 2003). More generally, it is argued that civic commitments are not necessarily in tension with political reliance on religious convictions, which do not violate constitutional principles and the morality of liberal democracy. Religious believers may rather have good reasons sometimes to be wary about relying on religious beliefs in making political decisions that are reasonably believed to further the common good and be consistent with the demands of justice (Perry 2003). Arguing that public justification cannot be based only on shared reasons and that publicly justified polity cannot arise only out of a deliberative politics that aims at public justification, an asymmetric convergence rather than a consensus has been defended to accommodate both religious and non-religious convictions (Gaus and Vallier 2009). Much of the debate and the challenge posed by religious critics in the area of public deliberation have been prompted by Rawls’s notion of public reason, which is a moral ideal of shared principles about justice and the common good, requiring that political decisions be reasonably justifiable or acceptable from each individual viewpoint (Rawls 2005). In this pluralist conception, a tension surfaces between the key commitments of liberal democracy to the equal protection of the basic rights and freedoms of all citizens and to the equal considerations of all points of view that may reject the priority of public reasons (Lafont 2019).

As a result, the standard liberal tradition has generated the backlash of what Jeffrey Stout has called “new traditionalism”. The common link among various types of antimodern traditionalism is that modern democratic societies appear to lack any unifying framework and seem to be inherently at odds with the substantive and comprehensive visions of religious traditions (Stout 2004, 118). Some Methodist, Roman Catholic, and Anglican prominent theologians turned political philosophers like Stanley Hauerwas, Alasdair MacIntyre, and John Milbank stand as representative

critics of the political culture of modern democracy. The form of traditionalism they espouse in their writings is the tendency to undermine identification with liberal democracy and liberal secularism. Some of them reject not only liberal views, but also liberal modern politics and democratic institutions as fundamentally incompatible with religious orthodoxy and “the allegiance to the tradition of the virtues” (MacIntyre 2007; Milbank 2005, 2013). Others question the claim that commitment to liberal democracy requires accepting the priority of public reason, which in their view might be an optional feature but by no means a necessary element of constitutional democracy (Wolterstorff 2012).

Similar forms of traditionalism have also proven attractive to scholars of Eastern Orthodox traditions. Paschalis Kitromilides has devoted a great deal of his intellectual energy to account for the intense confrontations of Orthodox ecumenism to preserve Byzantine-Ottoman traditions in southeastern Europe and vindicate the hostility of Orthodox ecclesiastical hierarchy towards the liberal modernizing project since the Enlightenment (Kitromilides 1994, 2016). His view of liberal nationalism is argued to have little understanding for the traditional religious thought and practices and is perceived as an ideological enemy of Orthodox Christianity and a threat to the Church and to the Orthodox Christian way of life (Malesevic 2020). He has largely represented the “Orthodox Commonwealth” as a unified cultural space (Kitromilides 2007), which like the Muslim *Ummah*, is claimed to underpin the same faith with the shared social experience of a distinct way of life that unite ordinary people in their everyday activities.

More firmly, under the iconic guise of anthropology, some scholars of Muslim beliefs and practices, like Talal Asad and his followers, also defend traditionalism and tradition-based moral reasoning, whereby apprehension of the correct form and purpose of a good life is rooted in certain historically contingent practices or ways of living, particular to a moral community (Asad 2003). They provide an explicit civilizational appraisal of Islam as concept, movement, practice, and tradition. They often begin, as Muslims do, “from the concept of a discursive tradition that includes and relates itself to the founding texts of the Koran and the Hadith, [for] Islam is neither a distinctive social structure nor a heterogeneous collection of beliefs, artifacts, customs, and morals, [but] a tradition” (Asad 1986, 14). They reject the secularism of liberal democracy, arguing that it makes incumbent to treat Muslims both as abstract citizens and as a distinctive minority either to be tolerated or restricted, depending on the politics of the day (Asad 2018). Committed to rethink the political sphere,

in order to excavate the exclusionary principles of the modern state, they argue that modern secular governance and its regulation of religious life have paradoxically increased discrimination and violence against religious minorities (Mahmood 2016). They finally claim that the secular ideals of civic and political equality, minority rights, religious freedoms and the separation of private and public domain have exacerbated religious tensions and inequalities.

Beyond a narrative of historical significance or a focus on text, theology, and practice, ethnographic inquiries have also contributed to the exploration of what it means to have Islam as a lived category, where beliefs are not defined as separate from the community in which people live but rather integral to guiding actions for how people live (El-Zein 1977). In this sense, the possibility of an anthropology of Islam becomes a fully integrated explanation of life and requisite behavior. It is then claimed to be an anthropology of Muslims, which should rest in the observations of how Muslims themselves draw upon their own discursive traditions and religious practices to develop their own representations and feelings of what it means to be a Muslim (Tapper 1995; Varisco 2005). In turn, the question of power had placed Islam firmly within a political understanding of context and the contestability of representations.

Although the liberal state is supposed to remain neutral with regard to religion and religious morality, there are different senses of neutrality and different forms of moral complexity. The ultimate sources of moral value are diverse, and not simply the conscientious adherence to principles, but the exercise of virtue in policies recognizing the value of constitutive ties with shared forms of life may fare well with respect to the liberal ideal of political neutrality toward differing ideals of the good life (Larmore 1987). In addition, framing the debate in terms of the ethics of democratic citizenship and duty of civility can be misleading. It may suggest that the debate turns on whether or not citizens should follow some ideal moral norms and principles when engaging in political activities, whereas in fact the fundamental question is whether or not citizens can, upon reflection, endorse the ideal norms and principles actually embodied in the democratic institutions and practices in which they participate (Lafont 2019). In turn, for the proponents of the new traditionalism, any political system that professes neutrality with respect to conceptions of God and the good is unacceptable (Eberle and Cuneo 2017). They argue that the neutrality thesis grounded in personal freedoms and procedural justice would promote skepticism about the good and hinder the objec-

tive conception of the good endorsed by religious believers (Sher 1997). For many religious citizens, political authority is subservient to and perhaps even derived from divine authority, and they see their religious convictions as taking precedence over their civic commitments (Callaway 2019). In turn, “republican liberalism” has tended to proceed from a fundamental right of autonomy, to the recognition of interdependence and reciprocity, and on to the cultivation of the civic virtues of the public-spirited citizen, making participation in political deliberation as constitutive of the human good (Dagger 1997).

The effects of democracy that ground political authority in the rational consent of the people rather than in divine authorization, together with religious criticism and secularism, have not yet resulted in the disappearance, the privatization, or the “routinization” of religion (Weber 1976, 246–254), from public life and political culture. The same can be said for the general commitment to religious diversity, the demands of justice and the pursuit of the common good that include principles of toleration. The relation between religion and politics continues to be an important theme in political philosophy, despite the emergent consensus both among political theorists and in practical political contexts on the right to freedom of conscience and on some sort of separation between church and state. This also implies the need for society to be unwilling to tolerate unjustified religious beliefs about morality, spirituality and politics, especially beliefs that promote violence.

The critical turn

A new critical liberal tradition of post-secularism appears to occupy a conceptual middle ground, straddling the standard liberal tradition and the new traditionalism (Eberle and Cuneo 2017). The critical liberal tradition is sympathetic with the political commitments of the standard liberal tradition but not with the wariness about religion that often animates this position. It is also sympathetic with some of the religious commitments embraced by the new traditionalism although not with their suspicion of liberal democracy. Critical scholars of Muslim beliefs and practices claim that the rise of religious extremism, especially Islamic fundamentalism, mystify religion as essentially dangerous and do not recognize its construction in particular sociopolitical circumstances. They argue that this makes it necessary to question the normative presuppositions of the primacy of secular rationality over religion and the principle of the inevitable separation of religion from the public sphere (Asad 2003). In this view,

the individual's task to determine what is most important or significant is often seen as the reason for the importance of the politics of recognition in order to maintain diversity and equal opportunity without privileging one religion over another or religion over non-religion or anti-religion.

Similar controversies, contestations and renegotiations are also confronted in French public and academic opinions (Gauchet 2020), and they are related as much to individual freedom and personal autonomy (Kymlicka 1995), as to the translation of dangerous components into a neutral official language of post-secularism (Habermas 2006; Taylor 2007). The question remains, however, whether religion and the secular can learn from each other and adapt themselves to the post-secular age of a supposed post-metaphysical rationality. It seems like a pious wish to believe that religion can be "translated" or "neutralized" into a generally accessible and secular discourse in order to be free of its inherent destructive potential and become a "responsible religion", which might be compatible with "reasonable" principles of secular liberalism but not subordinated to the absolute authority of secular reason. Although the obligation for Habermas is not political but communicative, his claims to "responsible religion" have political implications. The so-called post-secularism makes even more challenging to adjudicate conflicts between religion and politics, leading critical religion scholars to a radical rejection of both religious and secular categories in the liberal state.

The discourse that is critical of religion as analytic category was first articulated in earlier attempts (Cantwell-Smith 1991; Smith 1982), resolutely taken later by postmodern neo-traditionalist scholars of Muslim beliefs and practices (Asad 1993). In the late 1990s and early 2000s, a variety of critical perspectives emerged in the works of a number of scholars, ranging from the call to be "self-critically aware" of how the category of religion is constructed to more radical perspectives that claim its "collapse as an analytic category" and call to abolish it altogether (e.g. Fitzgerald 2000; McCutcheon 1997). They are hardly in agreement on all points, but they all share interest in various intellectual currents that have gained academic prestige in criticizing the foundational categories and hegemonic narratives of modernity (Huss 2015). In particular, they take genealogical problematization (Foucault 1972) and grammatological deconstructionism (Derrida 1976), in combination with their application toward the critique of Orientalism (Said 1978 [1994]), and use this power/discourse framework to question and ultimately deconstruct the Western category of both religion and secularism.

Typically, religious scholars and theologians take religious belief and practice to be the most salient aspect of religion. The assumptions of a *sui generis* nature of religion as an autonomous experience of self-evidently numinous power define humans not as social and historical beings but as believers of creeds, thus effectively reducing the methodology of religious studies to esotericism and theology. Critical scholars of religion reject the theological assumptions of traditional religious studies and attempt to replace the marginalizing and alienating politics of representation in religious studies with representations grounded in a recognition of humans as historical, social, economic, and political beings (McCutcheon 1997, 22–23). In particular, they criticize the use of the label “religion” to describe “the actions of people for whom the term continues to be an alien import” (McCutcheon 2018, 16), suggesting that before the term emerged in the early modern West, people were not naturally or necessarily thinking that they are religious (Schilbrack 2020). They argue religion is an arbitrary concept that originally served specific interests and was subsequently adopted, naturalized, reified, and elevated to an analytic category by scholars of religious studies (Nongbri 2013). They finally urge to study its “contingent political creation” and its “historicization” in the context of the emergence of modern liberalism (Arnal and McCutcheon 2013, 112).

In this approach, both religion and secularism are not analytic categories and neutral descriptions of universal phenomena, but rather contingent, politically laden, discursive notions that emerged in the context of capitalism and colonialism, and shaped a variety of modern social, cultural and political practices and institutions, constructed and defined as either religious or secular (Huss 2015, 98–99). They are seen as co-constituted in a binary pair, “with neither appearing first nor one exclusively anchoring the other” (McCutcheon 2018, 13). These notions were also used to classify, describe and interpret a large variety of formations in the non-western and pre-modern world. The role of colonial encounters and research interests in non-western cultures explain why the critical discourse examines the colonial aspects of the study of religions and depends on post-colonial theories (e.g. King 1999). As the analyses are shaped by, and saturated with, such terms as imperialism, colonialism and hegemony, they are concerned with the inequality of power relations between the (Christian) Occident and the colonized or post-colonized (Muslim) Orient (Goldstein 2020, 83).

Often critical scholars do not see religion as referring to a particular social structure that operates within cultural systems, but as a pure schol-

arly “fabrication” (McCutcheon 2018), which parallels the argument that any concept and any category is invented at some historical location, “always for someone and for some purpose” (Cox 1981, 128). However, applied to the study of religion, a framework that seeks to be critical may also hold that theories of religion can be legitimately used to describe patterns of human behavior that exist independent of the scholar’s theorizing about them (Schilbrack 2020, 89–91). From this perspective, the patterns in human behavior that scholars of religion study can operate whether or not they are noticed, conceptualized, or named by scholars or by the participants themselves. In this sense, the fact that a concept like religion depends for its meaning on relations to another concept, such as secularism, does not undermine their ability separately to refer to things in the world. Similarly, the fact that critical scholars at a certain time cannot understand religion without presupposing it conceptually in a binary co-constitution with secularism does not imply that religion could not exist without secularism historically.

Remarkably, another strand of inquiries have questioned the common conceptual roots that religion and politics share with authority. In the Voegelin’s tradition of “political religion” (Voegelin 1986), the justification of authoritative acts had concerned scholars who show a number of links between mutually challenged and engendered quasi-religious performances in the totalitarian projects, which might even be far more diverse and contentious. Some decisive research findings are by now brought to light from a comparative approach to religion and politics that aims to scrutinize the entire phenomenon of totalitarian attempts to totally refashion humankind and society (Gentile 2006; Maier 2003; Gregor 2012). They may allow a more general balance between some disciplinary histories and twentieth-century despotic regimes and ideologies, such as Italian Fascism, German Nazism, Soviet Stalinism, Cultural Maoism, or religious fundamentalism.

The dynamics and range of ideological wanderings and political implications of religion cannot be reduced to a universally identified pattern of relationship to state policies. Hence, most observers and commentators seem to focus only on formalistic and factual aspects of personalities and events. Arguably, many are merely mouthpieces for either the secular Left or the religious Right. Similarly, the opinions of both politicians and religious leaders might be driven mostly by vested interests and academic scholars might be too gripped by political correctness to provide any authoritative analysis or practical solutions. Critical scholars are also too often caught in

their commendable efforts to participate in the reflexive and genealogical turns in the study of religion, and in so doing they throw religion out with the holy water of the discursive bath of postmodernist deconstructionism. Once religion and secularism are problematized, the flaws with classical liberal conceptions of religion become obvious, but once we move the religious and the secular off the table, how do we understand and explain religion in general or any religion in particular? By refusing both the political terms of liberalism and the colonial terms of discourse we are prompted to redescribe what we see happening on the ground.

The relations between religion and politics exhaust much of political philosophy and many of areas specialists. The challenge to liberal politics and critical literalism does not come, of course, from the mere presence of different religious groups in society. Yet, an intimate and experiential anthropological approach may illustrate the more general limitations of both politics and scholarship and their potential complicity in religious discourses that use effectively secular liberal space and critical discursive apparatus to advance certain religious ideological agendas. Among many possible lines of enquiry, it may be rather more profitable to think anthropologically of the political functions of religion in the different ways they are distributed and accomplished in society (Doja 2000a). At issue is not merely a substantive definition of religious politics as a distinct social object or a discrete cultural product at one or another time and place, but rather the inherent political character of religion as a function of society and culture, to which I now turn.

Religion and politics as cultural systems

Critical scholars of religion reject the centrality of belief and practice as well as the authority of believers to take their experience, or the interpretation of their experience, in explaining what religion really is (Arnal and McCutcheon 2013, 173). They insist on redescribing religious self-consciousness into some terms of social forces within various historical contexts. More explicitly, in social scientific approaches, religion and politics are often thought in a kind of real or imagined institutional isomorphism along a normative and mimetic process (Poulson and Campbell 2010).

Moving beyond fetishized historicism and institutional isomorphism, I do not refer to religion as a discursive formation that instrumentally fabricates distorted and petrified relations between people, or as a necessity for the existence of society or culture in a quasi-biological functionalist sense. While the political functions of religion are an inevitable part of the

workings of society, following Marcel Mauss, they can be thought anthropologically as a “total social fact” that may involve or “set in motion” the totality of society and its institutions (Mauss 2007, 100). I further take the political functions of religion in society much like in the anthropological analysis where myth is shown by Lévi-Strauss to be a function of the mind in a quasi-mathematical structural logic (Lévi-Strauss 1958, 1964). In this sense, religion is not merely an instrumental device used in political contexts for political purposes, but a *sui generis* total fact, closely connected to the anthropological reflections about culture and politics in society.

In popular, commonplace views, culture is often assumed to consist only of public expressions and observable traditions, which includes such things as language, arts, material products, social arrangements, and social customs that determine social behavior. In similar shared assumptions, religion is the public expression and observable manifestation in texts, rituals, symbols and institutions of what is believed to be a prior, inner, and personal experience, feeling, faith, intuition, conviction, or sentiment that defy adequate expression. Remarkably, politics is also related commonly to state or public affairs and the art of governing, which is one type or manifestation of politics but not the essence or definition, and even less the predominant form of it.

Critical scholars of religion repeatedly argue that we should not see religion as somehow removed or set apart from culture and its historical and social manifestations (McCutcheon 2018, 12–13). The religious features of a culture cannot be considered “in distinction from the things not categorized in this manner”, as typically implied by the more common conjunction of “religion and culture” or “politics and religion”, but they rather consider that “the sacred is the profane” (Arnal and McCutcheon 2013). For them, both are inevitably coterminous, while the impression of their distinction is necessarily the result of specific social actors enacting and policing divisions. This is none other than what Durkheim once argued, that is, “things set apart and forbidden” (Durkheim 1965, 65). As such, they may be studied as “that complex whole,” i.e. the anthropological notion of “culture”, which is the result of ordinary human actors arranging their worlds in ordinary ways. Hence, critical scholars reject the assumption that religion can be thought somehow to predate and pervade all human actions, rather than something presumed to be the result of human action (Arnal and McCutcheon 2013). They repeatedly level a criticism towards their peers who take the visible shape adopted by what is presumably the transcendental distinct essence of religion.

They refuse to be necessarily left with studying how the sacred manifests itself in secondary, public expressions and observable phenomena, comparing them across cultures in search of the similarities and differences that may help making inferences about the unobservable and inexpressible powers of numina (McCutcheon 2021). However, if religious things cannot be distinguished from non-religious things, this does not mean that culture and religion are identical, or the notion of “religion” has no reference in the world and no analytic value not already captured by the notion of “culture” (Schilbrack 2020, 92).

The concept of culture is central to anthropology and exploring anything anthropologically, whether politics or religion, is to consider “the impact of the concept of culture” on it and to look at it “as a cultural system” (Geertz 1973). This means that what anthropologists have come to know as “religion” cannot be reduced to the public expression of inward piety in the historical settings of art, architecture, writing, and behavior. Actually, this is the sheer domain of “cultural products” that are commonly mistaken for the anthropological notion of “culture”, which is what Edward Tylor once defined as “that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by Man as a member of society” (Tylor 1871, 1).

One of the success stories of anthropology is to have worked out the very concept of culture, which refers primarily to something that is universally shared, in the sense that all social groups are equally cultured, however differently, and that culturedness is a shared quality of all humans in groups. Fundamentally, culture is an intersubjectively shared communicative and behavioral environment that is made of a set of practices in which humans engage, about which they talk and in terms of which they act. Without these intersubjectively learned and shared ways, members of society could not interact effectively, they could not anticipate what others are going to do, interpret what they actually do, or respond appropriately.

In particular, culture is conceptualized at once at three sets of interdependent abstractions built from social relationships, behaviors, conceptions and meanings people broadly share, which are subject to change over time, but do not have always a necessarily concrete and observable existence as a thing out there. As a sociocultural system of historical creations, culture consists of cultural products, community resources, institutional arrangements and life ways of being, doing and thinking. As an *ideational system* of organized knowledge and belief, based on cultural learning of symbols and codes, culture is a kind of complex grammar

for action and thought that allows people to structure their experience and perceptions, formulate acts, and choose between alternatives. As a *cognitive system* of socially distributed and shared meanings, culture is a social process of learning, transmission, transformation and organization of knowledge of the self, the other and the world, which makes it possible to see how relationships are defined and constructed, interpreted, negotiated, and challenged in social interaction. In this sense, culture is not seen as complexes of concrete behavior patterns, but as a set of control mechanisms for the governing of behavior. Hence, scholars studying religious beliefs and practices anthropologically, to paraphrase Geertz, “don’t do systems” and end up viewing religion as a pure cultural system formulated before the analysis via a general viewpoint (Geertz 2002, 9), but explore systematic relationships within religious conceptions to be found by means of a systematic inquiry of cultural concepts.

Analogously, if religion and culture are coextensive, so are culture and politics, which again does not mean that religion and politics are identical. Insofar as culture is that “complex whole” of traditions, beliefs, practices, meanings, rules, and institutions that govern the ways of living in society according to a specific set of values, a code of behavior, a body of knowledge, and a form of organization, politics could also be argued, like culture, as a total way of living in society. In this sense, politics is a set of systematic relationships associated with the formal, complex, specialized and large-scale roles and institutions of power and authority that formulate and propagate the rules and laws of society. However, the term *politics* is related originally to the ways of doing things in public life and in community (*polis*), including the civic and civil actions (*politikos*) of prudent and sagacious people and citizens (*polites*) in the pursuit of common purposes (*politikon*).¹ In other words, politics refers primarily to the cultural ideas, values, norms, practices, and institutions that regulate how people and citizens interact in an orderly and mutually beneficial manner.

From the start, anthropology challenged the narrowly state-based models of politics and found it in the informal, generalized, and nearly socially invisible norms and relationships that do not appear political at first glance (Fortes and Evans-Pritchard 1940; Leach 1954; Gluckman 1965). In analyzing the cultural construction of gender and identity (DiLeonardo 1991; Morris 1995; Gal and Kligman 2000), the anthropology of politics examined the ways in which power is subtly infused through every

1. For further details, see “politic” in the *Oxford English Dictionary*, 3rd edition, September 2006.

aspect of culture and discourse. The diffusion of power in a globalized world is further forcing radical revisions in the anthropological conceptions of culture, religion, and politics (Marcus and Fischer 1986; Marcus 1995; Ong and Collier 2005). Anthropology has now grasped the reconceptualization of contemporary manifestations of power, which may not be distinguished from other social and cultural rules and roles. Politics and power are intimate aspects of all subjects of anthropological investigation, as they are inevitably involved in the creation and representation of cultural practices and meanings.

The political functions of religion

Religion, in particular, is infused thoroughly with specific arguments about power, as I showed elsewhere when examining a number of historical cases going from the reign of Constantine to Serbian kings and Ottoman conquerors to the ethno-religious conflicts in former Yugoslavia and contemporary politicking over great religious legacies in the Balkans (Doja 2019). More generally, the concept of religion cannot be supposed to stand uncritically as an essential, trans-historical, universally valid and stand-alone constant category, whether defined in terms of religious beliefs, symbolic meanings, or ritual practices. Anthropologists and critical religion scholars have rather argued that the comprehensive concept of religion entails the examination and unpacking of the authoritative status of religious meanings, symbols and practices, as the products of historically distinct social forms and forces. Religion is a historical construct, which is both unique to West European civilization and inseparable from politics.

The languages of other civilizations may have no terms that correspond to religion, and even in Indo-European languages a term for religion developed later in Latin *religio*, which first denoted a scrupulous attitude towards certain practices and observances (Benveniste 1969, 2.265–272). Through conceptual slippages worked out and institutionalized by the first fathers of the Christian Church, the term came to mean a reified system of observances and beliefs as an abstract entity or transcendental signifier that linked human beings to God (see Doja 2000a).

In all cases, the concept of religion is necessarily approached with a technical language, vocabulary and terminology, which are not neutral, but are the language of a particular religion, which is normally Christianity. Religion “is a Christian theological category” tied to the West and the ways in which it is imposed over non-Western societies call into question

the paradigms of knowledge and constellations of power that maintain an asymmetrical relationship between the powerful and the disempowered (King 1999, 187). The comparative study of languages and the postulate of Indo-Germanic and Semitic races, which separated Christianity from Judaism and Islam, are also argued to have developed the notion of world religions as a discourse of othering based on the assumption of “Euro-Christian supremacy” (Masuzawa 2005, 70). In this argument, despite its vague commitment to pluralistic multiculturalism, the supposed racist, colonial, and hegemonic European Christian discourse on world religions must have ultimately infiltrated ordinary language. This is a common anthropological concern as the language we use accomplishes a normative work, changing the way we think of what we call “religion”. Not only we may find ourselves asking the wrong questions, make the wrong assumptions, and arrive at the wrong conclusions, but we may also universalize, reify, and essentialize religion, often imposing religious concepts when they do not relate or even exist (Eller 2007).

Critical scholars of religion argue that the concept of religion distorts reality. Religious practitioners come to regard what they do as “religion” after they have developed a degree of cultural self-regard, causing them to see their own collective spiritual practices and beliefs in some way significantly different from those of others, which is historically what turns religion into a product of both identity politics and apologetics (Cantwell-Smith 1991, 43). More importantly, to decide how to classify any practice or institution as religious or non-religious or to distinguish between the study of religion and the study of culture or politics is not objective and neutral, but is an act of power (Fitzgerald 2017). This is true to some extent for all acts of classification and definition that are concerned with boundary issues (Durkheim and Mauss 1963), as we do not study important things in themselves, but rather the meaning systems that make the world important in certain ways.

Accordingly, critical scholars of religion have focused attention not on debates concerning the adequacy or inadequacy of this or that definition, but try to understand definitions as actively stipulative and not merely passively descriptive (McCutcheon 2015, 120). They are not interested in the definition itself but in issues of defining religion (McCutcheon 2018). They consider that the concept of religion is widely used to sort forms of social life into a shared category that distinguishes them from non-religious aspects of culture (Schilbrack 2020), which is in itself a human and mundane classificatory act.

The process by which we qualify something as religious has the usual practical effects that attends any act of naming, distinguishing, classifying and ranking in other contexts that are non-religious. The practical implications of acts of classifying and systems of classification, as with sacred/profane, are fundamental to thought-processes of category making and identity construction. They produce, reproduce, negotiate and contest discriminate meanings and hierarchical positions in the world. In particular, the definition of religion is linked normatively to legal processes, authority, and knowledge, which provide meaning, in relation to practices and institutions, at different locations in the world and at different times in history, to achieve strategic goals.

The practice of categorizing a particular “bundle of behaviors” under the rubric of religion is further argued to reproduce social formations and normative narratives overdetermined by modern political liberalism, capitalism, and colonialism (Arnal and McCutcheon 2013, 106). Moreover, an important historical, ideological and constitutional function of religion is claimed in the universalizing abstraction and construction of liberal modernity. The apparently neutral descriptive terms of religion, culture and politics are increasingly argued as power categories, or “acts of cognitive imperialism,” which in dialectical interplay construct our apprehensions and shape the formation of the secular that is part of the “mystifying project of Western imperialism” (Fitzgerald 2000, 15; 2015a, 305). In many contemporary contexts, the concept of religion is fundamentally shaped by Christian assumptions and many authors argue that religion is a modern Western invention (Cantwell-Smith 1991; Asad 1993; Dubuisson 1998; Masuzawa 2005). Therefore, it cannot be consigned *a priori* to a sphere apart from the realm of power but it is aptly seen as a product of particular power regimes (Asad 2003; Fitzgerald 2007, 2011; Stack, Goldenberg, and Fitzgerald 2015; McCutcheon 2018).

Like religion, secularism is not a merely neutral space of division between public and private realms, which according to liberal principles allows religious diversity to flourish and forbids religious opinion interference in political questions. Secularism is not characterized by religious indifference, rational ethics, political toleration, or the simple outcome of the struggle of secular reason against the despotism of religious authority. It is rather argued itself as a new religion within a complex arrangement of legal reasoning, moral practice, and political authority to discipline the private realm and conceal problematic practices of power. In particular, scholars of Muslim traditionalism consider that the explo-

sions of intolerance and the repressive measures directed at real and imagined secular opponents make secularism a locus that brings together certain behaviors, knowledges, and sensibilities in modern life (Asad 2003). In this context, the political qualities of religious meanings are mapped onto the genealogy of secularism, not merely as an illustrative but a constituent element of its primacy, which makes liberalism a world religion and neoliberalism a religious extremism (Fitzgerald 2015b).

Like the categories of religion and secularism, even the more technical term of the sacred cannot be taken uncritically to imply a quality of discrete places, objects, and times, or persons, each requiring specific conduct, but it is rather constructed as a unitary domain where an external, transcendent power is essentialized. The rites of passage, liminality and the pivoting of the sacred have then long become key concepts in the study of religion and ritual (Van Gennep 1960; Turner 1969). They provide the extraordinary processual conditions to think how ritual performance introduces an intermediate stage for transition and transformation, which produce and reproduce the sacralization of politics and the politicization of religion. The definition of the boundaries between the sacred and the profane is a political act that creates a fluid, malleable situation of liminality, in which social hierarchies may be reversed, the social order may be temporarily dissolved, and new institutions and traditions may be established.

The analytic utility of anthropological visions of liminality is further explored to reconceptualize power and politics from the perspective of the ritual performances and cultural dimensions of political and social transformations in the contemporary world (Thomassen 2014; Wydra 2015). Often cultural, symbolic, and cognitive aspects of complex political processes are considered irrational, residual, and irrelevant by the more dominant, normative, and teleological approaches of political philosophy. In turn, the expectation is that the hegemonic conceptions of politics might be modified by giving special relevance to the transformative potential of liminal situations and the permanence of the sacred in politics (Horvath, Thomassen and Wydra 2015).

Even though in connection with a social-deterministic conception of specific social constraints that generate a collective consciousness, the sacred is first conceptualized with in reference to culturally dependent classificatory systems (Durkheim and Mauss 1963). More to the point, the transformative dynamic depends upon “the pivoting of the sacred” during the liminal phase of the rites of transition, which shows character-

istically that the presence of the sacred is not an absolute attribute but rather an alternating and variable value, “brought into play by the nature of particular situations” (Van Gennep 1960, 12). The sacred pivots in a process, following a schema of shared forms, rhythms, and patterns in which the same substances, objects, actions, or persons move from one place in society to another, and are viewed alternatively as sacred in one context and profane in another.

Lévi-Strauss transformed the idea of these oppositions into a more symbolic approach and developed the notion of the sacred into a more general theory of the human mind (Lévi-Strauss 1966). In this theory, social structures have a symbolic origin and the idea of the sacred is the conscious expression of a semantic function, whose role is to enable symbolic thinking to operate despite the contradiction inherent in it. In his own words, however diverse they may be, and viewed in terms of their most general function within a system of symbols, notions of the sacred represent a “floating signifier”, which would be a “zero symbolic value”, that is, a sign marking the necessity of a supplementary symbolic content, which can be any value at all, provided it is still part of the available symbolic reserve and is filled with differential significance (Lévi-Strauss 1950, 63–64). Even though sacrality is believed to be *sui generis*, it is usually through the patterning of ritual and accompanying myths that anything can be made sacred, vested with meaning and imbued with power. Critical scholars also argue that the notion of religion cannot be defined by beliefs held in common, but by everyday practices and discourses that form common sensibilities and attitudes not necessarily connected to supposed systems of meaning (Asad 1993).

In this sense, religion cannot be taken uncritically to imply a single unifying, internally coherent, and carefully programmed set of rituals and beliefs (Eller 2007). It is rather argued as a combination and a particular cumulative expression of universal categories of social practice and discourse, which are intuitively recognized as “elementary particles” of religious behavior, and may include prayer, dancing and singing, physiological exercises, exhortations, recitation of texts, simulations, prohibitions, feasts, sacrifices, congregation, inspiration, symbols, etc. These “elementary particles” may not be essentially religious, and they may all have their secular variation. However, in specific combinations and arrangements, “all having the same general goal, all explicitly rationalized by a set of similar or related beliefs, and all supported by the same social group”, they serve as “building blocks” for a by-product that becomes specifically

religious (Wallace 1966, 75–78). Any group may circumscribe and prioritize certain elements over the others in a set of rituals and beliefs, and any particular religion may differ from any other particular religion in the cognitive selection and organization of the “building blocks” of religious behavior.

The very quest for “religion” is in itself misguided and misleading as a product of the Western ethnocentric historical and cultural perspective (Boyer 2001, 311), while the claim of an independent ontology for “religion” is a protective strategy “deployed by dominant powers to ensure their continued influence over others” (McCutcheon 1997, 177). The argument on religion as an ideological attempt to gain hegemony may also explain why both scholars and believers make the claims that they do. As a result, religion cannot be a single homogenous thing and does not require a separate explanation from politics at all.

Awareness of what is missing

The various ways in which the social and cultural functions of religion are distributed and accomplished in society show that religion plays always an important political role. As I argued elsewhere, religion shows human beings as builder of symbolic worlds whose function is to serve as a political balance to the rest of social life, along a complex process that allows for social values, religious concepts, and political ideologies to meet together in the very structure of society (Doja 2000a). I showed in particular the complex mechanisms by which social structures of kinship and religious values of morality are interrelated in the Albanian context (Doja 2011). In addition, religious conversions show the boundary work of identity politics along a symbolic process of redefinition of ethnic group boundaries in the *longue durée* of Albanian history (Doja 2000b). What we take for religion does not only promotes the transmission of religious meanings, practices and traditions by exploiting episodic or doctrinal memory processes to fill individual psychological and emotional needs, provide explanations of the origins of cultural institutions, and soothe immediate problems. It is also a general organizing schema of spiritual knowledge providing the source of rules, norms, motivations, and sanctions. Ultimately, it indoctrinates people into a social cohesion that perpetuate power domination or provide utopian motivations of rebellion, liberation and social transformation. In this sense, there are no specific aspects of religion, which may interact one way or another with politics and culture, and which modern political theorists may misunderstand or ignore, but religion itself is

rather a *sui generis* total fact of that complex whole of politics and culture.

One reason for the importance of this topic in political theory and political anthropology is that religions often make strong claims on people's allegiance. Simply put, it can be argued that to get the belief and authority granted in religious representation, religious leaders need followers who believe in the holy word, just as to get the power granted in political representation, politicians need voters who believe in the promised policy. From this standpoint, the political readjustment of religion, as I showed more specifically in the case of Bektashism (Doja 2006a, 2006b, 2006c), may show how the transfer from the religious to the political domain points to an ideological dimension that might be hidden both behind categorical and authoritative doctrines and behind revolutionary and liberating discourses.

The deeply political significance of religion becomes even more apparent when looking at contemporary societies, stuck in an important crossroad that requires making bold choices, regarding the place of religion in the public sphere. This is even more pressing as they are faced with an increasing place that Islam seems to have taken both in Western and Southeastern Europe (Abazi 2016; Doja 2017, 2018), just as in current regional and international affairs. In turn, this might trigger an even closer attention to the politics of influence and domination in religious and ecclesiastic disguise. In particular, a colorful display of the political functions of religion can be witnessed in the increasing competition between different political and religious attempts to obtain people's following. Arguably, what might be called an unholy alliance between religious officials and intellectual elites to gain political advantage by manipulating the souls and the votes of ordinary people in liberal democracies is only paralleled by the proselytizing policies of radical religious organizations and institutions that eagerly challenge traditional understandings of religious worldviews to promote radical religionism.

As I showed elsewhere, a situational approach may reveal the discriminatory and stereotyping ideologies that lie behind the categorizing processes of religious affiliations in local, regional or international contexts (Doja 2008). In particular, historical reconstructions of religious heritage are often used and misused to forward or contest various claims to negotiate or challenge ethno-political agendas (Doja 2019). They may show the ways in which historical, cultural and religious heritage is entangled in identity politics, which could provide new insights to a better understanding of the politics of religion both in everyday life and in international affairs (Doja 2018).

More importantly, from the perspective of political anthropology, the definition of people's religious identity and affiliation is often a political issue for either scholars or entrepreneurs of social groups, ethnic minorities or religious communities where any individual is deliberately taken to belong. Therefore, when we think and talk about religion, we realize we are dealing above all with a technocratic class of religious leaders and officials that are like politicians and patrons of power and centralized authority. Religious advocates often claim both religious and moral heritage by selectively drawing upon history and politics to infuse the everyday life of ordinary people with claims of legitimacy and belonging. As the case of Bektashi leaders illustrates (Doja 2006c), the way they read religious scriptures and tell sacred stories significantly affects the escalation of religious aggressive policies aiming to radicalize religious belonging and identity. It is exactly under these conditions that the essentialism and fundamentalism of the so-called religious values are reaching their peak.

The question is not to ignore nor to accept the plethora of religious voices in the name of political correctness, neither to avoid nor to monitor the diversity of these voices in the public sphere of the West. In this diverse field, political anthropology may be useful to refine the meaning of the politics of religion in connection with the social organization and the social transformation of contemporary societies. Arguably, a political anthropological approach to religious discourses, reinvigorated by the critical activism of postmodernist scholars, may uncover a hidden ideological intent in support of the politics of liberation theology to subvert the standards of secular liberal democracy and modernity. It may also reveal the instrumental ideologies that lie both behind the discourses on religious and moral values and behind the categorizing processes of religious affiliations in local, regional or international contexts.

Ultimately, what local people hold for their religious identity and history must be treated as a discursive ideological construction, for we can reveal its possible situational relevance or its sociological and political determinants. To build a relatively autonomous analysis of religious discourses, it is necessary to study the context that produces such ritualized discourses and practices, to convert the interpretations of the actors into data to be interpreted, and to incorporate in the subject of study as much their attempts to organize a memory as their strategies to balance or reverse power relations. Far from politicizing and ethnicizing religious issues, a critical and analytic approach in the perspective of political anthropology is ought to reveal and de-essentialize the hidden ideologi-

cal undercurrents of discourses mobilized around religious identity and political projects.

Conclusion

While analyzing the contentious relationships between religion and politics, specific attention is paid in this article to a contrastive account from the perspectives of political philosophy and political anthropology. Philosophical problems raised by the various ways in which religion and politics may intersect have been important for the standard view of religious restraint within the liberal tradition, for the generated backlash of a new traditionalism, and for the new critical liberal tradition that is occupying the conceptual middle ground. They are argued here as part of the patronizing attitudes of Western scholarship that are echoed in the radical discourses of political and religious leaders. They may appear unusual and difficult to grasp, if one schematically employs categories developed within the political theory of liberalism.

In turn, an articulate analysis of the main philosophical reflections about the relations between religion and politics, linked to a careful examination and ideological contextualization in the perspective of political anthropology, can result in a more critical understanding of the political functions of religion as a single cognitive, culture-dependent set of systematic relationships. This article could not possibly exhaust such a rich and complex topic, but it offers a localized account of a specific issue that may be an indication of the unholy alliance between the politics of religion and religious entrepreneurs. I argued for a critical approach to the politics of religion by focusing on the political discourses and processes that define religious advocates in liberal democracies. In this context, the performative practice of certain religious discourses often construct a distorted representation of religion, which is used increasingly as a justification to use violence or to occupy the public liberal space, or both. Finally, the side effect of this situation seems to be a potential underestimation of the pressing problems at both local, regional and global levels.

In methodological terms, I tried to engage with a comparative analysis and problematization of certain political functions of religion as a way into new insights to understand and challenge the ideology and hegemony of the politics of religion. The aim of this article was not to provide a new account of religion and politics, but to examine how the political functions of religion may define a certain functional modularity of the politics of religion.

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