Religion and democratisation: when and how it matters

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EDITORIAL

Religion and democratisation: when and how it matters

Rationale

This special issue aims to contribute to the growing literature on the role of religion in democratisation by focusing on state–religion interactions. Although the following articles focus on the relations between religion and democracy, they also add to the broader field of religion's influence on politics. Our goal is not to assert that religion is the significant factor in the transition to democracy. Actually, most existing surveys demonstrate that the GDP, level of education, urbanisation, and the existence of a middle class are more relevant triggers of regime transition. Religion, however, may influence the building of new institutions, the legal status of civil liberties, and patterns of political participation—all significant factors when it comes to consolidation of democracy.

To capture the specific role of religion in democratic or political changes, it is necessary to move away from the dichotomy of state and religion and explore more deeply the interactions between state and religious organisations and actors. The often-assumed antagonism or tensions between the two represents only one form of interaction, which may be used or combined with competition, adaptation, and cooperation. Consequently, the following papers will examine the roles of multiple actors and their different levels and agencies within the state, religious associations, clergy, religious adherents, diasporas, and purveyors of education. In this regard, this special issue breaks from the dominant approaches in political science which focus on either the strategies of political elites during periods of democratisation or on the nature of the authoritarian state. It sheds light on the nature of state interactions—not only with religious ideas and factors, but also with religious institutions—therefore bringing the state back in the study of democratisation.

Religion, democracy and democratisation

In both domestic and international politics, religion is often depicted as a tool of political opposition. At the national level, it is presented as an alternative ideological repertoire to the failed, secular state. For example, the state-centered approach to the politicisation of Islam, arising from comparative politics discourse, demonstrates the influence of authoritarianism on the instrumentalisation of Islam as a resource for political opposition (Nasr 2001: 3). Cultural Duality Theory and State Culture Theory also envision a parallel power structure of state and religion and expand upon this model by proposing that a dualist power structure occurs when an Islamist movement is formed in reaction to state ideology and policies (Moaddel 2002: 373–74). These theories posit the existence of a rigid, stark opposition between the state and religious groups (as in Iran) or religious values (as in Egypt). Of course, there is a wealth of anthropological research on Islam and democracy that brings more contextualised and historicised analysis and, therefore, invalidates this
assumed narrative of polarisation (Ahmad 2009, Hefner 2011). Nonetheless, this anthropological research is rarely considered by mainstream scholars of politics.

Similarly, at the international level, most studies frame religion as a resurgent ideology used almost exclusively as a tool for supranational political opposition (Roy 2004: 5; Bayat 2007: 10). While these approaches explain how religion is efficiently constructed as an ideological tool for political opposition, they rarely explain why.

When examining the influence of religion on democracy, the results are even more inconclusive. For example, 1980s literature on the conditions for transition to democracy in Latin America and Eastern Europe did not give religion a significant role (see Lipset 1959; Rustow 1970; Przeworski 1986; Przeworski 2000; Carothers 2002; Lijphart 1997). In contrast, several recent studies have emphasised the positive role of churches in East Germany, Poland and South Africa’s transitions (Stout 2008; Hong 2009, Fawcett 2000; Kunkler and Leininger 2009; Woodbury 2012). There is also significant work from sociologists of religion invalidating the assumption of the decline of religion in modernisation both in the West and in other parts of the world. (Turner 2010; Turner and Salemink 2015). Other studies focus more on the positive influence of some specific religious traditions, such as Protestantism in western democracies (Tusalem n.d.: 90) or Catholicism in Latin America (Philpott 2004).

This ambiguous role of religion vis-à-vis democracy in much of this research reveals the serious limitations of focusing solely on unified religious traditions or civilisational blocs as explanatory factors. Progress in understanding the systematic impact of religion on democratisation will require alternative frameworks more sensitive to the contextual factors and actor agency through with religions shape political outcomes and vice versa. As such, we have chosen to focus on the nature of state–religion relations and its consequences on political development. Specifically, we pay attention to the gradual processes of change that can either generate novel institutions over long periods of time or produce unexpected breakdowns of institutions at critical thresholds. We also analyse how shared worldviews, cognitive scripts, and normative templates may interact with discursive practices to influence institutions and institutional. In other words, by investigating religious institutions as part of nation-building and state policies, this special issue shows that political culture influences not only discourses and communication styles, but also material interests and organisations.

**State–religion relations**

Our study hopes to contribute to this debate by suggesting that relations between the state and religion, and the actors that contest them, are the central path through which religion impacts moments of potential democratisation. This requires a shift toward social and institutional analysis. Most of the approaches above operate on the implicit dichotomy of a secular state versus political groups that use religion as an oppositional tool at both the national and international levels. An institutional approach shifts the perspective from a polarised state–religion focus to complex sets of interactions between the two spheres, including adaptation, cooperation, and competition. It considers state–religion relations an element conditioning the democratisation process, because of its impact on the behavior of actors with various goals, both sacred and profane. It is also important to note that each process from secularisation to democratisation is not irreversible and actually can trigger opposite effects such as de-secularisation or de-democratisation (Ahmad 2011). In other words, no religious tradition is anti-democratic per se, but certain forms of state–religion interactions are anti-democratic—such as regulating, restricting, or privileging religious activities.
This special issue is the first systematic attempt to compare the impact of state–religion relations on periods of democratisation across countries and religions. Depending on the features of the state–religion interactions, some of these effects are positive while others are negative.

In “Disciplining Religion: The Role of the State and its Consequences for Democracy”, Cesari contends that the state has a crucial role in building political cultures propitious to democracy, especially in postcolonial countries. The main reason is that in these countries the state built the nation, sometimes from scratch. Hence, it played a decisive role in cementing the status of religion in the new national cultures. She argues that the positive or negative role of religion can be analysed in the “magnetic” field created by the interactions of state, religious, and political actors, all competing to define religion, politics, and/or democracy. She shows how new states have built national habitus that plays a decisive role in the politicisation of religion and describes a particular hegemonic type of state–religion relations as well as its negative connection to democracy. Hegemon and religious nationalism negatively affect civil liberties and exacerbate social hostility, thereby impeding democracy. In this regard, hegemony is a national feature of religion that has regional and international political impact. Different modes of state accommodation of religion can coexist with democracy, provided all religions are socially legitimate. In addition, religious actors and parties are most likely to influence democracy during the transition phase. Finally, the evolution of these parties seems also influenced by a certain type of state–religion relationship.

Along the same lines, Sultan Tepe in “Contesting Political Theologies of Islam and Democracy in Turkey”, provides an in depth approach to the evolving nature of the hegemonic state in Turkey and how it limits, among other factors, the democratisation of Turkey. In “Religion, State and Sovereign Democracy in Putin’s Russia”, John Anderson provides an example of religious nationalism in the case of the state and the Russian Orthodox Church for the sake of mutual interests but not democracy.

By contrast, Jonathan Fox’s article “State–Religious Competition in Western Democracies: 1990 to 2014” reminds us that democracy does not require separation of state and religion. He describes the multiple religious economies that characterise Western democracies, where secular and religious political forces compete to influence government religion policy. Fox measures change over time in 117 distinct government religion policies in 27 Western democracies between 1990 and 2014, and uses the Religion and State round 3 (RAS3) dataset to find that, overall, governments have added new policies, especially those limiting the religious institutions and practices of religious minorities.

It appears that religion can also have a positive or negative effect in the critical phase of democratic transition. On the positive side, David Buckley in his “Religious Actors and Constitution Drafting: The Philippines and the Arab Awakening in Comparative Perspective” introduces different modes of relations between state institutions and religious and secular actors and, hence, broadens the paradigm inclusion–moderation that usually focuses only on the overture policy of the state vis-à-vis religious parties. Buckley’s argument shows how the political competency of religious actors is actually shaped by the history of their interactions with secular agents at large and not only the state, and by the degree of trust that all actors have developed toward each other prior to the transition. This may explain the success of the Tunisian transition and the failure of the Egyptian one. The political future of religious parties and their resilience is also related to the nature of state–religion interactions. Accommodation leads to decline of religious parties but increases social relevance of religious actors as discussed by Felipe Mantilla for Latin America (“Church–State Relations and the Decline of Catholic Parties in Latin America”)
and Catherine Kelly and Amadou Diallo for Senegal (“Sufi Turuq and the politics of democratisation in Senegal”).

Importantly, all articles implicitly or explicitly emphasise that the role of religion is better understood when not limited to institutions and political parties. In this sense, it is part of the civic and national culture, and requires a more historical and dialogic approach to religion and politics than the scope of this special issue.

References


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