From Religion to Politics

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Abstract

The concordance of religion and politics is one of the most ideal situations in a certain state. While politics concerns itself with the management of the often-hostile environment of government activities and affairs, religion must be on the background in order to pacify the tension. The only problem is that whether or not an existing culture is willing to accept the fusion of these two or just be contented with its complete separation in order to assure absolute power among the governing bodies. The following discussion will be an analysis on the impact of religion and politics among the members of the society by presenting the principles of philosophers like Aristotle, Alexis de Tocqueville, and Jean Jacques Rousseau.

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Aristotle's Polity: Anthropological and Economic Dimensions

Aristotle's view regarding a social organization's form of government is based on two types of comparison. First is the relationship between the city-state (polis) and a living organism wherein the survival of the former is dependent on natural human tendencies to join with others in some activity or endeavor. At the same time, the city-state's existence is subject the needs of the citizens to produce and manage material wealth and supplies in order to support their everyday living. As an example, a couple decides to enter marriage and raise a family. The family then becomes part of a community which must have its own system of government that will be responsible in managing its securities and resources in order to sustain peace and harmony among its members. The second is the comparison of the statesman or political leader to a craftsman through the process of material, formal, efficient, and final causes. The material cause is like the clay being used by the craftsman or potter (efficient cause) to create a vase (formal cause) which the purpose of being a liquid container (final). This concept of this analogy is being adopted by the constitutional forms of government in countries like the United States, Peru, and Zimbabwe. For example, the household as well as economic groups that form a community serve as the material cause albeit the government should still remain focused on the concerns of its individual citizens. The citizens are being guided by an organized structure referred to as the constitution which is representative of Aristotle's formal cause. According to Aristotle, the constitution is not merely a written list of rules but is rather the identity of the city-state and the way of life of its members. The efficient cause is the government body whose role is to ascertain the orderliness within the community and whose quality is determined by the

constitution. The final cause in this example is the welfare of the citizens or the main objective embodied in the constitution (Goodman & Talisse, 2008, p. 13).

The aforementioned political theories of Aristotle still exist in today's modern democracy. However, certain problems do arise in its implementation such as the disobedience of laws. Furthermore, corrupt public officials continue their quest for power and self-serving interests thus affecting the lives of the citizens who are unable to gain maximum benefit from state resources. These are the very reasons why Aristotle's theories must always be kept in mind in order to avoid the influences of law disobedience and government corruption. Aristotle recommended the strict and consistent enforcement of laws so that the citizens may see that the government is determined in imposing these laws and thus conforming to them.

Aristotle and the Judeo-Christian Tradition

Aristotle's political views regarding the origins and social relationships of human beings share similarities with the Judeo-Christian tradition to some extent. This is particularly related with the general idea of moral behavior in constantly seeking for justice, truthfulness, obeying the laws, and imposing penalties or sanctions to those who would violate the laws (Lewis, 2006). Aristotle's political theories have been influenced by the Greco-Roman views of laws and government and they are specified under the following (Brennan, 2011):

1. The citizens of the state are entitled the rights to govern by voting, public debating, formulating laws, serving on juries, and holding office;

2. Laws must be established in accordance with the world's nature and therefore must be guided by reason and intellect and not irrational belief arising from ignorance or fear;

3. To secure the state's democracy, it must have three branches: the legislative branch to make the laws, the executive branch to approve the laws, and the judicial branch to settle legal disputes; and

4. Every state should have a written law.

These aforementioned Greco-Roman views were basically created on the perspective of democracy or the political orientation wherein the supreme power lies in a body of citizens who can elect people to represent them. This concept of democracy was also affirmed by the Judeo-Christian tradition that believes in the following three qualities of every person (Brennan, 2011):

1. created by God and therefore has worth and dignity;

2. has the ability to choose between right and wrong; and

3. has the responsibility to help those who are in need.

The United States is a nation that declares how the Judeo-Christian tradition became an important part and is still playing a significant role in the establishment of its identity in terms of its Republic government. This tradition is manifested in the Declaration of Independence which contains phrases and words such as "Nature's God, Creator, Supreme Judge of the World, and divine Providence." Even the phrase "In God We Trust" is placed in dollar bills in order to show how its citizens value the quality of having a stead mind which is achieved by resting the mind, body, and spirit from all the stress and pressures of work and responsibilities. This completely affirms Aristotle's view about happiness in accordance with excellence or virtue as the goal in every person's life. The two kinds of virtues according to Aristotle are moral virtues and intellectual virtues. Moral virtues lead to strength of character as the individual makes it a habit to intentionally perform good deeds. Intellectual virtues, on the other hand, are gained through education and are reinforced by practicing theoretical contemplation and practical judgment. He

further stressed that since virtues brings out the best qualities of a person, that individual is able to live harmoniously among the members of the community and is therefore able to gain pleasure in life because a virtuous person is blessed with many good things such as wealth, friends, political power, children, and even a good birth (Lewis, 2006).

Aristotelian Democracy versus Modern Democracy

The concept of democracy was described by Aristotle as a political orientation wherein the government is ruled the poor. According to him, this is because poverty predisposes an individual to become virtuous in his quest to earn for financial support or acquiring wealth, unlike the wealthy class during his time who were more concerned with the pursuit and preservation of honor or military glory (Lewis, 2006). This concept has evolved into what is now called "modern democracy." According to theorists, albeit the word democracy, which meant rule by the people, originated from the Greeks, the latter did not provide sufficient representation as to the sense of the word, thus the premises and practices of ancient democracy are entirely different as compared with those being adopted by the modern democrats. Furthermore, the Greeks were deemed to have little or no idea as to the rights of men since political participation was only allowed to a small minority of adult inhabitants (Birch, 2007). Former United States president Woodrow Wilson was also a critique of Aristotle's concept of democracy because its ancient principles tend to impede the growth of a nation. He does not agree particularly with the idea that democracy must only be intended for the poor or the many but instead it should serve the people as whole, thus calling the Aristotelian concept as impossible to adopt in the modern democracy. According to Wilson, democracy must continue to evolve depending on the nation's development of history or must always be subject to change base on logical arguments (Frost & Sikkenga, 2003, pp.554-556).

Wilson does have a point about in his argument regarding the concept of modern democracy. People must learn from the lessons of history and one of those lessons is that change is very much inevitable. For a nation to ignore this reality or to always cling to ancient philosophies is similar to taking for granted the opportunity towards progress. While Aristotle's concept of democracy may be regarded as insufficient for the modern times, still it may serve as a guide especially when it comes to the ideals of virtue especially since the political arena is constantly dealing with issues of corruption. According to Wilson, adopting modern democracy does not necessarily mean the rejection of Aristotle's ideas but rather it is a way of showing that one has fully grasped what ancient democracy truly means and with that enlightenment comes the freedom to "make further permanent advances" (Frost & Sikkenga, 2003, pp.554) in the government.

What is the Best Form of Government?

Choosing the best form of government greatly depends on the culture and history of the nation as well as the way of life of citizens. Yet so far when it comes to justice and the welfare of the majority, Democracy can be deemed as the best form of government for certain reasons. First, the right to vote it endows to citizens serves as protection of the latter from the abuse of corrupt government officials who would tend to abuse their position. Of course this may not be a guarantee that the chosen public leader may be an upright one until he is able to serve his term, but the mere fact that citizens are able to make a choice as a majority provides enough advantage in deciding which electoral candidate can be the suitable public leader. When it comes to Aristotle's however, scholars have conflicting views and assumptions as to what form of government the philosopher considers best.

According to researchers, Democracy is not particularly in Aristotle's best list but instead he favors another form of government which is Aristocracy. Although Aristotle never mentioned directly that he does consider Aristocracy as the best regime, scholars drew their assumption from what he described as "the rule of the few-that all but the virtuous and those of leisure are citizens" (Bates, 2003, p.98). There have also been assumptions that Aristotle was either a critic or a partisan supporter of the Democratic government based on his writings about it in the Nichomachean Ethics, which is considered to be his best work on the philosophical study of moral values and rules. But the truth is that scholars have been confused as to the real interpretation as to how Aristotle viewed democracy because there was a point where the latter mentioned it as a deviant regime and therefore cannot be a suitable form of government. To add more to this confusion, there was also another portion in the Nichomachean Ethics where Aristotle appears to be praising Democracy albeit in a quite restrained manner. A deeper analysis led scholars to believe that the aforementioned conflicting statement made by Aristotle in his ethical work was the result of his intention to please a certain group of audience. This audience, in particular, were those considered as students of politics and therefore future national leaders and lawmakers. Perhaps Aristotle knew that he since he was trying to gain the favor of a very serious and conservative audience who tend to be resistant to the concept of democracy, then praising it an explicit manner would not be a very wise move (Bates, 2003).

Alexis de Tocqueville

Tocqueville's fascination with the American way of life led him to declare that religion is the first of American political institutions. This was after he had witnessed how orderly the democratic system was in America as compared with Europe's democracy which veered more toward a state of lawlessness and disorder. He believed that religion was responsible for the

continued social order among American citizens who were recognized for their strong sense of equality and value for hard work. Tocqueville also believed that the American philosophy of economic improvement is inspired and motivated by their deep orientation on God's teachings thus making them virtuous (Lerner & Schmuhl, 1994).

The American government serves as a good example in demonstrating the combination of religion and politics. It is only fitting for Tocqueville to regard religion as the nation's first political institution because of the way it has influenced the American way of life particularly in running the government. In fact, he refers to the Americans as having a strong civil spirit which, though sometimes quite irritable due to excessive patriotism, is a lot better than indifference which is commonly seen among Europeans. This is why religion cannot be regarded as the first political institution in European democracy since the latter is more oriented with social class, power, and authority. This was even confirmed by Tocqueville himself who declared that unlike in America where the people are very much united, in Europe (France in particular) the spirit of religion and the quest for freedom of individuals tend to go in different directions (Hoelz & Graham, 2006). In Europe, only the intellectuals and those of noble birth were given the recognition of authority thus leading to the absence of enthusiasm among the members of the lower class while in America, the freedom to make decisions is granted to all citizens whether rich or poor. Discrimination among social groups is so apparent in Europe that members of the clergy were not granted position in the government nor were they given direct governmental support.

Jean-Jacques Rousseau on Civil Religion versus Alexis de Tocqueville on Republican Religion

Tocqueville developed a model on the concept of religion in relation to politics which he referred to as republican religion. But there was another French political writer and philosopher, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, who also came up with an almost similar model called civil religion. Rousseau's civil religion is composed of principles which aimed to use religion for the political purpose of promoting unity by compelling citizens to carry out their duties as members of the state. Some of the principles embodied in this concept are the "belief in a just and providential God and the afterlife" (Schultz, West, & Maclean, 1999, p. 53). Likewise, Tocqueville's republican religion also aimed to promote unity among the citizens as well as the belief in a supreme being. But unlike civil religion which used religious principles for political ends, republican religion viewed these as the foundation of the political system. Another difference between civil and republican religion was the manner in which they originated. Civil religion was created out of Rousseau's theories while writing about the prerequisites of modern polity while republican religion was formulated by Tocqueville from basically observing the American way of life during his visit to the country (Cristi, 2001).

In today's modern world, it is almost difficult to assess if religion still holds the same influence as it had before on people. Arab countries, for instance, have many areas where uprisings and debates are very frequent and one may doubt whether the concept of civil religion is still effective in pacifying these conflicts. Al Majalla magazine's editor-in-chief Adel Al Toraifi (2011) expressed concerns regarding the long-term impact of Arab protests particularly those that call for freedom of expression, democracy, and human rights which the traditional political system is lacking. In 1992, the "Egypt between a religious and civil state" debate was conducted and was participated in by groups form the pro-religious and pro-civil society groups. Ma'mun al-Hudaybi, one of the sheikhs of Islamic movements, declared that "the Muslim

Brotherhood is completely against a religious state and is calling for a civil state," (Toraifi, 2011, p.1) albeit in accordance with the "Islamic Sharia Law. In such case, civil religion may be applicable if the citizens are united and willing to accept change. Otherwise, it will take several years of conflicts or even bloodshed before finding out if democracy will indeed prevail.

Tocqueville on the Political Functions of Religion

In Tocqueville's *Democracy in America*, there are at least three functions of religion. First, it brings forth solidarity which leads to the union of interests and purpose among the members of the state. Second, religion nurtures the principles of right and wrong as well as the moral education of the citizenry. In so doing, religion determines the belief or sentiment as well as the traditions shared by the American people. It also influences members of the family and in effect regulates the state itself therefore making it the foundation of America's democratic government. However, Tocqueville cautioned that religion must always maintain political neutrality because this is one way of continuing to show its elevated nature to the public eye and wield acceptance from the majority. In other words, if religion becomes completely absorbed by politics, the public will easily take it for granted. Lastly, religion also ascertains that the people will not abuse their freedom in the excessive pursuit of desire or material things (Hoelz & Graham, 2006).

One of the advantages of democracy is that it allows supreme power over the citizens, one of which is the freedom of decision making. At the same time, this can also pose as a disadvantage especially if one or some members of the citizenry are not intellectually capable enough to participate in the decision-making process. This is where the role of religion comes in which plays as a remedy or prevention of such disadvantages. Religion serves as a guide in

making sure that the values of the citizens are intact thus making the responsible members of the state.

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