On the Heuristic Value of the Concept of Political Religion and Its Application

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The usefulness of the concept of Political Religions (PR) in the modern world depends first of all on the definition of the term ‘religion’. Over a century ago Emile Durkheim established among sociologists and anthropologists the concept that religion consists essentially of the organisation of rites and rituals formed around a belief system aimed at buttressing social solidarity and morality. Thus, any strong ideology that was fully articulated and expressed socially might be considered a religion. This is the definition most commonly employed by those who use the concept of PR.

A more traditional definition is used by the sociologist Rodney Stark, who concludes that ‘religion consists of explanations based on supernatural assumptions and including statements about the nature of the supernatural and about ultimate meaning’. More simply, religions are based on belief in a God or Gods who have revealed themselves in revelations believed to come from God or the Gods themselves.1 This is the traditional definition of transcendental, supernatural or theistic religion (or what Eric Voegelin called überweltliche Religion), obviating any valid concept of purely world-immanent or secular religion.

Proponents of the Durkheimian approach point to ‘Godless’ Asian religions, such as élite forms of Buddhism, Taoism or Confucianism, which do not embrace the concept of a God or Gods but instead posit a kind of general mystical essence which underlies reality and gives it meaning. Stark’s response is that the Godless forms of Asian religions are merely the exception which proves the rule, being elitist doctrines based on rarified meditation and mysticism, whereas the ordinary forms of these religions as practiced by the vast majority of their adherents are elaborately polytheistic – religions based on Gods.2
Yet it cannot be denied that, as Emilio Gentile has pointed out so clearly,\(^3\) the revolutionary ideologies and regimes of the twentieth century sacralised politics in a special and elaborate manner, albeit with varying degrees of exclusiveness that made different kinds of accommodation with ‘real’ religion. Can quite different forms of sacralised politics and theistic religions all be termed religions? None of the putative PRs have ever claimed officially to be religions (as Gentile notes), but is it analytically, conceptually and heuristically useful or advantageous to think of them as such? Eric Voegelin was one of the first analysts to use this approach with precision, but later changed his mind, concluding that religion and PR were distinct and should not be conflated. The concept of political religion, like generic fascism, does not refer to an absolutely existing empirical entity but is simply an analytical concept and heuristic device, whose validity and utility depends on the care and precision with which it is employed.

The divine monarchies of the ancient Middle East derived their authority from transcendent Gods, in most cases more than one. Such state systems should, however, be more properly called caesaropapist than theocratic. Ancient Jews lived under a variety of systems; the early form tended towards theocracy, the monarchies either towards caesaropapism or the politicisation of established religion. Rome subsequently exhibited broad religious tolerance, but the notion advanced by some that it developed the more limited form of civil religion is exaggerated, though Rome did anticipate certain aspects of the latter.

The growth of Christianity and Islam brought further differentiation. Late in the fourth century Christianity became the official religion of the Roman state, a relationship that would continue in predominantly Christian societies until the American Republic disestablished church and state 14 centuries later. Christianity has been perhaps the most ‘transpolitical’ of religions, having more or less flourished amid the widest variety of political forms (sometimes even including Islamic and other oriental despotisms). The Catholic West tended generally towards constantly mutating forms of caesaropapism (with an occasional effort at theocracy), but soon introduced the doctrine of the two spheres, with dual – though by no means fully separate – sovereignties of church and state. This division, though at no time intended to be absolute, provided one key to the subsequent development of Western pluralism and, eventually, of more limited and representative government.\(^4\)

The Orthodox East tended towards caesaropapism. A peculiar kind of caesaropapism was introduced in Protestant kingdoms by the sixteenth-century Reformation, but by then Western institutions of pluralism, the