

# RELIGION AND NATIONAL IDENTITY IN HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

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## I

Throughout history, at least until the end of the eighteenth century, religion generally served as the basis of national identity and thereby was often made subservient to the political interests of the state. In the course of much of Christian history, as with the history of religion generally, it was the state, the empire, or the monarchy that prevailed over the religion of the nation or empire. Throughout much of this history, religion and the state were inextricably intertwined, but in a way that allowed religion to give sanctity to the state as personified in the investiture of its rulers. This bond between religion and the state readily served to give sanction to the state, the empire, or the nation in the pursuit of its own self-interests.

From earliest history, so close was the bond between religion and the state that the two could not be separated, even conceptually. The church was the state and the state was the church.<sup>1</sup> Religious and political groupings were indistinguishable, which may be seen today wherever religion and nationhood or nationalism are so interwoven as to be interdependent.

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<sup>1</sup> See, for example, T. M. Parker, *Christianity and the State in the Light of History* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1955).

This interdependence of the religion and the state was perhaps most dramatically expressed in the ancient world and in Asia--the latter as the seat of all of the major world religions--in the intimate relationship enjoyed between kingship and priesthood. Here the religious head and the political head of the community were one; the priest was a magistrate and the magistrate was a priest.<sup>2</sup> The king or ruler held a sacred office, not merely one of civil or political authority, and a priest was an officer of the state as well as of the religion. Within the structure of the state or nation was an integrated system in which ruler, clergy, political decrees, religious ideology, religious norms of behavior, and coercive governmental power were all combined to maximize the stability of the social order. Identification of political rulers with divinity was widespread. From earliest history, religion was a matter for the community as a whole and not the individual. As one prominent scholar of ancient religion expressed it, ancient religion was "the product of a nation" and was typically a "people's religion."<sup>3</sup>

Since ancient and tribal religions recognized no distinction between the religious and the secular, the same authority that promulgated laws regulating relations between persons promulgated laws concerning a person's obligations to the supernatural. This authority was the king; and although the performance of the sacrifice and other rituals could be delegated to the priests, the source of all law was the head of the state. For example, the Code of Hammurabi (king of Babylonia), imposed penalties for homicide, larceny, perjury, and other crimes; at the same time, it regarded the fees of surgeons and the wages of masons and tailors and prescribed rules for the inheritance of property. But the same Code catalogued the gods and assigned them their places in the divine hierarchy.

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<sup>2</sup>. This phenomenon is treated at some length in a classic work on the subject: Henri Frankfort, *Kingship and the Gods: Study of Ancient Near Eastern Religion as the Integration of Society and Nature* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978).

<sup>3</sup>. C. J. Bleeker, "The Religion of Ancient Egypt," in *Historia Religionum: Religions of the Past*, ed. J. Jouco Bleeker and Geo Windengren (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1969), 41.

Identification of political rulers with divinity was widespread. In ancient Babylonia, the king was divine, as also in the case of Ur, who called himself the son of a goddess. Similarly, Sargon of Akkad gave himself the title of "god," and Sargon's son, Sennacherib, is referred to in the inscriptions of the period as "the god of the city of Akkad." As in ancient Babylonia, the Pharaoh of Egypt was no ordinary mortal, but came to be regarded as a god incarnate and the channel through which all blessings came to the people.

Divinity came to be ascribed to the emperors of Rome; thus, the emperor was not mere temporal functionary, but a sacred ruler. Numerous kings in India were worshipped as incarnations of Vishnu. In Japan, the emperor was called *Kamisama*, the very term used for deity or for beings possessing sacred power. Because of their reputedly close relationship to heaven, Chinese rulers were given the title *Tzu* (Son of Heaven), the human counterpart of *Shang Ti* (Sovereign Ruler).

This blending of religion with the state has also occupied a large place in the history of Christianity, in all three of its major branches--Roman Catholicism, Eastern Orthodoxy, and Protestantism. Often there is the tendency, however, to overlook the fact that until the endorsement of Christianity by the Emperor Constantine in A.D. 313, Christianity knew only a radical separation of the church from the state, a period during which there was not only institutional separation but open hostility on the part of the state toward the church, a situation not unlike the status of religion in many socialist countries in recent decades.

During the Middle Ages, church and state were held together by common self-interests, in which each served the other. With the concept of the Christian state, *corpus Christianum*, throughout the Middle Ages to be a citizen of the Holy Roman Empire was to be a member of the church, and to be a member of the church was the foundation of one's citizenship in the Empire. For centuries, in Europe as elsewhere, religion was identified with the state and intimately associated with its national identity. For this reason, to be a dissenter in religion was to be in conflict with the interests of the state; it was to be guilty of both heresy and sedition simultaneously. In the Christian West, non-Christians, such as Jews, were therefore widely viewed as aliens without any real citizenship. Hence, Jews for centuries came to be treated as outcasts or pariahs without

human status or any real civil rights, enemies of the church and enemies of the state. In such an arrangement, collaboration between church and state served their mutual interests.

By and large the close collaboration between church and state was primarily one that resulted in the subservience of the church to the state and not the state to the church. Even avowedly Christian monarchs sought to control the church and make it serve the interests of the empire or the state. This pattern came to prevail whether the form of Christianity was Roman Catholic, Eastern Orthodoxy, or Protestantism. With the expansion of colonial empires in the New World, Africa, and Asia the subjugation of the church to the interests of the state continued, and, indeed, escalated. Admittedly, all too often Christian missions from the West served the interest of Western colonialism.

The subordination of religion to national interests followed this pattern in Protestant countries in Europe in which setting the term "Erastianism" was coined to describe the supremacy of the state over the church. The very phrase *cuius regio, eius religio* embodied the principle that the secular ruler was the one to determine the faith of the nation, and he had the right of control over the administration of the church in his territory. With the Reformation and the creation of national churches, in country after country the church was brought under the control of the state. This trend was given momentum also in Roman Catholicism by what was known as Febronianism, which not only challenged papal authority over other bishops, but advocated national churches in which bishops were made subject to the secular rulers of the state. Another expression of the use of religion to serve national interests came in Russia, under Peter the Great, who took upon himself the appointment of members to the Holy Synod (to rule instead of the patriarch), by declaring this action to be within his authority for "the care and regulation of the clergy and spiritual order."<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Patterned after the Lutheran Church in Sweden and Prussia, Peter told the Senate to find for him a good man among the army officers "who will have boldness and will know the administration of the Synod and can be Over-



## II

The subordination of religion to the state, far from waning, has dramatically increased in modern history. With the emergence of the modern nation-state, the intimate association of religion with nationhood has brought increasing demands on religion to serve "national interests" even when those interests were in direct conflict with the basic teachings of the national religion itself. With the nationalization of Christianity following the Reformation, the church was often required to serve national interests even when to do so meant, in effect, the denial of the catholicity of the church, a tenet to be found in both the New Testament and the oldest and most revered of all Christian affirmations of faith, the Apostles' Creed. All too often it meant reducing religion, including Christianity, to little more than a national faith, accountable to and controlled by a bureau or department of religious affairs within the governmental structure of the modern state. Recent history is replete with examples of the conscription and capitulation of religion to serve national interests.

To cite but a few examples will perhaps suffice. With the Meiji restoration in the nineteenth century, Japan's national goals and purposes, including the building of an empire, were served by the establishment of State Shinto, to which all Japanese citizens were to be subject and upon which their national loyalty was to be based. State Shinto was established in the Constitution of 1889 to ensure the absolute allegiance and obedience of all Japanese citizens to the state--including its rescripts and its demands for supreme sacrifice should any emergency arise. Thus, State Shinto became a cult of loyalty to the nation and to its national institutions. It was essentially *created* to serve the national interests of modern Japan.

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→ Procurator"; see John Shelton Curtiss, *Church and State in Russia: The Last Years of the Empire, 1900-1917* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1940), 11ff. For more than two hundred years, members of the Synod took the following oath: "I recognize and confirm with my oath that the supreme judge of this Holy Synod is the Emperor of all the Russians."

For centuries, Confucianism in China was used as a tool of the ruling classes to perpetuate their privileged positions in society. With China's long tradition of viewing the role of religion as subservient to the state, Christianity was readily seen by many Chinese as an arm of Western imperialism in China, serving the national interests of foreign powers as an instrument of foreign influence. Soon after the establishment of the People's Republic of China on 1 October 1949, steps were taken to nationalize five officially designated religions of China--Buddhism, Taoism, Islam, Catholicism, and Protestantism--and to have them serve *patriotically* the new republic. Confucianism was not recognized and, in fact, was expressly condemned as a religion since it represented old China. Stripped of any foreign connections, the five officially recognized religions were remolded to suit the needs of the new Chinese government and to function as *patriotic* associations. Protestant churches were merged to form the Three-Self *Patriotic* Association and a few years later Catholics were obligated to form the China Catholic *Patriotic* Association, both of which were compelled to sever all foreign ties with churches abroad, so as ensure their complete loyalty to the new Peoples' Republic of China.

Adolf Hitler's Third Reich provides a painful historical reminder of the extent to which demands may be made by the state on the church in order to serve the national interests of a totalitarian regime. There were, to be sure, strong voices of dissent against making the church subject to the control of the state. The first Reich Confessing Synod of Barmen adopted a statement that is widely known as "The Barmen Theological Declaration." Drafted primarily by the renowned Swiss theologian Karl Barth, with the assistance of Hans Asmussen and Thomas Breit, the Declaration declared its resistance to control by the state: "The church cannot relieve the state of . . . its special office. Nor can it allow the state to take away its [the church's] own office; it cannot allow its message and its form to be determined by the state."<sup>5</sup>

Notwithstanding these and other examples that may be cited of the

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5. See Franklin H. Littell, "From Barmen (1934) to Stuttgart (1945): The Path of the Confessing Church in Germany," *Journal of Church and State* 3 (May 1961):41-52.

subjugation of religion to the state in recent times, let it be said that religion has also played a prominent role in fomenting national independence and in the overthrow of totalitarian political power, as in recent revolutions of Eastern Europe.<sup>6</sup> Ironically, it was the attempt of the Securitate on 16 December 1989 to arrest Rev. Laszlo Tokes, pastor of the Hungarian Reformed Church in Timisoara, Romania, whose bishop, Laszlo Papp, had obtained a court order for his eviction, that sparked the revolution that brought down the Ceausescu regime. When the Romanian Securitate arrived at the church to arrest the pastor, hundreds of his supporters formed a human chain to prevent the pastor's arrest. The sad truth is, however, that evangelical Christians constituted one of the few religious voices of dissent during the years of oppression under Ceausescu. In the days that followed the attempted arrest of the Timisoara pastor, numerous religious leaders participated in the revolution, leading in mass recitals of the Lord's Prayer; a Baptist pastor, Peter Dugalescu, addressed a crowd of more than one hundred thousand in the square of Timisoara.

Even earlier than in Romania, much of the pro-democracy movement prior to Germany's reunification emerged from small church gatherings in East Germany at which the Communists were criticized on matters of foreign policy, the environment, and disarmament. On 10 September 1989, a bishop's statement was read from virtually every pulpit throughout the former German Democratic Republic (GDR), expressing grievances with the government and detailing the demand for "long overdue changes." Most of the mass meetings and marches during those critical months centered around Protestant churches in East Germany.

The role played by the Roman Catholic Church in Poland is well-known, including its close association with the Solidarity movement which virtually took over the post-socialist government of Poland. In the Ukraine, the resurgent Roman Catholic Church openly defied Joseph Stalin's dissolution of its structure and the handing over of more than

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<sup>6</sup>. See James E. Wood, Jr., "Rising Expectations for Religious Rights in Eastern Europe," *Journal of Church and State* 33 (Winter 1991):5-19 and Niels C. Nielsen, Jr., *Revolutions in Eastern Europe: The Religious Roots* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1991).

fortyone hundred of its churches to the Russian Orthodox Church, and has, in fact, retaken some of these churches. In this resurgence, the Ukrainian Catholic Church has stirred nationalist feelings and given an impetus for the independence of the Ukraine.

### III

Admittedly, the proclivity of virtually all modern nation-states, even the most democratic ones, is to seek the support of religion for its policies in both national and international affairs, on behalf of war and of peace, according to the self-interests of the state. In the case of authoritarian and totalitarian governments, religion's obedience to the state is summarily demanded and religion's right of dissent is expressly denied, depending on the degree to which the government assumes absolute and complete control. All governments, of whatever type, encourage and readily welcome the church's support. Following his detailed and monumental study, titled *The Churches and the Third Reich*, Klaus Scholder observed that "the important thing is . . . to recognize not so much the goals of a political movement as how it describes its opponents."<sup>7</sup> In both politics and religion, the right to dissent is the right to be free.

Even in those countries where the churches are by law prohibited from speaking out on social and political issues, the law does not apply when the churches speak out in support of government policy or the state's "national interests." The constitution of the Soviet Union, for example, expressly forbade the involvement of the churches in addressing social or political concerns. Nevertheless, from time to time the churches' pronouncements and sponsorship of public demonstrations and rallies on world peace were warmly welcomed by the government, and even encouraged. The lesson is clear: governments welcome the support of religion, but view with concern, if not alarm, whenever those expressions of involvement are in opposition to government policy in national or international affairs. To be sure, churches may always be spared any

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<sup>7</sup>. Klaus Scholder, *The Churches and the Third Reich* 2 vols. (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1988), 2:ix.



censure from the state as long as they concern themselves with purely "spiritual" matters and limit their pronouncements to questions of personal piety.

For the churches, or any religion, to dissent from what the nation's leaders declare to be the "national interests" is for religion to risk political disfavor, even reprisals, and to have the right to speak out on public affairs challenged as inappropriate and even unpatriotic. Assaults on the churches' claim of their catholicity and their divine obligation to speak out on national and international affairs when in conflict with the "national interests" are an ominous sign of an assumed superiority of national sovereignty over the churches.

A term widely used today to justify the ways of the modern nation-state is "national interests." It has been used to sanctify the most blatant forms of nationalism and political chauvinism. It is a term often employed by political leaders, even in liberal democracies, to justify actions shrouded in secrecy and duplicity. In its wake, it may even serve to give an aura of legitimacy to actions and causes that would otherwise likely be viewed as morally unacceptable, politically unwarranted, and even patently criminal. The term is one increasingly used by present-day governments, both on the right, on the left, and in the middle. The most undemocratic acts of liberal democracies are often justified today by attributing these acts as being in the "national interests."

The notion of "national interests" has widely become the supreme value in the formulation of national policy--both domestic and foreign policy. Religion itself is readily exploited, wherever possible, to serve whatever the nation's leaders deem to be the "national interests," even on occasions when those "national interests" may be clearly in conflict with the very tenets of the religious tradition itself. The compromise of religion to serve political ends may be coerced as the price to be paid for legal recognition, social acceptance, or for obtaining certain favors from the state. The accommodation may also be the result of the manipulation of religion to aid in the accomplishment of national goals and priorities, to which any national church is particularly vulnerable. In any case, the consequence is the subordination of religion to the self-interests of the state, and the authentic, higher, and prophetic role of religion in society is denied.