

**„THE RELIGIOUS AND THE POLITICAL:
A COMPARATIVE SOCIOLOGY OF RELIGION“**

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How can the swaying relationship between religion and politics in contemporary globalized world be analyzed and subsequently explained in sociological terms? Turner tries to answer this and other complex questions - secularism, religious revival, extremism - in the wider theoretical framework based on the assumption that State formations are intertwined with religion. In *The religious and the political*, Turner investigates in fact the relationship between political and religious phenomena from the point of view of two separate and distinctive arenas: nation States and globalized societies.

While taking into account the fact that each State presents peculiar religious and political traditions and consequently a different approach to the management of the possible strains between religious and civil issues, Turner stresses out the fact that each State in contemporary world is forced to cope with the general trends that globalization has set even in the religious domain.

Within this framework, Turner provides a relevant amount of information on the religious history and the political culture of a number of countries, highlighting the historical processes that have determined, in each society, the current state of the relationship between faith and politics. Relevant in this context appears to be the interest that Turner shows in women's right in each social system and religious tradition, which he carefully analyzes as an integral and essential element of the sociological discourse.

Turner also gathers in his book a remarkable and upgraded amount of scientific literature on theoretical issues related to the contemporary global matters. Very interesting are the chapters on citizenship and sovereignty (p. 55 ff.). Turner starts by showing how citizenship and sovereignty have gradually become the basic characters of the modern nation-States, by describing how the increasing numbers of migrants and refugees, the emergence of supranational organisms and other global phenomena, are undermining the States centrality in the social life, with relevant consequences also for the religious communities.

More in general, Turners' position on the relationship between politics and religion in the current, globalized world is clear: religion is never completely independent from the State.

In order to demonstrate this, Turner shows that in some countries the State control over religion is often based upon internal security strategies. In the United Kingdom (p. 250) and the United States of America (p. 248), for instance, the authorities have felt the urge to control the Islamic minorities justifying such measures by the need to prevent phenomena of radicalism and consequent terrorist attacks. The policies undertaken with this aim, however, have brought State authorities to make statements with religious implications, mentioning for example "the pacific nature of the 'true' Islam' ". Despite the fact that such statements were motivated by the need to justify security measures, they have interrupted, in Turner's opinion, the long tradition of keeping State and church separated. Control over religion also occurs in countries where Islamic terrorism is not a major issue. In Turner's eyes, the case of Turkey, widely considered as the demonstration that a secular Islam exists, is on the contrary the result of massive State cultural policies, rather than the outcome of a debate within the community of believers that produced a secular interpretation of Islam.

Turner says about Turkey:

we concentrate on the history and role of the Diyanet, which is, we argue, yet another illustration of the management of religion by the State (p. 206)

Turner makes a comparison with Japan, where in his opinion the same has happened: the Shinto-Buddhist identity of most Japanese is the result of an intense propaganda, that started late in the 19th century and has continued each time that any internal or foreigner issue implied the need, for the public authorities, to strengthen a sense of national diversity and superiority:

Japan has a mythical sense of its divine origin, and hence of the uniqueness of its culture and society (p. 189).

Turner's theory seems clear: almost everywhere in the world religion is represented as a free activity within a free State, but it always becomes the object of State politics, just like economics or human rights. This perspective is strongly influenced by the author's personal experience and belief. This subjectivity also emerges when the author approaches the analysis of religious beliefs from the point of view of globalization. His thesis is that religion has turned into a consumerism product. The secularist project is aimed at reaching religious freedom and tolerance, but wherever individuals have the right to choose their own faith, they make a superficial choice, conditioned by consumption trends (p. 91). Turner sustains that nowadays religions have become a sort of merchandise, engaging in market competitions just like food or sneakers brands; an even more effective metaphor is that religions are like candidates in the electoral arena, where who triumphs is the one that better reflects people's opinions, no matter what nature those opinions have.

Turner does not seem to believe, like Durkheim, that lacking a common religion might provoke in contemporary societies a disintegration phenomena: nowadays, civil rituals like the British coronation, might perform the same function as the collective religious rituals of the past. The problem is for religion itself: in Turner's opinion the organized traditional religions, with their strict hierarchy and orthodoxy, were able to connect the believers with a dimension of mystery (p. 164), while the contemporary individual religious practices can only serve for self-therapy purposes.

Turner's idea of contemporary religious trends emerges when one compares his indignant descriptions of contemporary cases of religious syncretism with his accounts of modern devotion to the Virgin Mary.

Sai Baba is portrayed by Turner as a simple fraud:

The religious movement associated with the life of Sathya Sai Baba (1926–2011) offers an instructive example of popular religion and a dramatic illustration of Weber's theory of charisma, although within a modern global setting. This example from South Asia illustrates the evolution of popular religion drawing on a Hindu tradition of holy men in a culture where there is no centralized religious authority (p. 231).

Furthermore, the cults of Mother Earth are for Turner trivial examples of New-Age spirituality:

New Age authors often borrow shamelessly from Aboriginal traditions to create a synthetic urban religiosity that is well suited to modern notions of self help, therapy, expressivity, experimentation and ecological conservatism (p. 236).

On the other side, the devotion of the Virgin Mary has for Turner the function of social redemption for large groups of women:

However, despite the multiplicity of these Marian images and beliefs, she is inextricably connected with underprivileged and downtrodden women. This role has historically given Catholicism an important missionary advantage over Protestantism, which expunged female saints and regarded Mary as only a Testament minor figure in the New Testament narrative (p. 239).

Despite the constant oscillation between invaluable documentation and theoretical stimuli - that derive also from the innumerable interesting case studies that Turner brings about - and the author's personal orientations that undoubtedly strongly influence the analysis, this work constitutes an exceptional instrument of documentation for the current and future studies in sociology of religion.

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