
THE WORD OF GUEST EDITOR

Karl Marx's assertion over a century ago that religion is the opium of the masses holds true for varied reasons today. In essence, this statement constitutes an acknowledgement of the role and influence of religion and its values on the society and human agency. This view is however restrictive and reductionist as it fails to consider the dialectical, mutually influential and dependent nature of the relationship between human agency and religious values.

Thus, this special edition of the Politics and Religion Journal should be a welcome contribution to the advancement of the scholarly endeavor aimed to generate a better understanding of the role and influence of religion in the contemporary times, as well as for assessment of the nature of this influence (i.e. whether it is positive and helps in bringing progress to society or negative and thus inhibits progressive change), and planning of interventions meant to enhance the positive side of its impact while simultaneously minimizing the possible negative impacts. The edition is comprised of three research articles, four analytical pieces, and three reviews and/or polemics. The contributions are a colorful mix from both the developed and the developing parts of the world i.e. from South Africa, Pakistan, India, Greece, Italy, United Kingdom, Liban and Iran. This brings together in one issue a wider range of perspective on religion, politics and society, which is crucial in this period defined by increasing globalisation and global interconnectedness, whereby experiences in one part of the world are not as greatly dissimilar from those in other parts of the world. This special edition thus provides some basis for a rich comparative international analysis of experiences, both diverse and common, from different corners of the globe.

The three research articles have as their common thread and focus, an examination of the relationship between politics and/or political activities and religion, whereby the influence of the latter on the former is emphasized. Aneela Sultana's article titled *Taliban or Terrorist? Some Reflections on Taliban's Ideology* examines the Taliban creed as a divergent strand within the Islamic religion and its influence on both gender relations and international politics, especially what have been branded terrorist activities. Babita and Sanjay Tewari's article titled *The History of Indian Women: Hinduism at Crossroads with Gender* examines the historical role of Hinduism in legitimating male dominance in Indian society. This it does through a comparative analysis of the Hindu female gods and male deities as well as their impact on Indian women's status throughout the history of Indian society. Also examining the role of deities in the Indian society is the article by Ashish Saxena's which focuses on religious-cultural practices and their relevance in the contemporary society. It does so through an analysis of a traditional cultural and religious practice of '*maile*' congregation (an annual community gatherings) and its attendant '*kul-deity*' worship, and their relevance and continued practice in the contemporary Indian society and its politics.

The four analytical pieces are in a way the continuation of debate on religion, society and politics through presentation of experiences and perspectives from other parts of the world, notably South Africa; Liban; Greece; and Italy. The pieces by both myself (Mapadimeng) and Polikarpros Karamouzis advance the view that religion should be recognized as an autonomous force with influence on society's development, especially on the consolidation and advancement of democratic systems. For Karamouzis, religion's role in democracy can partly be achieved through religious education. This ties well with the implied educational dimension of religion as reflected in Ziad Fahed's analysis that focuses on Catholic Church's faith and its desired influence on the practice of politics, or put differently, how politics should be practised according to catholic faith. My piece does a comparative analysis of religion and culture which suggests that both phenomena have autonomous influence on society, on the basis of which an analysis of indigenous African culture of ubuntu and its economic significance is made. The fourth analytical piece by Luca Ozzano is case-study based. It examines, comparatively, the nature of religious fundamentalist movements in USA, India, Israel, and Turkey; and their role in democracy, especially their relationships with politics and influence on policies.

The above detailed research articles and analytical pieces and the issues they cover are reinforced through the three review pieces. Katie Anders's review is titled *Secularism, Religion and Multicultural Citizenship*, and Pupak Mohebali's focuses on "The Oral History of the Community of Combatant Clergies of Tehan", whereas Adeel Jamaluddin Khan reviews the significance of the Green Revolution and its likely influence on America.

What is fascinating about all the individual contributions is that although they come from different parts of the globe and are influenced by divergent experiences, the core issues are similar and have a common theme running through them i.e. concern with understanding religion and its role and influence on society's socio-economic, cultural and political life. As I already mentioned, this provides a rich comparative data that should inspire further research and debate, as the modern human society is wrestling with related problems.

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