

## Religion- Why is it so Political? - Towards an empirical view.

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**Abstract-** The incorporation of empirical science is a necessary and welcome development in the social sciences. The fields of Psychology and Social psychology has become very important to Economics. It has made inroads into Political Science too. Religion, and its potent power to influence politics has long mystified experts in the field. An empirical enquiry can be quite useful. The roots of religion seem to be rooted in the 'Mystical Experience' - a well-studied phenomenon in Psychology. As humans progressed from tribes to super-tribes to groups comprising of millions of individuals, religions seem to have evolved a political superstructure that is very powerful in ensuring human group cooperation and extreme altruism. But the way in which it developed, makes it a recipe capable of generating conflict with other groups of humans.

The secularization process that led to the development of liberal democratic political structures aimed to deliberately suppress this factor to enable people of different religions to coexist together. But religions, with its long and ancient hold on humans are inherently, more powerful. Appreciation of this helps us to understand the political nature of religion and could help policy makers to better design political structures for durability. We may need to make sure that religious expression is confined to homes and the private sphere, and limit its expression in the official running of the state, for a durable democracy with a liberal structure. It is also worthwhile to encourage more solemnity, legitimacy, and reverence for non-religious structures like the parliament, democratic values, the constitution, and non-partisan rule of law.

**Keywords:** Politics and psychology, Politics and religion, Psychology of religion, Religion as political structure, Evolution of religion, mystical experience, and religion.

### Main manuscript:

"Those who say religion has nothing to do with politics do not know what religion is."

- Mahatma Gandhi

Social sciences, encompassing disciplines like Economics and Political Science, systematically explore the complexities of social phenomena that emerge from the interactions within large groups of human beings. These disciplines have traditionally relied on rational theorizing to understand individuals' motives and behaviours, employing logical frameworks that assume a certain predictability and order. Economics, for instance, has historically utilized models based on rational choice theory, which posits that individuals make decisions that align with their personal interests, optimizing outcomes within given constraints.

However, recent developments in these fields have seen an integration of empirical psychology, particularly in the emergence of behavioural economics. Behavioural economics deviates from traditional economic theories by incorporating psychological insights into economic models, thereby acknowledging the cognitive limitations and biases affecting human decision-making. This

interdisciplinary approach challenges the assumption of purely rational actors and introduces a more nuanced understanding of economic behaviours.

Political Science, similarly, has begun to adopt these diversified rationalities, integrating both procedural, bounded rationality from contemporary cognitive psychology, and global, substantive rationality, akin to the rational choice theory prevalent in economics. Procedural rationality acknowledges the limits of human cognition, suggesting that decision-making is influenced by the complexity of information and the cognitive capabilities of the decision-maker. In contrast, substantive rationality focuses on the outcomes of decision-making processes, if individuals can make the best choices given their preferences and constraint.

The reliance on the principle of rationality alone, however, has shown limitations in its predictive power concerning political phenomena. Without the support of empirical research to identify accurate auxiliary assumptions, models based on rationality theories struggle to account for the unpredictability and varied nature of human behaviour in political contexts. This gap underscores the importance of integrating empirical psychology and social psychology more extensively into political science research. By doing so, political science can enhance its methodological toolkit, incorporating insights from psychological research to better understand and predict political behaviours and outcomes.

Thus, the call for a broader application of empirical psychology in political science is not merely an academic suggestion but a necessary evolution. Incorporating these psychological perspectives can enrich our understanding of political dynamics, offering a more comprehensive and empirically grounded framework for analysing political phenomena. (Simon, 1985)

The quote at the beginning is attributed to Mahatma Gandhi (Maxim, 2015). It is quite a surprising assertion. Why is religion so enmeshed with politics? Religion's resurgence and its palpable impact on politics and voting behaviours across various nations, including Russia, Turkey, the USA, and India, highlight its potent force. Why is religion such a potent political force?

It is very important for political science to incorporate an empirical, social psychological view of religion. Such an understanding was long considered fraught, controversial, and vague. But slowly, consensus views on many aspects of the issue are emerging, though some are not accepted universally. But it is well worth trying to aggregate the empirical thought processes into a coherent view. The intersection of religion and politics is a profound and complex domain within political science that has not been fully explored. This essay aims to shed light on the significant relationship between religion and politics from an empirical standpoint, addressing why this intersection is crucial for understanding societal dynamics and governance.

**‘Mystical’ Experiences- The foundation:** One peculiar ability of human beings is to have a unique set of subjective experiences called ‘Mystical Experiences.’ (Woolacott, 2020; Wulff, 2014; Shrader, 2008). This can happen spontaneously, but that is rare. It is usually ‘attained’ by spiritual practices, particularly, by various types of meditation. The experience has several characteristics. They commonly include all or many of the following:

Ineffability- an inability to put the experience into words. (“I have no words to describe it”)

Noetic quality- A feeling that some ‘hidden’ knowledge has been suddenly revealed. (“I understand everything- the purpose of my existence”)

A sense of oneness, wholeness, or completeness. (“I realized that we are all one,” “I felt in union with the universe, the divine”)

Timelessness- A sense of having transcended time. (“time was meaningless”)

Encountering “the true self”-a sense that mystical experiences reveal the nature of our true, cosmic self: one that is beyond life and death, beyond difference and duality, and beyond ego and selfishness. (“I met the true self, and I knew I existed forever”)

Extreme bliss and a sense of being loved. (“It was true unconditional love”)

The persons who have had these experiences quite often feel permanently changed as a result. They become more spiritual, becomes more altruistic, and often turn into seekers, intensely interested in questions of religion, God, and ultimate meaning of life.

Near-Death-Experiences or NDEs (Recently sought to be re-named as Recalled Experiences of Death- RED), offer a peculiar and revealing instance of mystical experiences happening to humans unbidden (Parnia, 2022). These are phenomena well studied by medical professionals, like psychiatrists and emergency physicians. A certain number of people who have survived a cardiac arrest, or have come perilously close to death by illness or accidents and have recovered, narrate a remarkable subjective experience that seem very real to them. These are of mystical nature, with most of the above-mentioned features, and some additional features unique to them.

Trance states are states that happen in the context of ecstatic tribal dances organized by hunter gatherer human groups of the present day. These are reproducible in similar modern settings, like rave parties (Papadimitropoulos, 2009). These point to a possible origin of the experience in the remote tribal past of humans.

Mystical experiences have a deep connection with religion (Armstrong, 2011; Proudfoot, 1985; Webb, 2011). Deep prayer is as effective as meditation in invoking mystical experiences. Religious rituals, seances, communal chanting, and group prayer often invoke a deep and abiding feeling of connectedness and oneness to the religious community in whose context the religious/mystical experience occurs. In fact, religious experiences are often indistinguishable from mystical experiences as described above. But the 'feeling of unity or oneness' that is described, is often closely identified with one's own religious community when it occurs in the background of religious practices, just like those during the tribal dances.

Many founders of religions, cults and reformatory movements within religions seem to have had deep mystical experiences which they have interpreted based on their historical context, social norms, and beliefs.

Every religion seems to have a mystical tradition which is somewhat detached from its dogmas and controlling nature and with which it coexists in a sometimes-uneasy truce. In the catholic church there were St. Ignatius of Loyola, St. Theresa of Avila and similar mystics. The Pentecostal tradition of modern Christianity is a similar one which is opposed to other mainstream churches. The Sufi tradition in Islam is a typical mystical tradition and is opposed by traditional Islam, sometimes vehemently. Hinduism and Buddhism seem to have a more integrated experience with its mysticism, but the mysticism of these religions seem to be strangely detached from the orthodoxy and orthopraxy of the pervading religions which were quite rigid and maintained a stranglehold on the average member of the society.

In short, mystical experiences are natural human experiences that occur in various contexts. Their origin, significance and possible evolutionary functions are not clear. But they are very powerful, profound, and transformative. They are of extreme significance to the ones having them.

So, it would seem as if the 'Mystical experience' has seeded a framework for a better, more elaborate social structure that enables tens of thousands of people to collaborate. The tribal shamanism with its attendant experiences has slowly morphed into the big religions of today. This capacity to evoke powerful feelings are partly responsible for their power.

**Religion is political:** How religions act as political structures in large societies have been well studied (Jelen, 2002; Fox, 2018). A certain political structure is apparent in the way all large-scale societies today are governed. Even in democratic countries, it is quite evident. If we look at India, for instance, the constitution is accorded a *sacred* status. A *sacredness* is given to the Judiciary, and the parliamentary process. The national flag, founding fathers like Gandhi, and the office of the president are treated with reverence, mimicking the sacrosanct superstructures of religions. This is like the structure seen in most modern democracies, and even in quasi-democracies like Russia and

Turkey. We can see that actual religion and God are deliberately kept out of these structures, and alternatives are preferred, as a rational, better choice.

It is a recent, somewhat controversial assertion is that loyalty to the group, obedience to certain authorities and sacredness or godliness are natural, innate human moral principles, in addition to not doing others harm, fairness, and freedom of individuals from oppression (Haidt,2007; Haidt,2012; McKay,2015). These morals are embedded in the rules of all major religions, and enable them to act as structures that hold a community together, as a ‘single people.’

It is amazing how humans have been able to subsume individual aspirations and are very often subsumed in the interest of the larger community- tribe, super-tribe, or country. We have been described as ‘ninety percent chimpanzee, ten percent bee’ (Haidt 2012). Humans routinely sacrifice their lives to the interest of the group, and individual human lives are seen to be very expendable in large societies of humans. The flip side is that inter-group hate is a pervading fact of history, and extermination, genocide, abduction and enslavement of women and children were rampant to the point of becoming routine, throughout our history. This fact is of paramount importance to our understanding of politics.

When it is a small tribe of a few hundred individuals, as we have been for millions of years, the group is genetically close to one another, and members know each other quite well, and the traditional evolutionary explanation of ‘kin selection’ and ‘reciprocal altruism’ can be invoked. But some experts seem to think that this is not enough to explain extreme human co-operation.

Many favour a still somewhat controversial ‘multi-level selection’ to explain formation of large human groups (Traulsen, 2006; Haidt, 2012). The historical sequence whereby small groups or tribes of hunter-gatherers transformed into gargantuan conglomerations of millions of individuals, cooperating intensely, with high degrees of specialization, just like the eusocial insects like bees and ants, have been elucidated and described, with some basis in empirical data (Haidt,2012; Purzycki,2018).

We humans have been in tribes of a few hundred individuals for at least three hundred thousand years. There were inter-tribal cooperation and trade, but with unrelated tribes, there were wars, raids, and violence on a large scale. The tribal religions had a shaman or a sorcerer, were animistic and magical. But tribal norms and morals were separate. These were enforced directly, through punishments and gossip. In short, their Gods were not moralistic, and religion lacked its elaborate superstructure.

Later, agriculture and the advent of very large civilizations occurred slowly. There must have been a selection process whereby groups that managed to cooperate in large numbers and could maintain their cohesion, won out. Large, organized religions with their encompassing structures were the tools that enabled this.

In short, religions equip a group to stick together, and facilitate intense cooperation. But- and this is a big but- they can potentially promote intense enmity with other groups to the point of endorsing guilt-free extermination and genocide.

Liberalism and democracy arose and progressed in the aftermath of the reformation and the destructive inter-faith wars of medieval Europe. Thinkers generally found that it was useful to suppress religions in a *secularization process* if people of different faiths were to co-exist peacefully in modern nation states. This happened more organically and naturally after the scientific revolution that followed.

But it should be remembered that political structures that are god-less, like the structures of liberal democracy and secular rule of law, could be inherently much less stable than those that involve God, Gods or the divine (Sosis & Bressler, 2003). A God or Gods, and the divine sanctity of religions provide a framework for fanatics to operate fearlessly. The mystical religious experiences underscore their psychological power. The potent disruptive nature of religions on modern nation states with a liberal democratic structure cannot be overemphasized.

This paper is not a call to reinstate the political power of religions, but a thesis for the contrary. A clear understanding of what a religion really is enables us to understand its power in political contexts. It may enable policy makers to design innovative ways to make political structures of liberal democratic governance more effective and long-lasting. We should remember that emotions are also cognition, and it can be evoked with the judicious use of secular state functions, patriotic songs and official rituals, taking care not to arouse ethno-nationalistic fervour to a point where it becomes destructive. Trans-national humanism may not come naturally to humans, and this may have to be inculcated from an early age.

We may need to make sure that religious expression is confined to homes and the private sphere, and limit its expression in the official running of the state, for a durable democracy with a liberal structure. It is also worthwhile to encourage more solemnity, legitimacy, and reverence for non-religious structures like the parliament, democratic values, the constitution, and non-partisan rule of law.

Acknowledgements: Nil

Funding: We have not received any funding for this article.

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