

Why 'theocracy' Is a Failed Concept in IR

Written by John A. Rees

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JOHN A. REES, DEC 21 2015

Theocracy: government by divine guidance or by officials who are regarded as divinely guided.

The (re)emergence of religion in the study of IR brings with it the challenge of continually assessing the language we employ when describing the activity of religious actors and interests in world affairs. This process can involve expanding our lexicon, and where necessary, declaring long-held epithets no longer useful.

With the latter in mind, it's time we had a chat about 'theocracy'. This is a commonly used term that, on the one hand, efficiently categorises states that are led by religious authorities, yet on the other hand, misrepresents both the form and substance of religion-led politics worldwide.

There are (at least) two reasons why 'theocracy' is a failed concept in IR.

Firstly, 'theocracy' is a stereotype, promoted in the West, of politics shaped by Islamic norms and laws. The term came to prominence in IR as Western analysts tried to make sense of the bewildering revolution of 1979 that gave rise to the Islamic Republic of Iran. How to describe a country that was now being run by clerics? How to define a system that was now supremely governed by a high court of religious authorities? It didn't take long before movements to promote the norms of religious law as a primary source of governance in the Islamic world were universally described as 'theocratic'.

One problem with using stereotypes in political studies is that they homogenise phenomena that are more accurately understood as diverse. For instance, Muslim majority politics influences and inhabits a wide variety of political systems. As I have written elsewhere:

Numerous states, notably in the Islamic world, utilise strong majority religious traditions in the development of national and cultural unity, producing a variety of political cultures from absolute monarchy (Saudi Arabia) to clerical oligarchy (Iran) and democracy (Indonesia).

In short, the term theocracy undermines the use of more precise yet equally succinct descriptions of Islamic influence at the state level.

Secondly, 'theocracy' has become a caricature of the broader threat religion poses to political society. Type 'theocracy' into any search engine and one is confronted by commentaries warning of a coming apocalypse if religion is let lose in the public square. 'Theocrats are marching and must be stopped' headlines one prominent contribution, referring to religion as 'faith-derangement syndrome' that inevitably leads to belief that 'little girl's clitorises should be sliced off', holds that the Bible is some sort of 'public-policy guidebook', and can be identified as the central cause of such security crises as the Israel-Palestine conflict and the nuclear standoff between Pakistan and India. We see here the use of 'theocracy' merely as a term of abuse hurled at the spicy end of the culture wars from the camp of fundamentalist atheism toward fundamentalist religionism via an entertaining though at times troubling display ('We need to finish off faith') of anti-religion activism.

The effect of this approach, one that might aptly be called 'theocracy obsession syndrome', is a perpetuation of

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ignorance about both the problem and the promise of religion-informed politics and its secular counterpart. Analysts of international affairs can more credibly attest to the effects of both too much and too little religion in political culture, each measured on a scale of violence from moderate to extreme. An unthinking alignment between religion and 'theocracy' denies secular and religious resources being brought to bear to counter such violence.

Taken together, 'theocracy' as stereotype and caricature has little to offer IR as a useful concept for religion research going forward. Nearly three decades of accumulated analysis has helped break open the once dominant dichotomy where secular and sacral elements of political society were framed within a zero-sum contest for power. 'Theocracy' as a concept promises only to revive this fading construct, preventing further advances in theory and policy. A rich and extensive lexicon of terms is now at our disposal to provide alternatives to 'theocracy' when describing the dynamics of religion-led politics worldwide. It's time for IR scholars and policy makers to let it go.

About the author:

John A. Rees is Professor of Politics and International Relations at The University of Notre Dame Australia. His research interests are related to themes of religion and international development, religion and foreign policy and the IR discourse on post-secularism.