

# Should Politics and Religion be Kept Separate?

Written by Rhia Sharma

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The notion of whether or not politics and religion should be kept apart is highly controversial in today's world. 'While religion has often been ignored as an important political factor, it is becoming increasingly clear that it plays a substantive role in world politics, both internationally and locally' (Fox, 2001:53-57). Conflict has spread internationally in regards to religion, to places such as Israel, Afghanistan and Sri Lanka. 'In addition, the international network of Al- Qaeda has demonstrated the potential international impact of religious movements' (Fox and Sandler, 2005:317). This essay will argue that politics and religion should be kept separate giving reasons through a liberal perspective. It will look at the liberal ideas of John Locke, Benjamin Constant and Alexis de Tocqueville. The liberal approach claims that there should be a separation; because without separation conflict can spread among human beings about religion. 'Although enlightenment thinkers and their precursors differed on many important issues, they were unified in their concern to wrest the notion of legitimate government from its religious, particularly Christian foundations' (Mansfield, 1991:101-114). This essay will go on further to explore the ideas of Thomas Jefferson and the 'wall of separation'. Lastly it will look at the example of Islamic states which incorporate religion into their political system and assess whether it is a viable idea to do so.

Before arguing why religion and politics should be separate, it is necessary to briefly understand why some key thinkers believed it was necessary for religion and politics to remain united. Niccolò Machiavelli believed 'religion was the foundation of state and society' he stated that 'rulers use religion accordingly since religion is under his control' (Barbier, 1999:112-113). Montesquieu also had a firm belief that religion should be part of politics as 'religion provides unity, harmony and social stability for society' (Barbier, 1999:118-121). Thomas Hobbes argued about religion and politics in many of his works, the key argument being in the context of a *religion and a world state*. Hobbes argued that religion was vital for politics as 'religion drives people to obedience, makes them familiar with laws and how to live in a peaceful society' (Barbier, 1991:130-131).

Reverting back to liberalism, John Locke expressed his ideas in: *A letter concerning Toleration* (1689), it should be noted that Locke never mentions a separation of religion and politics, he tends to speak more about the 'difference' between the 'Church and the State' (Locke, 1947:47). So what is the difference between Church and State and Religion and Politics? It could be said that the church and state are more institutions that are separate from each other, whereas religion and politics are activities that occur in spheres of citizen's everyday lives. Nonetheless, Locke claims that the idea of separation is linked to tolerance, as human beings lack tolerance for one another, the controversy between religion and politics increases. Locke mentions that if religion was forced onto a country, how would one know which to follow from the multiple religions in the world? (Locke, 1947:27). Locke summarises his letter with, 'the sum of all we drive at is that every man enjoys the same rights that are granted to others. Is it permitted to worship God in the Roman manner? Let it be permitted to do it in the Geneva form also... Let no man's life or body, or house, or estate, suffer any manner of prejudice upon these accounts' (Locke, 1947:62). From this summary, Locke addresses his fear of 'religious forces' threatening to rule the state and its citizens (Chavura, 2010:41). Locke was 'concerned with religious freedom' and believed that the biggest threat to citizens would be if the state starting talking about religion (Chavura, 2010:39). It is evident from Locke's letter that he did not accept the notion that the church and state or religion and politics should be one entity. In fact he wanted them to be as separate as possible so no religious force or power in government could rule the citizens'. If there was no religious force then everyone religious or non-religious could enjoy the same rights as everyone else.

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Benjamin Constant was another key liberal thinker who believed in separation of the religion and politics. 'The separation of church, the state and the freedom of the individual were two of Constant's central political principles' (Wood, 1993:236). Constant found that the problem was 'more acute in modern societies like France because they fostered political fanaticism and individual isolation' (Vincent, 2004:16). Constant believed that 'religion cannot serve as a basis for morals, and the more insulated from politics, the better' (Todorov, 1999:167). He mentions the idea of a public and private sphere, public sphere being politics and the private sphere being the practice of religion. So, Constant suggested that 'rather than having to choose among religions, why not accommodate them all, only taking care that they be contained inside the private sphere of the individual' (Todorov, 1999:167). Furthermore, 'according to Constant, religious sentiment is one of the expressions of the human capacity to transcend oneself' (Todorov, 2009:280). Religious sentiment is an important term; Constant believed that since religion was mostly about transcendent feelings, it should not be connected to important political matters in the country or globally. Once again it is clear to see that Constant believed that religion should be kept as an independent practice and that religious feelings should not interfere with political decisions. 'Constant's take on the relationship of political institutions to social mores was similar to one of the main points Tocqueville would make over thirty years later' (Vincent, 2004:16).

Alexis De Tocqueville discussed the separation between politics and religion in his second volume of *Democracy in America*. 'By studying the American experience, Tocqueville wished to direct his European readers to the proper and natural relationship between religion and politics in drawing a democratic age' (Tessitore, 2002:1143). Tocqueville believed that 'separation of church and state was not only good for politics; it was especially good for religion' (Tessitore, 2002:1144). His reason was that separation allowed 'religious sentiment to arise unclouded from its true source of strength as one of the constitutive principles of human nature' (Tessitore, 2002:1144). Tocqueville believed that 'religious fervour is harnessed in the attempt to throw off the yoke of political oppression' (Tessitore, 2002:1145). He claimed that this was apparent in the French revolution where they attempted to 'set up a purely secular state which took on the attributes of a religious revival' (Tocqueville, 1955:10-13). Moreover he claimed that political authority 'tends to be broken, changing and transitory, these factors of politics are total threats to the nature of religion' (Barbier, 1999:267).

The author of the Declaration of Independence, Thomas Jefferson also discussed ideas on the separation between religion and politics, using the idea of the wall of separation. 'Jefferson's preoccupation was ensuring that religion remained free and uncoerced' (Chavura, 2010:41). Jefferson's ideas were very much similar to that of John Locke's as it was also partly theological. Theologically speaking Jefferson believed 'true religion comes from conviction, and conviction cannot be coerced' (Chavura, 2010:42). Jefferson's famous *Letter to the Danbury Baptist Association* wrote words that would go on to become crucial to the Supreme Court post WWII. He stated 'religion is a matter which lies solely between man and his God, Legislative powers of government should make no laws respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof, thus building a wall of separation between church and state' (Jefferson, 1802:397). The arguments so far for the separation of religion and politics 'within the liberal tradition of political thought, is a doctrine of negative religious freedom, it can also be considered an attack on all models of church-state interaction that had previously been attempted' (Chavura, 2010:42). However if one is to explore the interaction between religion and politics today in some countries which follow Islam for instance, then one may find that separation between religion and politics is after all a feasible idea.

As mentioned in the previous paragraph some Middle Eastern countries that follow the practice of Islam, have been in the global eye due to their political institutions mixing with their faith. This paragraph will explore how the branches of government in Middle Eastern countries incorporate Islamic faith with examples. 'Foundations of political authority in Islam can be traced back to the early community established by the Prophet Muhammad in Mecca' (Weiss, 1986:2). It was believed that the role of the state was to 'enforce the divine law, as revealed in the Qur'an and Sunnah' (Weiss, 1986:2). From this statement, it is already clear to see that problems would arise, it was also believed that an 'individual alone could not conform entirely to the injunctions of Islam unless and until the practical affairs of his society were in line with God's revealed plan.' (Weiss, 1986:2). In regards to the judicial branch of government, the implementation of Sharia law in many Islamic countries poses one question; is it really a good idea to join religion and politics? The constitution of the Islamic Republic of Pakistan states, the role of a judge on a shariat bench is to, 'examine and decide whether or not any law or provision of law is repugnant to the injunctions of Islam' (Chap. 3a, Article 203B). Furthermore, any law that is not in line with the injunctions of Islam 'immediately

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becomes void, and should be amended at once' (Weiss, 1986:11). To explain further the problems that Sharia law can create, a BBC news article published a story about a teenage girl who was executed in Iran for crimes against adultery. The first problem with this execution was that the girl was only sixteen which made it illegal as 'Iran had promised not to execute anyone under the age of eighteen' (Wilson, 2006). The second problem was to do with the system of practice in Sharia law as 'the clerical courts do not answer to parliament, instead they abide by their religious supreme leader' who at the time was Ayatollah Khamenei (Wilson, 2006). This posed a problem as the BBC reported that the human rights campaigners could not hold them accountable for the execution of the sixteen year old. That year the BBC (2006) also reported at least 159 executions in regards to Islamic law. It is evident from this story that the implementation of sharia law in the judicial system and the idea of mixing religion and politics have its repercussions.

However Islamic liberals would contest the notion that mixing religion and politics is appropriate. One of the most iconic Islamic liberals Muhammad Imara argues that 'religion and the state were distinguished from the beginning' and that 'leadership was not part of the fundamentals of religion' (Ayubi, 1991:153). Muhammad Sa'id al- Ashmawi put forward the strongest case for Islamic liberalism by stating 'God has wanted Islam a religion, but some people wanted it to be politics' (al-Ashmawi, 1987:7). He went further to state that ' the Arabic term sharia originally meant path or method, however Islamic thought has thus , in his view, followed Judaism without realising the difference in nature between the two religions (al- Ashmawi, 1983:22). In relation to punishment for disobeying sharia law, al-Ashmawi states 'their application is not mandatory, either by the tradition of the prophet or by the practice of the early 'guided' caliphs' (1987:183). It is clear to see that the Islamic liberals 'vary considerably in their ideas and style, but they are generally less scriptural and more historical and social in their understanding of Islam' (Ayubi, 1991:160).

To conclude, in relation to Islamic countries , even though Islamic liberals claim that there is a divide of religion and politics , in the current climate it is clear to see that religion is not separated from politics and sharia law is still as practiced as it was when first insinuated. However, generally from the ideas of Locke, Constant and Tocqueville, it is clear to see that many of the key liberals who spoke about the separation of religion and politics were concerned with the idea of religious freedom. Nonetheless they put forward a strong argument for the separation of religion and politics and many Western countries today abide by this notion.

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*Written by: Rhia Sharma*  
*Written at: University of Westminster*  
*Written for: Introduction of Political Theory*  
*Date written: February 2012*