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When God Plays Politics

turbaned Shi'i mullahs, venerable ayatollahs, 'covered' women, and hear talk of 'martyrs' and 'sacrifice' or learn of the night-time calls of "Allah-u-akbar!" ringing from rooftops all over the city? Can all this that I 'look' upon really be 'seen' or best understood from one and only one angle – as 'politics'? Clearly not.

As the days pass, the theocracy in power seeks to impose its will, but, in doing so, is creating its own religious mirror-image – the powerless, yet mighty, martyrs among the fallen. For every demonstrator killed, another martyr is born. For every demonstrator that 'power' feels it has removed from the struggle, another martyr is mourned and another 'spiritual' being comes to life. In the face of the *potestas* of the *Basiji* thug-militia, wielding truncheons against scattered packs of the defenseless, come cries of resistance to lying, fraud, and domination, speaking in the idiom of ultimate authority: 'Allah-u-akbar!'

If this politics of Tehran June 2009 is *just* 'politics,' it is an unusual sort of politics – one with few parallels in today's Western world. Maybe the demonstrations of the 1980s in the shipyards of Gdansk come close? There, Solidarity strikers chanted slogans of defiance against a regime, while hoisting aloft images of John Paul II or the Blessed Virgin of Częstochowa in the faces of governmental paramilitaries. Images of the black civil rights demonstrations of the 1960s, led as they were by clergy singing hymns usually reserved for the chapel, likewise flash before our memory.

Such a 'politics,' equally well 'seen' as 'religious,' raises questions. Are there in fact such wholly different things as religion and politics? Is our distinction between the two really any more sustainable, say, than that between 'religion' and 'cult'? Like efforts to separate 'religion' from 'cult,' might not our distinction between 'religion' and 'politics' be only a device for manipulating one or the other? 'Politics,' it is said, has no place in a 'religious' house of worship; 'religion,' likewise, belongs to the private and personal sphere, not to the public square in which we do 'politics.' But, then we are hit with news from Iran. State 'politicians' invoke the sacral authority vested in them as clerics; demonstrators chanting 'Allah-u-akbar!'

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example, some of the six clichés already mentioned. Asad surely means to deny the putative universality of the so-called 'liberal Protestant' or 'confessional' idea of religion – as belief and as “a purely inner, private state of mind, a particular state of mind detached from everyday practices.” (Asad 1996, 1–15, 10ff.) If *that* is really what Asad means by 'religion,' then one can hardly argue with his criticisms just outlined. Here, I believe, some of Asad's own life story may help us understand his fierce objection to this 'liberal Protestant' idea of religion that he assigns to anthropologist Clifford Geertz. (Asad 1993, 48) In an account of his schooling by Christian missionaries in Pakistan, Asad makes a special point of recounting the humiliating experiences he had as schoolboy at the hands of Christian missionaries and their attitudes toward 'religion.' One can only imagine how a young Muslim boy of tender dispositions would react to a view of 'religion' that made little of his own Muslim religious life. This sort of Western missionary is known to make out that their ways of being religious were the only, or most exalted, form of being religious. In cases like that, justifiable resentment is sure to follow. “Well, if *that* is what religion is, then I reject 'religion'!” (Scott 2006, 243–303) Thus, when Asad argues against Geertz in his classic of 1993, *Genealogies of Religion*, and repeatedly in other works, that “a trans-historical definition of religion is not viable,” it is surely what I have called the 'liberal Protestant' idea of 'religion,' housed as it was in a strategy of fulfilling the purposes of conversion from Islam, that Asad eliminates as a cross-culturally comparative category. (Asad 1993, 30) Although treading into the psychological territory of the motivations behind a thinker's ideas can be treacherous, in Asad's case it seems to me to offer a plausible interpretive context all the better to grasp his critiques of 'religion.' After all, the (presumably liberal) Protestant missionaries of Asad's youth do think about religion in the universal, autonomous, belief-centered way that Asad attacks, integral to their colonial missionary purposes as well!

The problem is, however, that Asad seems to press eliminationism nonetheless. As recently as 2003, Asad reinforced this dismissal of the 'liberal Protestant' idea of 'religion' from any role in making sense of

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How might one make a case that 'religion' is a serviceable concept, a notion definable in some appropriate way, rather than eliminated or reduced to an empty form? How as well do we get beyond the positivism of today's social sciences – beyond those people who would, in effect, just open the Yellow Pages to the section entitled 'religion' and define 'religion' in terms of what one finds there? Better yet, how do we get past those in the university who would similarly scan the indices of most of our behavioral and social science publications or academic courses, and see what turns up under 'religion'? Political scientists, sociologists, social psychologists, criminologists, most anthropologists (Asad and Geertz being notable exceptions), and so on take the term 'religion' 'off the shelf' so to speak. Partly because of the positivist epistemological standards of 'social research,' they rarely, if ever, move beyond the commonsense uses of the term 'religion' to deeper criticism of them. As I shall argue shortly, positivism fails as an intellectual basis for conceptual thinking because it does not *take responsibility* for its concepts. It mindlessly just selects whatever carries the name 'religion' and proceeds from there. But how do those doing so know that the term 'religion' means the same for the items selected in this way? They cannot. We may reject unacceptable clichés about 'religion' or even eliminate 'religion' altogether from our language. But *rejecting* ideas about what we should mean by 'religion' does not excuse us of offering something that makes better sense. Therefore, we cannot escape the task of critically coming to terms with the definition of religion.

This chapter will conclude by articulating an approach to the definition of religion that has the following seven characteristics of the definition of 'religion' thus derived.

a. Pragmatic: Useful for explanation

First, when I say that the concept of religion should be defined *pragmatically*, I mean that we should submit the term to a test of its utility. Does a particular use of 'religion' help us understand the world, or not? Does it add anything otherwise missing? Thus, even

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been excluded from the list of 'religions.' No. Durkheim himself applied the label 'religion' to Theravāda Buddhism, as it were, in order to help fulfill his own theoretical strategies. He declared it a member 'in good standing' of the class 'religion' because doing so satisfied the larger purposes he wished to fulfill in his thinking about the whole of human society. Durkheim took the risks of accepting 'ownership.'

Informed by this larger strategic vision, Durkheim argued that the idea of the 'sacred' provided ~~gave~~ a richer, more defensible content to the idea of 'religion' than belief in God. Durkheim believed this because he believed that humans needed something more to flourish than 'bread alone,' so to speak. They needed things one might only call 'spiritual' – morality, inspiration, meaning, the stuff of the traditional religions – even the 'atheistic' ones like Theravāda Buddhism. But if, as Durkheim thought in his time, these age-old religions were vanishing, then what hope had the human prospect? None, unless we could either find or create things that fulfilled the same, or *analogous*, functions that the old religions had done. This core idea of the sacred enabled Durkheim to speak of the evolution of religions from traditional ones, like Christianity or Islam, to those that Durkheim foresaw succeeding them in the future – a religious humanism, individualism, or nationalism, for example. The common element shared all along the trajectory of religious evolution was the sacred. It was to be found, Durkheim believed, in all things commonly called 'religions.' In humanism and individualism, the human person is a 'sacred' being. Our bodies, our privacy, our consciences, our freedoms and rights are inviolable – sacred – and not to be transgressed. Even Buddhism, despite its atheism, regarded key things as sacred. Thus, Buddhism *compares* well with Christian or Hindu 'religions,' in possessing a tradition of institutionalized monasticism in which certain central vows are considered sacred, for example. Beyond the sacred, does not Buddhism, as well, reveal other features typical of 'religions' – a *comparatively* rich ritual life, like Christianity, Hinduism, or anything else one might want to call 'religion'? Does it not, furthermore, orient its members

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power as a “pervasive dynamism or tension existing in a particular network of social relations ... a complex network of forces, tensions and energy that constitute a political system ...” Rather than being focused on the State, “power is a dynamic energy that infuses a social system.” (Chidester 1988, 8)

What is owing to Foucault in this discourse about ‘power’ cannot easily be put in a few words, but surely his location of subtle and multipolar sources of domination, and the need to resist and struggle, must take the lead. Foremost is Foucault’s original reprise of the idea that ‘knowledge is power.’ Foucault thus refers to his work here as seeking to incite an “insurrection of knowledges” that will expose how our ways of conceiving the world enable certain regimes of power. If knowledge is power, then Foucault wants to expose the many hidden ways it has been so to the detriment of human liberation. Disciplines touting their ‘scientific’ credentials often form the objects of Foucault’s skillful undermining of their claims of freedom from such calculations about power. For Foucault, that they are regimes of knowledge is sufficient to implicate them in regimes of power. It is “really against the effects of a discourse that is considered to be scientific that the genealogy must wage its struggle,” says Foucault. For Foucault, that regimes of knowledge classify and categorize things gives them tremendous power, because it is in terms of those classifications that we act toward those very things. (Foucault 1980, 84)

Foucault’s major effort is decidedly liberationist. He seeks something of a transformation of our politics. He wants to “imagine new schemes of politicization ... which will take new forms” in order to facilitate liberation – in particular, liberation from “the vast new techniques of power correlated with multinational economies and bureaucratic states.” (Foucault 1977b, 183–93, 190) Accordingly, Foucault’s theoretically rich and culturally suggestive historical writings have spawned a generation of thinking about how individuals and institutions control others by the most subtle, obscure, and unintentional methods. Because of the broad scope of Foucault’s subject matter – human sexuality, systems of classification, asylums and prisons – it is easy to see how his work could speak across disciplinary

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lines in the university. Think only about the unintended way in which our pervasive Enlightenment humanism preached liberty and reform, but how its institutions, such as the asylum, often enacted regimes of the harshest forms of dehumanizing domination. These dehumanizing processes got their start from the 'enlightened' *knowledges* that rigorously categorized and classified human beings and their behavior and gave the dehumanizers *power* over other human beings.

While we owe the great French historian and philosopher many things, Foucault's approach to 'power' actually reinforces our own cultural historically formed prejudices about 'power' that I have exposed in the previous pages. In this way, despite his reputation for revolutionizing our thinking, Foucault actually reinforces all the deeply entrenched prejudices that have been historically built up in the Western way of thinking about 'power.' It is probably enough that in making 'power' the major theme of his entire intellectual oeuvre, Foucault has reinforced our 'native' (sic) tendencies to prefer the conflict model of human sociability.

But there is more. In Foucault, we find no separation of *auctoritas* and *potestas*. Power is unitary and it is political. Paradoxically, while Foucault says that he seeks to think about power outside the 'real world' of *everyday* politics of the State, he nonetheless produces a concept of power that is purely political. For him, the "set of relations of force in a society constitutes the domain of the political." A "politics is a ... strategy for co-ordinating and directing these relations." Bringing 'power' back in, it then follows, *a fortiori*, for Foucault, that

Every relation of force implies at each moment a relation of power ... and every power relation makes a reference, as its effect, but also as its condition of possibility, to a political field of which it forms a part. To say that 'everything is political' is to affirm this ubiquity of relations of force and their immanence in a political field ... (Foucault 1977b, 183–93, 189)

And, there is still more. Foucault's determination to see power only as the political further results in Foucault's seeing power within

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human institutions as war. For Foucault, then, war is a quintessential political act and thus the soul of power. Says Foucault,

None of the political struggles, the conflicts waged over power, with power, for power, the alterations in the relation of forces, the favouring of certain tendencies, the reinforcements, etc., that come about within this ~~civilized~~ peace – that none of these phenomena in a political system should be interpreted except as a continuation of war. (Foucault 1980, 90–1)

Foucault here stands, then, for a frank and unapologetic declaration of an extreme form of the conflict model as the basic story line of the human past and condition. (Foucault 1980, 90; Taylor 1985a, 152–84, 170) All the ordinary associations with extreme forms of the exercise of power, such as warfare, conflict, and struggle (and not, significantly, the more neutral term, 'agency'), form the stuff of history and always will do so. Putting it directly, having 'power' in Foucault's sense is to construe human relations in strictly political terms, in terms of conflict, coercion, domination, and the other norms of political behavior in our world. It entails that every use of 'power' is seen as being political – and, in a sense, even that takes into consideration Foucault's point that human life in general is seen as involving plays of power at every step. The commonplace claim that the 'personal is the political' is a salient symptom of this kind of thinking. (Minogue 1995, 5–6) Thus, in the humanities, talk of politics is ubiquitous. Power – and power proper as *potestas* – is ubiquitous. It owns the field of play in large part because of the prestige of Foucault.

5. Problematizing Power in South Africa

So, what happens when we put together Foucault's notion of power with religion? In a crude version of this relation, we can see Foucault's fixation on power in the writings of a contemporary figure in the study of religion:

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Part of what *auctores* add is their mediation of things at one level to those at another level:

An "author" comes between us and the facts or ideas, and adds to them a ... ground of belief, in his own assurance to us respecting them ... And hence perhaps we obtain the largest and clearest idea of "authority," as that which comes between us and an object, and in relation to us adds something to the object which is extrinsic to it ... (Friedman 1990, 56–91, 75; Gladstone 1877, 3–4)

In effect, then, implicit in the notion of *auctoritas* – authority – is *hierarchy*, because the existence of 'levels' or gradations comes immediately into play. The *auctor* mediates between levels of reality by adding things to one level from another, or from himself. This is typically what heroes and savior-gods do the world over. Saviors 'bring' salvation; heroes 'give' us hope. But in neither case can they thus be our *equals* – because it is upon their mediation that we depend – even as the success of their mediation itself depends upon our *acceptance* and *recognition* of it. Neither saviors nor heroes act in a vacuum; they certainly cannot succeed in a vacuum. Interdependence is essential to the success of their roles. Thus, the *auctor's* mediation needs to be accepted, or recognized, by those for whom ~~he~~ 'add[s]' something. It cannot be coerced, as is the natural way for *potestas* to act. Gladstone, then, saw both the author and authority as sharing the common property of being part of a system of dependence. It is the authority or author upon whom one relies. Someone else's judgment is thus placed ahead of one's own. (Friedman 1990, 56–91, 76)

Since a system of authority is necessarily a system of inequality, it places one in a state of obligation toward the one in authority – the *auctor*. Authority entails a debt of duty toward the *auctor*. Authority is in part the ability to compel obedience; it is the way we get others "to do what we wish." (Friedman 1990, 56–91, 59) Consequently, in times or places where the values of individualism and equality reign, our obligations will tend to irritate us, and the hierarchies they presume will seem burdensome. Authority will

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such as same sex relations and religion, now are widely regarded as belonging to the personal or 'private' domain. This classification as 'private' accomplishes many things – chief among them perhaps is to make them exempt from regulation by political forces. What goes on sexually in the bedroom between consenting adults, or what goes on religiously among consenting church members – for the most part, at least – is free of public, that is, political regulation. A good part of the 'abortion debate' seems to be about drawing acceptable *boundaries* between public and private. ^{h/}Where does the private domain of the pregnant woman begin and end and the public interests of the State end and begin, respectively? In this, the privacy of domains of adult sex and religion are like ads promoting Las Vegas holidays there – 'holidays' from any sort of public or political regulation – which boldly announce: "what goes on here, stays here." While we may differ among ourselves ideologically as to which acts belong to the category of the personal and private over against the public and political, we would, it seems, be in accord that the distinction should remain. By excluding some acts from politics as 'personal,' we agree, despite ideological differences, that it is a good thing to secure a degree of freedom for the things we prefer to do – despite how we may disagree in other respects. (Minogue 1995, 5) Thus, at the very least, the determination to see politics in everything, such as in asserting that 'the personal is political,' exposes attitudes that bear watching. Ironically, these are the attitudes of Foucault's 'Panopticon' and its constant surveillance of human behavior. They are inconsistent with our desire to maintain a freedom of thought and action that people of different opposing ideological stripes likewise seek to varying degrees.

14. Resisting the Panopticon

It is in this spirit of resistance to the all-seeing eye of the Panopticon that I write this chapter seeking to expose the constructed nature of 'politics.' Because seeing things as political is so

Testing Interrogations of 'Religion,' 'Power,' and 'Politics'

be the substance of this chapter. Indeed, this phenomenon spurred a larger strategic effort to inquire whether present-day Middle Eastern Muslim 'suicide' bombing, or 'human bombing,' does more than attempt to project *power*, and exert direct '*political*' force, but also reveals something that might be called a 'religious' dimension as well. In particular, I believe that what we have learned by interrogating critical terms such as 'religion,' 'power,' and 'politics' can help us think about and understand human bombing in the Middle East in a far richer way than had been possible before. To be sure, there may be other construals of religion, power, and politics that may differ from mine. Other interrogators may devise other questions for interrogation. They may also enrich our understanding of often refractory religio-political phenomena, like suicide bombers in the Middle East, in their own ways. So be it. But in this chapter I should like to present how my interrogation of basic categories like religion, power, and politics can enrich our understanding of this anguishing contemporary phenomenon that seems to be both a religious and political phenomenon at the same time.

Take 'religion' first. Just how could a religious dimension of human bombing be construed or defined? If 'religion' be involved here, how might we pick it out? Is human bombing in the Middle East 'religious' in any commonsense or everyday sense of the term? Yes, Islam is invoked in cases. But perhaps Pat Robertson was right that such an invocation of Islam really masks a deeper non-religious nature? Perhaps ~~those who say that~~ politicians or other unscrupulous persons are only *using* Islam for other than 'religious' reasons? Perhaps, therefore, Islam is just *used* as a 'tool' or handy label or excuse for something totally different than Islam the religion? To those who say, moreover, that human bombing in the Middle East is religious, do they also say it is necessarily good or bad? How does it, further, fit with the idea that religion is just about having certain beliefs, such as a belief in the existence of God, and God's transcendent dictates? How could the religion *in* human bombing, so to speak, be something essentially internal and private, when it is so obviously a public act? How could it also be 'religious,' given that it is also not something remote from public life