

TOPIC 4. IDEOLOGY, RELIGION, AND POLITICS:

THE HISTORY OF A CHANGING CONCEPT

1) Introduction

2) Some Basic Definitions

3) How Ideology, Religion, and Politics Have Evolved

- ▣ a) Religion and Politics in the Premodern Period and the Impact of the Enlightenment**
- ▣ b) The Rise and Spread of Western Politics and Ideologie**
- ▣ c) Ideology, Religion, and Politics in the Twenty-First Century**

▣ **Introduction**

- ▣ Ideology, religion, and politics all shape people's attitudes about the way that governments are organized and operate and the roles of rulers and citizens. Though they are related concepts, this relationship has evolved over time.
- ▣ Ideology, religion, and politics have varied in their relative importance and sometimes become intertwined.

Some Basic Definitions

- An ideology describes an ideal political system and prescribes the rules for achieving and maintaining it. Those in power preserve and promote the ideology. Ideological writings and principles are a source of law.

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- A religion explains the creation and working of the universe and sets guidelines for human behavior. Many religions have rules about who should rule and how they should rule. Sacred texts and beliefs are a source of law.
 - Politics determines “who gets what and why.” Policies change over time as sources of power, rulers, and institutions change. Laws are made by whoever rules.

Definition

Compared to political ideologies, religion has three linked qualities:

- transcendence¹⁾ (refers to faith in a supernatural reality);
- sacredness (describes those aspects of the world which are placed above the secular by virtue of their religious significance);
- ultimacy (denotes a belief that religion answers ultimate questions about the meaning of life).

1) existence or experience beyond the normal or physical level.

3) How Ideology, Religion, and Politics Have Evolved

a) Religion and Politics in the Premodern Period and the Impact of the Enlightenment

Regardless of how rulers came to power, religion provided the basis for political authority around the world in the premodern period.

- The ancient Greeks and Romans consulted oracles and claimed to have the favor of the gods,
- Europe's monarchs said they ruled by "divine right," and China's emperors relied on the "Mandate of Heaven."
- In India, ruling was a sacred duty reserved for the Kshatriya caste. This reliance on religious authority was abandoned in the West but continued elsewhere for several centuries.

- In Europe, the role of religion in public life was undercut by the Enlightenment in the late seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. The rise of **secularism** meant that social rules would no longer be based on religious beliefs. As reason challenged the power of religion, state institutions and public life were largely secularized, and a new foundation for law and government was needed. Ideology filled this void, and some of the oldest ideologies formed at this time.

- Conservatism was the least radical of these. It promoted maintaining traditional social institutions, including religion, and called for little political change from the old order. Liberalism was more radical and emphasized individual rights and freedom from the state.
- Western civilization's rejection of religion as a source of authority was unique. Religion continued to play a role in the rise and fall of empires and dynasties elsewhere in the world. Though force was essential in creating and maintaining empires, new rulers ultimately cited some kind of religious authority to justify their hold on political power. By setting the rules for politics, religion continued to help determine "who got what and how." Successive dynasties in China relied upon Confucianism. Not surprisingly, the state was used to spread the rulers' faith.

b) The Rise and Spread of Western Politics and Ideologies

- The modern nation-state (a sovereign country with a government ruling a homogeneous population) came into being in Europe in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries when multiethnic kingdoms broke up, and people sharing a common language and culture formed states. German unification in the nineteenth century is a good example of this process at work. These countries needed answers to basic questions about how to arrange and operate their governments. For example, the organization and makeup of the legislature and its power relative to the executive branch were key issues. Established countries like Britain also faced institutional problems.

- These political growing pains occurred during a time of rapid social and economic change. Frustration with political arrangements grew as the Industrial Revolution spawned urbanization and the growth of a more complex class system. The new middle class in particular demanded a larger voice, and the power of the traditional aristocracy was greatly reduced.
- Britain's Reform Act of 1832 is the clearest example of this process at work. The act's passage enlarged the franchise and presaged a decline in the power of the House of Lords, benefiting the House of Commons.

□ Social and economic changes and political reforms in the nineteenth century stirred a philosophical debate in Europe. Governments were not changing fast enough for some intellectuals. New ideologies began to develop.

Karl Marx (1818–1883) argued that reforms alone would not go far enough to address the plight of the working class. Socialism called for a redistribution of wealth by the state.

- Other ideologies emerged. Some were more radical and others less so.
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Nationalism promoted the idea of the nation (people sharing a common identity) and advanced its interests over those of outsiders. Ideologies continued to expand their influence in the twentieth century and grew even more extreme.

In Russia, **Marxism** was joined with Leninist thought to form communism, which promoted violent revolution to achieve a dictatorship of the proletariat.

Nationalism took the extreme form of **fascism** in Germany and called for the suppression of anything that worked against the unity of the

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- Western politics and ideology also influenced the political development of much of the rest of the world. Though they were motivated by economic gain, Europe's imperial powers also spread the West's secular ideologies to what became known as the "Third World," this dissemination continuing until the mid-twentieth century. The vast French and British empires had the greatest impact.

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- Conservatism, liberalism, communism, and nationalism all found new adherents around the globe. Religion was associated with backwardness. As these countries gained their independence from the European powers beginning in the late 1940s, their governments were thus shaped and guided by Western political ideals. Many independence movements in Asia and Africa found leftist and nationalist ideologies especially attractive. The Cold War struggle in the Third World was over which Western ideology would prevail. The end of the Cold War left these countries to look for political values with roots in their own culture rather than the colonial one.

c) Ideology, Religion, and Politics in the Twenty-First Century

- Francis Fukuyama proclaimed in his book *The End of History* that the close of the Cold War marked the world's turning away from ideology. With the exception of Maoist beliefs that continued to guide rebel groups in a few far-flung countries like Peru and Nepal, the age of ideology did seem to be at an end.

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- However, at the same time that ideology was declining, religion began reasserting itself in the form of revivalism in most of the world's major faiths.
 - Having been diminished in the West by the rise of secular politics and ideology and undercut globally by Western imperialism, religion began a comeback as a political force. Movements in many former colonies began looking to religion to rediscover their political as well as their cultural identities.

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- Though a modern phenomenon, **religious fundamentalism** stresses early religious practices and the application of sacred texts to contemporary political and social questions. Groups claiming sacred authority for their political actions now seek to take power and influence politics and policies. Within this framework, imposing their beliefs on public life is a fundamentalist's sacred duty. Religion is being used in the same way that ideology had been used earlier.

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- Fundamentalists' beliefs resemble ideologies because they claim absolute authority and do not allow for competing ideas or sharing power. In some cases, the emphasis on gaining political power is so great that the movement becomes more ideological than religious. For example, the promotion of political Islam is now referred to as Islamism to distinguish it from the religion. Except for the collapse of communism, Islamism is the most important trend in world politics in recent decades.

Several important realities about the relevance of religion to understanding comparative government and politics must be noted.

- First, religion has played a role in politics dating back to the earliest times, and religious revival groups formed in Muslim countries and in India while they were still under colonial rule. These groups' contributions were overshadowed by the postcolonial ruling parties that grew out of independence movements.

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- The second important fact is that religious fundamentalism is not synonymous with religious conservatism, which is the belief that one's religion requires the rejection of some modern social practices. Unlike fundamentalism, religious conservatism is an older phenomenon and is generally apolitical. All religions have some conservative groups. Finally, it is important to remember that controversies over religion in politics are not limited to Islamic countries or developing countries generally.

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- Editorials about the 2004 U.S. presidential election argue that a large number of voters were motivated by what they perceived to be the excessive secularization of American public life. These voters pointed to the banning of prayer in schools and the removal of public religious displays as evidence of this marginalization of their beliefs.
 - Religion has also been an issue in France, Russia, China, and Japan. The French government's ban on Muslim girls wearing the traditional head scarf in school received worldwide attention.

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- In Russia, the Orthodox Church has reemerged as a force in the postcommunist period and pressured the government to take steps to curb the activities of foreign missionary groups. The Chinese government suppressed the Falun Gong sect because it was perceived to be a threat to the authority of the Chinese Communist Party.

Conclusions and Suggestions

- Discussing ideology and politics can create friction even among friends. Adding religion to the mix makes such discussions still more difficult. Explaining the relationship between ideology, religion, and politics is both sensitive and challenging, but it is also necessary if students are to make sense of government and politics in diverse countries.
- Keeping in mind the following suggestions will make teaching this material easier.

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- ❑ 1. Help students to understand ideology, religion, and politics as concepts apart from any particular ideological, religious, or political preference they may hold.
 - ❑ 2. Carefully explain the difference between analyzing and criticizing ideological, religious, or political values.

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- 3. Be sensitive to the nuances of words. For example, religious conservatives should not be confused with religious fundamentalists. (The Amish are an example that most American students will grasp. They are religious conservatives who reject the modern lifestyle but are not fundamentalists seeking to capture the public agenda.)

Key Terms: ideology, religion, politics, the enlightenment, secularism, conservatism, liberalism, socialism, nationalism, communism, fascism, religious fundamentalism, Islamism, theocracy, religious conservatism.

Questions for Discussion

- 1. Identify several ancient empires and several modern ones. What was the basis for their rule?
- 2. List several major revolutions. What was their impact on religion?
- 3. Identify several major ideologies and their core belief.
- 4. What do ideology and religion have in common? How do they differ?