

When God Plays Politics

Radical Interrogations of Religion, Power, and Politics

I am writing these words from Los Angeles, a city boasting the largest ex-patriot Iranian population in the world. It is late June, 2009. Half a world away, but close in mind, are the mass demonstrations against the contested presidential election ‘won’ by President Ahmadinejad. By Twitter, Facebook, cell phone, video-cam or cable news, we all learn about, and even directly see, events unfolding on the streets of Tehran, Tabriz, and Isfahan, events whose outcome is unclear. Yet, what is clear to all is another struggle between the brute force of police and militias versus the massed moral forces unleashed by a feeling of being wronged. ‘Power’ is speaking in its own language to ‘truth.’

As someone with a lifelong interest in the puzzles of human knowledge, I have always tried to ask myself what it is I ‘see’ when I ‘look’ at something. What do I understand, how do I make sense or give an account of what passes before my eyes? Likewise, as a person with an equally long interest in both religion and politics, I make even greater demands on myself to get at what I ‘see’ when I ‘look’ at these images from faraway Iran. How do I *understand* what the events in Iran, June 2009, present to my eyes? Do I just ‘see’ politics? And, if so, what is it to ‘see’ something ‘political’ when I ‘look’ at the demonstrations, the padlocked ballot boxes, the placards in English: “I want my vote,” the leaders claiming election and others admitting defeat, or when I hear of demonstrators calling out “death to the dictator”? Can I ‘see’ only ‘politics’ in images of

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 Częstohowa 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!'

protest the results of an election for president of a republic. Is one 'religious' and the other 'political'? And, if so, which is which? Maybe, our distinctions between religion and politics just do not work for Iran? Maybe, recalling Solidarity or Dr. King, they don't even work for us? Or, do they?

And, moreover, if we do decide to classify events as 'political' or 'religious,' what are we admitting about our larger view of the world in doing so? Most often it seems that we imagine that religion and politics are objectively two distinct things, like two 'tools' – a hammer and a nail. So, some have said that if both religion and politics are at play in Tehran, Gdansk, or Selma, for example, religion is being '*used*' for political purposes, '*used*' by political forces to 'hammer' their opponents. A blogger, writing on a website devoted to keeping watch on Michigan Congressman Thaddeus McCotter, complains in this way: "Politics is an ugly business. Religion is a beautiful one. So when a politician audaciously attempts to use religion to advance his political agenda, citizens should be outraged." (Blogger 2008) The Reverend Pat Robertson has gone to the extreme of arguing that Islam is so thoroughly '*used*' these days for 'political' purposes that it has lost its 'religious' self and become totally political. "We have to recognize that Islam is not," Robertson says, "a religion. It is a worldwide political movement meant on domination of the world." (Robertson 2007) The political 'hammer' of Islam has driven the religious 'nail' right out of sight.

Conversely, others have complained that religion has *used* politics, that something essentially otherworldly has become something contrary to its nature – politicized. The common charge against the Christian Right has been that they have tried to grasp the hammer of 'political' power to pound out their own religious purposes. Take over the local board of education and forbid the teaching of Darwinian evolution in the public schools; gain a majority in the statehouse and outlaw abortion, same sex marriage, and the like. Not long ago, the election of John F. Kennedy, as the first Roman Catholic president, was feared to be a plot to usher in a papal takeover of the nation. Suspensions of the political intentions

of the Vatican are sometimes as strong as they are of the Christian Right. A blog comment from a reader, Robert Singer, responding to Michele Madigan Somerville's "Born Again in Brooklyn" in the *New York Times* reminds us of this fear. Singer bluntly characterizes the Roman Catholic Church as a "political church ... ruled by political bishops, cardinals and pope." (Letter from Robert Singer 2009) Religious hammer, political nail.

So, as we "look" at the Tehran demonstrations, what do we really 'see'? Do we 'see' such political manipulation or *use* of 'religion' by either side? Do we 'see' an essentially "ugly" politics of the regime when we 'look' at paramilitaries confronting people espousing a basically "beautiful" religion of peaceful demonstration? Or, do we 'see' the "ugly" politicized religion of the mullahs exposed as no authentic religion at all, but merely something used to mask the politics of domination played by the regime? Further, do we perhaps 'see' the religion of the demonstrators as "beautiful" precisely because, unlike politics, it is something intimate and deeply believed, not some disguise for an underlying 'politics' of Western secularism? Or, do we 'see' religion on the streets of Tehran as "beautiful" precisely because, like the marches led by Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. or Gandhi, it engaged life bravely in the salvation of the public world? The questions do not stop in Tehran. Given a similar kind of mass movement, what did we 'see' when we 'looked' on in Tiananmen Square, June 1989? On the part of the demonstrators, was this just 'politics' too? Was it 'politics' devoid of 'religion,' and thus unlike the odd 'politics' of Gdansk, Tehran, and Selma? When 'Tank Man,' that lone figure, dodging before an advancing tank, threatened to bring it to a halt by the authority invested in him as a human being, were we 'seeing' what we 'saw' in Gdansk, Tehran, or the American South? Some would say that Tank Man's practical declaration of the sacredness of his individual humanity counts as 'religious' as much as an image of the Blessed Virgin or a cry of "Allah-u-akbar!".

These questions cannot, however, be answered straightaway. The reason they cannot be answered as they stand has nothing to do

with the *facts* from which the questions proceed. We would not be closer to answers if we knew more about Tank Man, Dr. King, Gandhi, or the demonstrators in Tehran. The reason these questions cannot be answered is because our concepts of religion and politics (and power) are systematically conflicted or unclear, and our uses of these terms are burdened with unexamined assumptions. To begin addressing the questions that come at us about religion and politics, we need, first, to do a good deal of preliminary sorting out of how we think about religion, power, and politics. We need to query our assumptions, for example, about our way of talking about 'power' as a unified field; we need to query the common clichés that surround 'religion' – that it is something essentially good (or bad), a reality internal, private, and reducible to having certain beliefs; we need to challenge the presumption that politics is autonomous and superior to other dimensions of life, such as morality, economics, or religion; we need as well to ask why we should go along with the common-place view that 'everything is political.' Such is this book's purpose.

This book is not, then, about the *particularities* of 'religion' in this or that place or time. Not only am I unprepared to write a book on religion and politics, say, in the 'I-countries' – Ireland, Israel, India, Indonesia, Iran, Iraq, Ingushetia, and so on – but such books have been done aplenty. 'Been there and done that.' So, how would another *kind* of book on religion and politics look? To make a difference, such a book would have to treat religion and politics *generally*. But, in being *general* how could it avoid the fatuous, sweeping generalizations of books that pontificate from their privileged God's eye view of our world? It would be downright foolhardy to attempt a book that pretended to encompass religion and politics globally – before even thinking critically about how we use the words 'religion' and 'politics,' and examining the assumptions that lie buried under the surface of our everyday talk of religion and politics. So, what I do in this book is to think critically about the basic categories of religion, power, and politics.

I shall also try to go further. The participants in all these events in Tehran, Selma, Gdansk, and Tiananmen Square were all, in their

own ways, playing ‘politics,’ and there may be compelling reasons to draw some distinctions between these ‘ways.’ On the one side, the irresistible force of sheer coercive power; on the other, the immovable object of headstrong (and ‘heart-strong’) resistance of spirit. But, are these kinds of agency different enough to merit different names, or are they plays of ‘power’ in the same register? Are they even perhaps different ‘things’ or only two kinds of the same ‘thing’? Is it so absurd to say that on the one side, *politics* is arrayed in its most fearsome and characteristic attire – sheer power, coercive force, *potestas*? On the other, do we not recognize in moral commitment and vision ‘weapons of the spirit,’ *religious* conviction, a stubborn insistence upon legitimacy, the willingness to recognize worthy (*auctoritas*) authority, the belief that some things are to be treasured as sacred? This book takes its rise from the perception of such distinctions in the array of agency in our world. Without laying down hard and fast, abstract, definitions and distinctions of religion and politics, I shall seek to grasp what we might possibly mean in distinguishing them from each other, or alternately in declaring the two part of the same thing. What does it *add* to the way we ‘see’ the events in Tehran, June 2009, to label them ‘religious’ as well as ‘political’? What are we trying to bring out when we say that we ‘see’ something ‘religious’ amid the ‘political’?

I shall accordingly try to contribute to a discussion of the kinds of questions I have raised by delving into the basic notions of religion, power, and politics so that we can unpack – and sort out – the baggage of meanings with which they are laden. But having unpacked these notions, this book is about sorting through them for the sake of better thinking about religion and politics. This entire process of sifting through our categories is what I call ‘interrogation.’ Accordingly, in the next chapter, I shall ‘interrogate’ the concept of ‘religion’ both as it has been current in everyday language and as it has been lately regarded in the academic world. In Chapter 3, ‘power’ will be similarly interrogated, as will ‘politics’ in Chapter 4. Once thus interrogated, however, I do not let matters stand. Concepts are things to be used to grapple with the world,

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and not just abstract objects of critical contemplation. Word play may be fine at a party, but it is useless in a struggle. I am writing this book in part because I feel that there are many struggles to which we privileged intellectuals have a responsibility to respond. While it is vital, therefore, to think *about* our categories – to ‘interrogate’ religion, power, and politics – I want us to think *with* them as well. It is in thinking *with* critical notions in our world, and in adding our thoughts to the universe of discourse of both the university and the community at large, that we as intellectuals take a responsible part in public discourse. In the final chapter, I shall, therefore, try to show how the ‘thinking *about*’ religion, power, and politics of Chapters 2, 3, and 4, respectively, can enrich the ‘thinking with’ religion, power, and politics of Chapter 5 in the test case of suicide bombers in the Middle East.