

Should Religions Be Able To Influence Governments?

A cult is a religion with no political power.
- Tom Wolfe

Hidden beneath this deceptively simple statement about religious cults is a much larger statement about religions in general. Religions do have political power.

More importantly, religions themselves have unelected leaders who have as much power over the constituents of their religious community as any elected political leader. The supreme religious leader may undergo some election process to achieve his position, but that election is among his peers, not those at the grass roots level, the ones who support the religion with their donations.

But aren't politics and religion quite different from each other? Not at all. In the western world, religious leaders used to be the same people as the political leaders until the separation of church and state. In the USA today there is some reason to believe that the separation may be trying for a reconciliation to some extent.

In the Middle East, religious leaders influence political leaders greatly. In Iran, for example, we know that President Ahmadinejad reached his position through an election. But the election was influenced by the supreme religious leaders, the ayatollahs, who determined whose name would be allowed to stand on the ballot and whose could not. Iran's parliament passes no legislation that is not approved beforehand by the ayatollahs.

If we go to the Far East, to China and Laos, we find Communist governments. Communism is ostensibly the opposite to a theocracy. However, study of the way communism in these countries plays out makes the student see how non-religion has become a form of godless religion of its own in these countries. The supreme party leader is treated with the same respect and has similar power to the supreme leader of a large religion, quite different from what happens in democracies.

Religions do have power over the behaviour of people within their respective communities, which is effectively what elected political leaders have over their constituents.

The big question which Tom Wolfe does not touch in his quote is whether religious leaders should have power over the behaviour of those who do not subscribe to their religions. At present, in countries where church and state are legally separate, religions use the media (many of which are owned by their followers--about 90 percent of the radio stations in the US are owned by religious conservatives, for example) as propaganda mechanisms to preach their message in the form of news and public affairs programs.

Those who believe that religions should be able to influence politics should be reminded that no country that has an official political affiliation today has much strength in the international economy. Most are poorly managed and poverty abounds. Western countries only surged ahead economically in the past half millennium once the church's influence over the politics of the state was separated at the end of the Middle Ages.

History says that when religion and politics are bedfellows, poverty results and corruption is a common consequence.

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