CHAPTER II

POLITICISATION OF RELIGION IN SOUTH ASIA: THE SECURITY AND POLITICAL DIMENSIONS

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RELIGION BASED POLITICS: IMPACT ON EXTERNAL AND INTERNAL SECURITY

1. Introduction

Religion has always played a powerful and profound role in politics in South Asia. This is true both in the sense that religious groups have, at least on certain issues, substantially influenced public policy, and in the sense that religious belief has been a major source of the values, social attitudes and moral assumptions which South Asian politics is based on. At the policy formation level, the role of religious interest groups, measured in terms of direct participation, has never been much but is certainly more active today than at any time before. While smaller denominations campaign vigorously and provide political leadership for a wide variety of causes (ranging from civil rights to social justice), the major denominations (Hindu and Muslim) have plunged into forceful political involvement – switching from traditional passivity to clamorous activity, even to
the extent of providing a base for politico-religious movements aimed at gaining control of ruling parties and, ultimately, the national government. Besides increasingly taking stands on domestic and foreign policy issues, their social agencies (most of which may not be tied directly to denominational bodies but which take moral direction from religious tradition) lobby and mobilize public opinion among their national constituencies with a political skill and organisational efficiency as yet unmatched by even political interest groups. Political involvement of Sikhs, Christians and Buddhists has been more selective but generally is on the rise.

Political involvement may not be all that unwelcome (after all religious groups comprise citizens with basic political rights) but for the fact that politico-religious leaders have an uncommonly high proclivity to use the “religious card” for inflaming religious passions in their political quest for power. Judged by criteria like testimony to belief in the supernatural, prayer rituals and financial support to places of worship, South Asians remain a deeply religious people. Secular values do pound away at the consciousness of some individuals of the intelligentsia whose members, though usually without clear value structures of their own, predominantly reject transcendent purpose as a plausible existential principle. Its trickle-down influence, however, is small and probably dwindling. Reduced to tired clichés (“unity in adversity” and “secular society”), such a vision has had limited power to command the religious energies of South Asia’s vast population toward a vista of a common future. In such an environment, the use of the “religious card” ignites religious ferocity which always seems to simmer just under the surface of South Asian life - a tragic product of bitter history, widespread
ignorance and the frightfully poor and crowded conditions under which most South Asians live. Murderous conflicts based on religious or some other cultural identity are not new nor are they confined to South Asia. The fall of the Soviet system brought old questions of national identity back to the forefront of international politics. But the cause for concern in the present case lies in the fact that an aggressive role by extremist religious groups in the mainstream politics of the nations of South Asia not only threatens human decency and religious freedom but also social pluralism in the region. Fanatical religious intolerance and division between religious denominations inevitably undermines both political cohesion and internal security.

To illustrate the point, two case studies are presented in brief below. These should suffice to show the havoc that religion-based politics has wrought in the civil societies of two of the leading nations of South Asia that, otherwise, are heirs to great civilizations and cultures of profound refinement – Secular India and Islamic Pakistan.

2. Religion in Politics: India

Hindus constitute some 82.6% of India’s population, with the rest comprising the minorities: Muslims, Sikhs, Christians, Buddhists, Jains and others in that order of numerical strength. Whether Hinduism is a religion or a social order and, if a religion, whether it is a monolithic religion or a juxtaposition of multiple religious sects, is a controversial issue and beyond the scope of this paper. It is sufficient here to note that the Hindus not only dominate the political and economic life of India but also set the tone of social
and civic life in the country. The fundamental feature of Hindu society is its caste stratification, with the upper castes (notably the Brahmins) exercising a monopoly of power, determining its attitude and directions, and projecting Brahminic Hinduism as the sole legitimate form of Hinduism. It is, however, the lower castes (divided further into ‘scheduled castes’, ‘scheduled tribes’, and ‘other backward classes’) that constitute the majority of the Hindu population of India.4

Even as nationalism grew and found expression in the agitation for political independence, the Hindu elite (and the Brahmins, in particular) in the Indian National Congress (INC), devoted increasing attention to religious revival. In time, with the leadership of the INC passing from the Brahminic followers of Bal Gangadhar Tilak to the secular nationalist Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi, there was a significant change of emphasis in the anti-colonial struggle. Though Gandhi’s nationalism used religious idioms, it was not a religious nationalism proper and, unlike Tilak’s religious nationalism, it helped inspire large sections of the Indian populace (including Muslims) to join the freedom struggle. Other Hindu leaders, however, took an openly communal line, and launched two movements in the 1920s: the ‘shuddhi’ movement to reconvert converted Muslims to Hinduism; and the ‘sanghatan’ movement to promote religious militancy. Taking advantage of the dissatisfaction with Gandhi’s conciliatory methods and against a backdrop of declining Brahminic hegemony over the lower castes, the Rashtrya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) was founded by them in 1925 (as an explicitly upper-cast Hindu organisation) to train Hindu youth in the martial arts for ensuring the dominance of Hindu social values and
Hindu political power. The RSS was forthright in its criticism of the nationalism of the Congress and, after independence in 1947, the schism between the INC and the Hindu extremist parties widened with the outright rejection of partition by the RSS.

After its formation, the RSS (which drew its support mostly from Brahmins, Banias, the landed aristocracy, and a section of the petty bourgeoisie) concentrated on its so-called ‘cultural’ work of spreading the ‘Hindutva’ doctrine by molecular permeation, keeping aloof from the anti-British struggles, which were being led by Gandhi and the INC. It went to the extent of ridiculing the 1942 ‘Quit India’ movement and even supported the British war effort. Many prominent Hindu politicians joined the RSS in their youth, including current Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee (who was appointed as first editor of the newspaper ‘Rashtra Dharma’ in 1946 in Lucknow and later moved over as the editor of ‘Panchajanya’, the new organ of the RSS). The RSS spawned several affiliate organisations, such as the Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP) to deal with Hindu revivalism, and the Bajrang Dal (BD) to spearhead Hindu militancy against other faiths, notably Islam and Christianity. Its fierce opposition to the moderate and secular outlook projected by the INC was best reflected in the assassination in 1948 of Gandhi (branded as conciliator and appeaser of Muslims) by an RSS activist, which led to his trial and conviction, and to the imposition of a temporary ban on the RSS. For the RSS, this was a momentary setback as it continued its operations with the same zeal and vigour but under a different name and cover.

The RSS was now replaced by the Jana Sangh (JS) comprising hardcore members of the RSS. A labour organization, the Bharatiya
Mazdoor Sangh (BMS), was launched to enable Hindu militants to enter the field of trade unionism (hitherto dominated by the Communists and the INC). Cells were clandestinely set up in foreign countries with substantial Hindu populations (Kenya, Uganda, Britain and elsewhere). Schools, medical dispensaries, cultural and skills-training centres were established to care for the poor and the needy. The JS encouraged its followers to infiltrate the army, the bureaucracy, and the police. With emotion-charged appeals to Hindu chauvinism, the JS built up a substantial following based on the political-cum-religious concepts of ‘Akhand Bharat’, nuclearization of weapons, and the prohibition of cow slaughter. Originally confined to the Hindi-speaking ‘cow belt’, the JS moved into the south with the induction of Rama Rao of Andhra Pradesh. With the INC now fractured and divided, the JS entered big-time politics by merging with the ruling Janata Party in 1977. The Janata Party split in 1980 on the issue of ‘dual membership’ which led to JS members of the Janata Party leaving it to form the Bharatya Janta Party (BJP), electing Vajpayee as its first president. As the political wing of the RSS, it is the party, which leads the coalition that rules India today.

The RSS re-emerged under the patronage of the ruling BJP, and remains the nurturing ground of Hindu radicalism. The impact of Hindu extremism and religion-based politics has been profound. It has shattered India’s secular image, created deep fissures in the socio-cultural fabric of Indian society, and fomented bloody communal riots and disturbances. Some of the better documented of these disorders are:
(a) the anti-Sikh wave of unbridled violence in 1983-84, following the assassination of Prime Minister Indra Gandhi by her Sikh bodyguards;

(b) the highly provocative ‘rath yatra’, led by L. K. Advani in 1991, which culminated in the demolition of the Babri Masjid in 1992 and the widespread communal riots thereafter;⁷

(c) the targeting of Christian churches and missionaries and, in particular, the cold-blooded murder of an Australian missionary and his family in 1998;

(d) the anti-Muslim riots in the state of Gujarat in 2002 wherein state and central governments (both BJP) appear to have colluded in the ‘religious cleansing’ pogrom;⁸

(e) the sustained campaigns for the stoppage of all missionary activities, and the re-conversion of Muslims and Christians whose forbears were allegedly Hindus; and

(f) the continuing communal disturbances of smaller magnitude throughout the length and breath of India which are much too numerous to mention.

With the rise of Hindu political power, India today is in the grip of a ‘Hindutva neurosis’, with Brahminic Hindutva forming the basis of ‘Hindutva’ politics. The ‘Hindutva’ cult promotes violence against non-Hindu minorities who are dubbed as the ‘foreign races in Hindustan and who must either adopt the Hindu culture and language or may stay in the country wholly subordinated to the Hindu nation’. It totally disowns the secular identity proposed for India by its
founding fathers and the illustrious leaders of its freedom movement. Most recently, the BJP-led government managed to promulgate the Prohibition of Terrorism Act (POTA), which confers such vast powers on the state that it has been challenged by human rights groups and political parties in India who are concerned over its possible use against minorities. But as pointed out by Indian political analysts, the law is unlikely to curtail the activities of Hindu extremist outfits affiliated with the government (such as the Shiv Sena). This is in striking contrast to the efforts towards a secular polity being presently made in Pakistan.9

3. Religion in Politics: Pakistan

There are complex historical and social factors that have shaped the interaction between religion and politics in Pakistan. From the heroic exploits of the Muslim freedom fighters based in Central Asia in the early decades of the twentieth century (under the overall command of Sheikh-ul-Hind Mahmood-ul-Hassan and comprising such leading ulema as Maulana Ubaidullah Sindhi, Maulana Barkatullah Bhopali, Maulana Mohammad Ali Qasuri, Maulana Abdur Rab Barq Peshawari and others) to the secular Mohammed Ali Jinnah of the All India Muslim League, Islam was at the heart of the political struggle for the creation of Pakistan, and it has remained at the centre of political discourse ever since independence. Controversy about the role of Islam in politics continues to trouble the political landscape of the country. Even after the passage of more than half a century, the relationship of religion with state is still as unclear as the nature and direction of democratic enterprise. The question as to what type of polity Pakistan should be – whether
liberal democratic or orthodox Islamic – evokes different responses from different sectors of society. The mainstream political parties, the military and the politico-religious groups have all attempted to define this relationship according to their vision of democratic development and of the role of religion in society and state affairs. As a consequence of an unending conflict of interests, the quest for shaping the state of Pakistan into an entity with a national identity (which is secular as envisaged by the founding father, Mohammad Ali Jinnah, or theocratic as proposed by the clerics) has added yet another dimension to the religious and political polarization in the country.  

Paradoxically, Islam in Pakistan both unites and divides. Islam formed the basis for Pakistan’s nationhood from the beginning. The country was founded on the ideology of Islam and was created as a homeland for the Muslims of South Asia. At the very outset, Islam was seen as one of the few unifying elements in a country made up of different ethnic, linguistic, and cultural groups. And, yet, although central to the beliefs and attitudes of the people of Pakistan, the interpretations of Islam have varied widely along diverging sectarian lines. Views on what constitutes an Islamic state have been widely debated, and the varying interpretations have frequently proved divisive. The Islamization programme has turned out to be controversial, and has yet to resolve the basic question relating to the role of Islam in Pakistan. Legislators have devoted a great deal of time inconclusively debating Islamization bills. The Shariah bill remains unapproved due largely to different and differing views on interpretation. Consensus has yet to be established on what Islam means in political and economic terms for Pakistan. Indeed, the
intensity of division on religious issues is fierce and continues to be on the rise and, from time to time, boils over into sporadic spasms of ruthless and bitter inter-sectarian violence.

Nor is the violence confined to inter-sectarian clashes and conflicts. Muslims constitute some 96% of Pakistan’s population, divided into two mainstream sects, Shiah and Sunni, and these are further subdivided into a host of smaller denominations. The rest comprise the minorities: Christians, Hindus, Ahmadis (declared non-Muslims in the 1970s), the Scheduled Castes, and others (such as the Parsis) in that order of numerical strength. Intolerance and persecution (under the notorious blasphemy laws) against Ahmadis and Christians in particular and bloody attacks on their places of worship have registered a sharp increase since the regime of president General Zia-ul-Haq (1977-1988), wherein armed religious radicalism was kind of nurtured and violence came to be institutionalised in the name of religion. The wave of religious bigotry and extremism began with Zia openly courting the religious constituency for political support and legitimacy, and once again it was the case of the state taking the lead in implementing the political agenda of the religious parties. The period witnessed the emergence of armed and trained military outfits (both Shiah and Sunni), and their mushroom growth under the benign eye, if not direct encouragement of state authority. The Soviet military intervention in Afghanistan and the Pakistan–based Mujahideen resistance were also contributory factors that influenced the rapid growth of religious militancy. The plentiful flow of arms, drug moneys and other funds from the oil-rich Middle Eastern countries to the Islamic ‘madrassa’
(religious school) network further added to the political power and influence of the religious organisations.

A major source of increasing religious terrorism emanating in Pakistan has been the 'madarassa'. Before one enters this thicket of 'madarassa' issues, it is necessary to enter a caveat here. The institution of the 'madarassa' is as old as Islam itself. It made its debut with a vengeance on the South Asian subcontinent some two hundred years ago as a defence mechanism against the proselytising onslaught of Christian missionaries enjoying the patronage and support of the then British colonial rulers. As a small school attached to the local village mosque, this admirable institution still plays a pre-eminent role in imparting basic religious instruction to the offspring of the local inhabitants, particularly the poor and the underprivileged among them. It is the larger schools and establishments or, rather, their politicisation, which is at the heart of the problem. It is some of these that have produced the bigoted religious extremists who resort to violence in the name of Islam for the attainment of their political objectives. The Talibans are a prime most recent example.

Of the estimated five to ten thousand (estimates vary) 'madarassas', most offer only religious instructions, to the exclusion of the social sciences, mathematics and other scientific subjects - areas that are important for the functioning of a modern society. Even worse, some preach 'Jihad' without even understanding the concept: 'Jihad' (which most Islamic scholars interpret as a striving for justice and, principally, an inner striving to purify the self) is equated with unbridled violence and wanton warfare. Still others send selected students to military training camps for learning the
martial arts. Teaching versions of their own brand of Islam and encouraging sectarianism, many sectarian groups run their own ‘madarassas’, and look up to regional and extra-regional powers for protection and support. In recent years, there has been a realization of this problem by state authority which now feels that, under the garb of religious training, the ‘madarassas’ are busy poisoning people’s minds and fanning sectarian violence. A ‘madarassa’ reform plan has been announced and is currently under implementation that would require all ‘madarassas’ to register with the government, expand their curricula, disclose their financial resources, seek permission for admitting foreign students, and stop sending students to military training camps.

To curb the rise of Islamic radicalism and the consequential religious terrorism, the government today considers it imperative to exercise a firm control on sectarian activities, curtail the freedom of action of sectarian political parties/groups/activists, and subject them to close scrutiny. I is felt that not only must bank accounts and financial sources be monitored, but also unaccounted funds must be seized. Experts are suggesting that, to reform the ‘madarassas’, the following actions need to be taken:

1. ‘Madarassas’, which impart military training, be banned forthwith and their funds and resources be confiscated.

2. ‘Madarassas’ syllabi should be rationalised, giving due consideration to the beliefs of different sects: only qualified teachers, approved by the Ministry of Education, should be employed.
(3) All donations should be routed through the government. No foreign funding or foreign students should be allowed to study in the ‘madarassas’ without express permission from the government.

(4) Naming of mosques which reflects ownership by a particular sect should be prohibited. Instead, mosques may be named after their locations.

(5) All Imam of Masjids should be employed by the government and paid by Waqf. Suitable selection criteria should be adopted and appropriate grades assigned. No individual belonging to any militant organisation should be employed.

(6) Publication of materials spreading hatred, prejudice and extremism, and the use of loudspeakers for purposes other than ‘Azan’, should be banned.

(7) The latest phenomenon of the ‘turbanisation’ of Islam, with different colours of headwear denoting different sectarian denominations, should be discouraged.

The ‘madarassa culture’ has led to what has been described as Pakistan’s ‘Jihad culture’. But a redeeming feature of this so-called ‘Jihad culture’ has been its almost total rejection by the broad masses of the people of Pakistan. As a political analyst has put it: “In 1947, Pakistanis remained glued to the secular Mohammed Ali Jinnah rejecting mullahs of all hue and cry. In 1988, JUI won 7 seats (out of 204) and a total of 360,526 votes – 1.84% of votes polled. TNJF got 42,216 votes. In 1990, JUI got 62,214 votes or 0.29% while Jamaat Ahle-e-Sunnat managed 1,992 votes out of 21,163,911 polled. In 1993 and 1997, Islami Jamhoori Mahaz, Jamaat-e-Islami, Jamiat
Ulema-e-Islam, Jamiat Ulema-e-Pakistan, Tehrik-e-Nifaz Fiqa-e-Jaffria, Tehreek-e-Islam, Islam Public Party, Jamiat Ahl-e-Hadis, Jamaat Ahl-e-Sunnat, Islami Siasat Tehreek and Islami Inqilab Party collectively polled less than 3% of votes polled (in general elections). It is clear now that, half a century ago, Pakistani voters made a conscious decision of allocating separate racks to religion and politics. They have since stuck to that resolve. For the past five decades, Pakistanis have indeed been going to mosques and praying but have never voted for members of the professional clergy who have been leading their prayers". The electoral successes of the politico-religious parties in the October 2002 general elections notwithstanding. This is in striking contrast to the BJP’s phenomenal rise to power in India.


Internal tensions, generated by religion-based politics, not only have a shattering impact on the national social fabric, but also have a propensity to spill over borders for a number of reasons, including the presence of similar ethnic and religious groups across national frontiers, the transmigration of populations, and the tendency of governments in South Asia to use the ‘external’ threat for overcoming domestic political and economic crises. Because of the national, religious and historical patterns, which run across state boundaries, internal security tensions cannot be separated from relations among states.

Continuing with the case studies above, India and Pakistan offer a particularly tragic case of structural threat. Their historical, geographic and cultural ties do not allow them to ignore each other,
but their organising principles pose a permanent threat to each other, a threat amplified by the fact that both states are politically vulnerable. Pakistan was founded on the basis of the two-nation theory, and so stands for the definition of the state along exclusively Islamic lines. India is constituted on secular, federative lines, and can only exist by cultivating harmony among the various large groups of religious minorities within its borders, including more than 130 million Muslims. The organising principle of India thus threatens Pakistan’s major raison d’etre, and provides grounds for Pakistan to fear absorption by an omnivorous India. The organising principle of Pakistan likewise threatens India’s basic raison d’etre, raising the spectre of a breakdown of the Indian Union into a number of independent, single-religion successor states. The tensions within and between them are neatly institutionalised in their dispute over Kashmir, which ties into the domestic instabilities of both states and symbolizes the structural political threat they pose to each other. The tensions have also symbolized a more general power rivalry between the two. Apart from this internal structural threat, other internal tensions that usually spill over borders are religious animosities generated by religion-based politics, glaring socio-economic inequalities, ethno-linguistic strife, and group feelings of political alienation and economic deprivation.

Religion-based politics in both India and Pakistan have accentuated the antagonism between the two countries. The gulf that divides them is over and above all a gulf of doctrinal passion. Pakistan is seen as an offence not just to India but also to Hinduism itself. It is the universal focus of frustration, felt by groups, sects and classes far outside the circle of the India intelligentsia. Within that
sphere, a conviction has taken hold that Hinduism is disabled by the mere existence of Pakistan; that it cannot be whole again as long as Pakistan exists; and that there can be no cultural rebirth or genuine reconstruction of society until this offence is redeemed. The depth of this conviction, and the extremity of emotion that informs it, is reflected in much of the prose that is written on the subject. The expanding anti-Muslim literature in India reads like a catalogue of odium, with its fulsome piling on of adjectives and its subjects portrayed as contemptibly debased human beings. At the same time, the Muslims are also feared as diabolically gifted adversaries, and every success in building an Islamic society in Pakistan is seen as evidence of a culture so much stronger than their own. At this point, by identifying Pakistan as a pure colonialist phenomenon, ideology helps to fortify them in their ultimate sense of victory.

The inability of the majority community in the region to recognise that the Muslim people had a human right and a legitimate claim to establish a national home on the subcontinent seems finally to come from a deeper source than the mere intransigence of doctrinal passion. The barriers to understanding could possibly be the product of cultural isolation. The unrelenting view that permits some Hindu intellectuals to reduce the drama of partition to the dimensions of an ideological cliché seems to reflect a genuine lapse in human perception that is in turn a cultural failure. The humanist and liberal elements evolved by the egalitarianism in Islamic culture from no part of the caste stratifications of traditional Hinduism. There is nothing in the Hindus’ own experience that enables them to surmount the passions of the day or to see beyond the stereotypes that their ideology offers them. This may be due in part to the
rigidities of a mass culture rooted in a faith that is inalterably based on law and divorced from history. One of the remarkable facets of Hinduism is that it preserves a body of minute legislation that perhaps no other religion can rival. In contrast, Islam sprang from the barren sands of the Arabian Peninsula but travelled throughout the world, sharing its cultural adventures and, through the centuries, had a unique experience of encounter and exegesis and of change and mobility through the processes of history.

Over the years since the partition of the subcontinent, a feeling has gained ground in Pakistan that Indian policy towards Pakistan has varied only in degree, never in kind. It has throughout been cohesive, coherent and consistent, while its strength and the strength of its critics varied. With the increase in religion-based politics and the rise of the BJP to power, the basic difference between Indian aspirations today and Indian ambitions a half-century ago is that they are more violent, more far-reaching and more carefully planned today. After the heady events of 1971, which created for India a new perspective, Indian foreign policy has always been assertive, expansionist and hegemonic. Its mainsprings have been the glorification of Hindu power and the expansion of its influence. This policy has rarely been pushed beyond India's capabilities. When India was weak, its interventions abroad were mild. When its strength grew, so did its daring. Today, as a powerful regional nation, with a great military, economic and technological advance over its neighbours, India can afford to be hegemonic with impunity, with scant respect for regional peace and security.

India and Pakistan have clashed, fought and survived, but they did not win peace. They fructified the land and they renewed their
lives but they did not win either safety or security. More than two generations after independence, the two sides still confront each other with claims and rights that history has given them – unreconciled and, on the fundamental questions of ideology, unreconcilable. If it was not a conflict of ideological doctrines, it would not be a tragedy: it would merely be a predicament. As it is, Pakistan suspects India of not really accepting the juridical and human reality of Pakistan despite India’s protestations to the contrary, while India in turn accuses Pakistan of continued, dogmatic adherence to the two-nation theory. From time to time, this basic cleavage acquires a traumatic dimension by charges and counter-charges of arming for war and interference in each other’s internal affairs. Indeed, India has moved to a point where it has become unable to distinguish its national security from the security of its authority in the region.

One of the foremost needs of the peoples of South Asia is security – security that is strong enough to overcome the fears generated by religious terrorism and the unscrupulous and exploitive doings of their governing elites, and real enough to build bridges of abiding friendship and mutually beneficial relationship with their fellow citizens in the region. That this is an intensely felt need is indicated, inter alia, by the heartening fact that there is widespread abhorrence of war as an instrument of national policy among the broad masses of the people, and a genuine yearning, particularly among the generations that have grown to adulthood after independence, to pursue mutually profitable interests in a rapidly changing world that would find ample scope for their energies. Besides, security or, rather, the lack of it, is the one single factor that
constitutes the prime impediment to the cooperative effort in South Asia. This is so because the prevailing concept of security in South Asia is inextricably rooted in the two time-honoured beliefs of (one) the balance of power system as the 'natural arrangement' for handling disputes, and (two) the familiar maxim of international relations of 'preparing for war for ensuring the peace'. Yet, these beliefs and the diplomatic practice that emanates from them, has only reinforced an increasingly dysfunctional regional system, and encouraged self-defeating policies by the major actors in the region.

The prevailing security approach also reinforces anti-people values and behaviour. First, it denies democracy regionally by broadening the gulf between, and, thereby, the irresponsible behaviour of, sovereign states to peoples in neighbouring societies. This acquires a particularly dangerous dimension when communal animosities, fanned by religion-based politics, spill over the borders. Second, it discourages democracy domestically by legitimising autocratic institutions and arbitrary action by law enforcement agencies acting in a partisan manner at the behest of state authority (the Gujrat communal disturbances are an example that aptly illustrates the point). Third, it deprecates democracy internally, within people's hearts and minds, by so shaping people's attitudes that they become willing, even eager, to shorten or extinguish the lives of thousands of people of other societies, without the slightest consideration whatsoever as to whether their extinction is justifiable.

In the background of religion-based politics, the concept of people's security suggests a possible solution to the security problems of the countries of South Asia. In essence, the concept means the nurturing of attitudes and values and the devising of
processes and institutions in South Asia that involve the representatives of all people in a quest for achieving security in all areas where safety is in question. Security can be achieved today by the nations of South Asia only when its rival nations hold it as an objective 'in common', and only when people take a comprehensive view of security threats, encompassing demographic, economic, environmental, political, psychological, military as well as religious problems that jeopardise their future. In a fragile age where religion-based politics could ignite a war between rival nations, no country in South Asia can maintain its own security while ignoring (or even inadvertently increasing) the insecurity of neighbouring societies. The comprehensive nature of people’s security pushes the conceptual change even further by moving it from purely military security to people’s safety from all of life’s major threats. Indeed, as a more comprehensive concept of security emerges and begins to incorporate non-military threats, the concept of ‘enemy’ itself could undergo a change. Over time, India and Pakistan, the principal rivals in the region, may well cease describing each other as “enemy number one”. Security concepts that dwell primarily on inter-adversarial and inter-governmental diplomacy – the traditional focus – simply are not democratic enough to address the region’s contemporary security problems.

5. Religion in Politics: Role of the Law Enforcement Agencies

The problem of providing security for the ordinary citizen is first and foremost the duty of the state. The conspicuous failure of the law enforcement agencies to do much about religious violence is one of the most important factors in the decline of the authority of the state
in South Asia. It might seem like belabouring the obvious, but the fact is that the dichotomy between the avowed and the actual functions of the law enforcement agencies has grown to a point where state authority has come to be held in ridicule. The presumption that law enforcement agencies will manage to maintain a modicum of law and order in a valid society while at the same time pursuing the specific partisan aims of a regime in power (or its individual members) has begun to thin. There needs to be a realization that the compromises that have to be made (in terms of recruiting, posting, and the disciplining of force personnel) will inevitably lead to increasing inefficiency in the other domain of the stipulated functions of the law enforcement agencies.

The use of the law enforcement agencies for partisan purposes in these days of religion-based politics has compromised their legally designated role of ensuring security of life and property for all members of society, irrespective of their religious calling or political affiliation. In effect, it appears that the law enforcement agencies have degenerated into an armed gang, which provides protection for its employer as well as brute force for use against the employer’s opponents. Where the state had set itself up as an arbiter between armed and violent factions, it is now deteriorating dangerously close to becoming merely another armed faction. Where the state once found the best means of restricting the use of force in its territory was to establish a monopoly of force itself and to crush or absorb any alternative accumulations of force parallel to it. It seems now to be abdicating that responsibility and appearing to be quite satisfied to be one of the several collections of force. At the moment, in the countries of South Asia, the state still controls the single largest
concentration of force; but once the vital principle has been conceded, it may be only a matter of time when forces stronger than those available to the state emerge, and pose a challenge to legitimate authority.

Today, the states of South Asia are faced with crises that challenge the very meaning and ideology on the basis of which the geographical foundations of their countries were laid. It is time that concerted measures were taken to arrest the dwindling power of the state, and to restore the effectiveness at least in its basic function of providing some semblance of law and order. Cleansing the law enforcement agencies of corruption and, more significantly, depoliticising them is not going to be easy. The forces themselves will fiercely resist reform for corrupt, politicised and religiously based officials infest the chains of command. It is only the top leadership, which can manage this all-important task, unless they too succumb to the temptations of partisanship. This task takes precedence over foreign policy, over infrastructural development, and over macro-economic stability, all of which are meaningless without law, order and internal security.\textsuperscript{18}

6. Religion in Politics: Current Trends and Future Prospects

The question that naturally arises in people's minds is whether this phenomenon of religion-based politics is a temporary one or has become a permanent feature of the political culture of South Asia. The answer probably revolves around the issue of the development of religion in South Asia. The major religions in South Asia include Hinduism, Islam, Buddhism, Sikhism, Christianity, Zoroastrianism, Bahaism and Jainism. According to the statistical data for 1990,
Hindus make up about 82.6% of the total population in India, 16% of that in Sri Lanka, 89.5% of that in Nepal. Buddhists account for about 0.7% of the total population in India, 66.9% of that in Sri Lanka, and 5.7% of that in Nepal. Muslims account for about 96% of the total population in Pakistan, 11.4% of that in India, 86.7% of that in Bangladesh, and 7.6% of that in Sri Lanka. In addition, there are a smaller number of Sikhs, Christians and Jains, and various religions and cults of a primitive character in some remote areas of the subcontinent. From the above data, it is clear that the traditional great religions of the world such as Islam, Hinduism and Buddhism occupy the leading positions in South Asia, with regional religions such as Sikhism and Jainism, minor as they are, also wielding considerable influence. Christianity has had a long history of dissemination in South Asia, but it has not taken real roots among the masses of South Asia.

Three trends are seen in the current development of religion in South Asia:

**One: The revival of the traditional religions:** Since the end of World War II and especially since the 1980s, there have been great upsurges in the rejuvenation of the traditional world and regional religions in the subcontinent. This is not only manifested in the increase of the absolute and relative numbers of the followers of different religions and in the continuous emergence of religious organisations but also in religious thought and practice striking deeper roots in the hearts and minds of people and societies. The end product of this process has been the phenomenal rise in religious fundamentalism and religious extremism.
Two: The increasing intensity of religious conflicts and the resort to armed struggle: Such conflicts, aggravated by religion-based politics, have become a normal feature of the South Asian scene. Three categories of such conflicts could be identified: (a) between different religions (Hinduism and Islam, and Hinduism and Sikhism and Buddhism); (b) between different sects in the same religion (Sunni and Shiah as also Sunni and Ahmadiya in Islam, and between Mahayana and Hinayana in Buddhism); and (c) between fundamentalism and reformism or secularism.

Three: The politicisation of religion: political parties have religious agenda while religious organisations have branched out into politics with political agenda of their own. This trend is particularly evident in India and Pakistan.

If religion-based politics in South Asia is to be reined in (because of the unbridled violence that it unleashes and the havoc that it wreaks in otherwise peaceful societies), what is it that needs to be immediately done to counter the adverse effects of the above developments? The answer probably lies in three propositions briefly underlined below:

One: The depoliticisation of religion is an imperative need for the modernization of the societies of South Asia.

Two: Religious cultures need to be brought into play in international relations in South Asia.

Three: There needs to be a dialogue for bringing about amity, faith, goodwill and understanding between the clashing 'civilisations' in South Asia.¹⁹
7. Conclusion

The subject of religion is increasingly and, frequently, seriously impinging on the lives of men and women in a manner few could have imagined in the closing decades of the twentieth century. Today, it is a key factor in the analysis of numerous issues including questions of identity, culture, nationalism, human rights, ethnicity and globalisation. From the anti-abortionists of the religious right in the United States to the rise of Hindu nationalism, and from the Taliban phenomenon to the bloodshed in the Balkans, religion has become deeply and violently entangled with politics and culture. The Freudian 'illusion' and Marxist 'opiate' notwithstanding, across the board it seems that humans remain 'incurably' religious. The fact is that religion has always been around as a social, cultural and political force. In the first half of the twentieth century, two nations -Israel and Pakistan - came into existence on the basis of religion and what we are witnessing today, particularly in the Middle East and South Asia, is in a sense the logical outcome of the (unresolved) attendant issues and questions contained in those moments of genesis.

The connections between religion, politics and culture are rendered even more complex in view of the broad spectrum of movements at work in what is a global religious revival. While there is a tendency to associate this revival primarily with fundamentalism, in actual fact there are numerous religious movements with wide-ranging agenda, and the vast majority are not committed to violence. Spanning North and South, these revivalist movements reflect different types of concerns related to the contexts from which they have emerged. In South Asia, for example, it is frequently suggested that they are a reaction to corrupt ruling elites and widespread
poverty as well as an attempt to consolidate a sense of identity in the face of rapid change and modernization. Given their undeniable, frequently strident, presence, sociologists have argued that it is time to recognize religious movements as social movements and religion as part of politics. Doing so creates the space that makes political solutions thinkable and, possibly, feasible.

Religion cannot wholly abstain from political and social development. Apart from the function of nurturing the moral values and assumptions on which South Asian life is based, religious leaders have important roles to play in offering counsel on social and political issues in which moral questions are paramount or crucial. Civil rights issues are often of this kind. The family planning and birth control issues, which turn primarily on complex moral questions, is another example. The issue of nuclear arms involves many highly technical, scientific, diplomatic and military components, but also turns on central moral determinations on which the leaders of religion should be enabled to speak out and be the natural sources of counsel. Even economic issues, though often to a great extent pragmatic, involve basic moral judgments, such as the question of how much social and economic equality a democratic society should countenance, and where trade-offs should come between economic efficiency and social compassion.

On the moral aspects of these and other similar issues, religious leaders have something to say and the right to be heard in the corridors of power. But they need to avoid becoming, by design or default, plain pawns in the disruptive policies of unscrupulous politicians. South Asia, today, is in transition. Its peoples have been through painful experiences in the past, and they are bound to
encounter more as the quest for a viable ethos moves on to its natural resting place. At some point, the connection between ideology and practice will become clear, and this will be the moment of decision. In the meantime, leaders of religion (following the Sufi Pir-Bhakti Sant dialogue traditions of medieval South Asia) must reach out to each other intellectually, and let the basic humanism of the people of South Asia assert itself. It is hard to believe that people may make the wrong choices all over again.

References


7. As Muslims in various parts of India demonstrated against the destruction of the historic mosque, extremist Hindus went on a rampage, especially in the city of Mumbai. Ball Thakeray’s Shiv Sena, actively supported by the law enforcement agencies, burnt entire localities inhabited by Muslims. The number of those killed in Mumbai alone is estimated to exceed 2000.


10. See Rasool Baksh Rais, “Religion and security in South Asia: Islamic radicalism and minorities in Pakistan”, *Area Study Centre*, Quaid-e-Azam University, Islamabad, August 2002, where the subject has been admirably dealt with.


16. In actual fact, the number of votes that the political-religious parties have obtained is 10 percent (2.9 million of 29.5 million votes cast) – an increase of just 3 percent. This small increase is due to several factors: first-past-the-post voting system, anti-American sentiment, political vacuum caused by the forced absence of the leadership of the mainline parties, misuse of the ‘book’ as a religious symbol and such other. See, Tariq Rahman “Reasons for the religious vote”, *The News*, Islamabad, October 28th 2002.


Mohammad Hamid Ansari

RELIGION AS AN INSTRUMENT OF POLITICS AND POLICY: INTERSTATE DIMENSIONS AND REGIONAL STABILITY

1. INTRODUCTION

In the world of the 21st century our subject is unquestionably disputatious and, for purposes of a seminar paper, possibly nebulous. The question also needs to be considered in a wider context and without resort to what a famous professor of philosophy once called "systematically misleading expressions".

In our own times and in our own region, religion is a much used, and abused, term. The *Pocket Oxford dictionary* ascribes five different meaning to it and the word itself is derived from the Latin word 'religio' having the meaning of "bond" or a uniting force (which in turn presumes the existence of a group wishing to be so united). Interestingly enough the adjective of the noun acquires more specific connotations; thus, the term "religious" stands for pious, devout, scrupulous, and conscientious. Thus, there is merit in reminding ourselves of John Locke's dictum that "if ideas and expressions were distinctly weighed and duly considered, they would afford us another sort of logic and critic than what we have hitherto been acquainted with".
If for definitional purposes, we consider religion to mean a system of faith and worship, we encounter questions about its operative radius. Is the English language term synonymous with the Hindu-Buddhist *Dharma*¹ or the Islamic *Din*²? Both go beyond faith and worship in terms of individual conduct and cover a wide range of acts and actions considered as righteous and having an impact on society. An analytical schema of the impact of religion upon the political sphere would therefore involve two considerations: (a) politically relevant religious attitude or action, or (b) religiously conditioned political attitude or action; conversely, the impact of politics on religion could take the shape of (i) religiously relevant political action, or (ii) politically conditioned religious action. Our discussion in this paper would be principally concerned with the first two aspects of the paradigm.

Religion in statecraft could be used for different purposes and have different objectives. It could be an instrument of legitimacy for the regime, could be utilised for justifying the status quo in terms of policies and postures, or could play a politically mobilising role to articulate dissent. It, therefore, incorporates the role played by the religious establishments and political groups sponsored by religious organisations. Viewed in this perspective, the question for consideration could be restated in terms of the following: Are

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¹ *The Encyclopaedia of Religion and Ethics*, (New York, 1959), vol. iv, p.702 defines *Dharma* as “sacred law and duty, justice, religious merit”.

² The term *Din* appears in several places in the *Qur’an* (e.g. ii.256; iii. 19-20,83-84; iv.171; v.4) and is translated by Abdullah Yusuf Ali as *religion*. According to E. J. Brill’s, *First Encyclopaedia of Islam* (Leiden, 1993) vol. ii, p. 956, the term “covers three things: *Islam* in its five elements, Witnessing to the Unity of Allah and to the prophethood of Muhammad, Poor-rate, Fasting, Pilgrimage; *Iman*, Faith; *Ihsan*, Rightdoing. These three make up the *din* of Muslims”.

RELIGION AS AN INSTRUMENT OF POLITICS AND POLICY

religious precepts having a societal impact used in politics by state and sub-state actors for the formulation or advocacy of state policies? What is the nature of these policies? Do they impinge on or violate bilateral or multilateral commitments of the state? Does religion have, in any sense, an international role? If so, what are its implications for inter-state relations, and for regional stability?

2. Religion as an Instrument of Politics and Policy

An observation of the historian Edward Gibbon is of abiding relevance. Speaking of religion in imperial Rome, he noted: "The various modes of worship, which prevailed in the Roman world, were all considered by the people, as equally true; by the philosopher, as equally false; and by the magistrate, as equally useful. And, thus, toleration produced not only mutual indulgence, but even religious concord". The point of the matter is that religion has always been a social reality and the challenge to statecraft, therefore, is to posit it in a framework most beneficial to society. The troubling question, thus, relates not to religion per se but to its social use and to the authority having the final say about the use of religious dictum or symbolism for social purposes.

Recorded history suggests that contention rather than concord has characterised the debate on this subject. Sociologists have noted that in all civilisations "religion provided some components of the broader civilisational premises and frameworks, and this partly determined the ways in which religious activities and organisations became related to political processes". In this exercise, conceptions

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3 Edward Gibbon, The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire, vol.1, p.12.
of a basic tension between the transcendental and the mundane orders “emerged and were institutionalised in many parts of the world – in ancient Israel, in second commonwealth Judaism, and in Christianity; in ancient Greece; in Zoroastrian Iran; in early imperial China; in Hinduism and Buddhism; and (later) in Islam”. In Europe, this battle was fought in later Middle Ages in relation to Christianity and was decisively pronounced upon, amongst others, by Marsilius of Padua in the 14th century. The desire to rule on the part of the Roman bishops, he wrote, is “the singular cause which produces intranquillity or discord” in the state. It took another two centuries before this could be rectified decisively through the Reformation, a process that eventually resulted in the creation of independent, secular, sovereign states in Europe.

In Muslim societies in the same period, the friction was minimal on account of “the inherent link between Islam as a comprehensive scheme for ordering human life, and politics as an indispensable instrument to secure universal compliance with that scheme”. Despite this, and the quietist tradition of political thought – aimed at the avoidance of anarchy – that developed, tensions did surface from time to time in the relationship of the Sultan and the ulema; the

7 “The concessions made by us are not spontaneous, but necessity makes lawful what is forbidden”, wrote Al-Ghazali (1058-1111 A.D) in one of his treatises on theology.
former, however, invariably prevailed because, in the final analysis, the responsibility of enforcing the *sharia* rested with the Sultan.⁸

Pre-modern political thinking, and practice, therefore, accepted religion as an instrument of politics and policy in both dimensions of the paradigm outlined above. The impact of this perception was essentially domestic given the limited quantum of the inter-state relationships, and the inclination on the part of all concerned to accept it as the *natural* order of things. Seventeenth century onwards, the Afro-Asian world was in any case in disarray after the advent of European colonialism. The comity of nations was essentially European-Christian, and the rules of the game were defined accordingly. Writing in 1809, the German scholar A. H. L. Heeren described a system of states as "the union of several contiguous states, resembling each other in their manners, religion and degree of social improvement, and cemented together by a reciprocity of interests".⁹ This situation underwent a change after the Second World War (with the exception of Turkey where the process was put in place by 1924) and with the emergence of the independent states of Asia and Africa. Most of these claimed a different cultural heritage; many consciously opted for a modern state structure and a

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⁸ Thus, in India in the 14th century, Sultan Mohammad Tughlaq "seems to have taken the religious status of the ruler too literally, and to have made demands on the loyalty and cooperation of the *ulema* and the *sufis* which went far beyond anything required of them before or since in Indian Muslim history", M. Mujeeb, *The Indian Muslims*, (London, 1967), p.75. Later rulers in India did likewise. In the Ottoman Empire the "commitment of the *ulema* to the state regime was so complete that they could not effectively represent a transcendental Islamic ideal opposed to worldly corruption". Ira M. Lapidus, *A History of Islamic Societies*, (Cambridge, 1988), pp.326–328.

A knowledgeable Frenchman once described the Asian “as above all *homo religiosus*”; the principal centres of this debate were, thus, expected to be China, India, and the countries of the Muslim world. China in 1949, opted for a communist system, which left no room for discussion concerning a role for religion in public policy. (Confucianism and Shinto, in any case, are essentially concerned with social morality and ancestor worship). In India, and given the backdrop of the Two Nation theory and the partition of the country on the basis of the Muslim-majority provinces of British India, the Constituent Assembly took a conscious decision to put in place a state structure focused on democracy, religious tolerance, economic development and cultural pluralism. Nehru's objective was a non-communal, secular, polity. The Constitution gave a legal shape to it.

Despite this, Nehru was aware that the “forces of secular nationalism were badly bruised at the dawn of independence” and that “ideological coherence was lacking in the ruling party”. In a letter as early as July 1948 he wrote: “I believe in India being a secular state with complete freedom for all religions and cultures and for co-operation between them. I believe that India can only become great if she preserves that composite culture which she has developed through the ages. I confess however that doubt sometimes
The trend of debate in recent years confirms the judgement that "the processes of modernity within India have unravelled, and it has not kept to the script". As a result, "Hindu nationalism has emerged and taken shape neither in the political system as such nor in the religious field, but in the broader realm of what we may call public culture" aimed "to impose a corporatist and disciplined social and political organisation upon society". Indian opinion, however, remains sharply divided over the desirability, or the viability, of such an outcome.

Two decades back the historian Ayesha Jalal proceeded "to tease out the inwardness of the real political aims of Mohammad Ali Jinnah and the All India Muslim League in the final decade of the British Raj in India"; she concluded that he and the Muslim League "were unable at the end of the day to square the contradictory interests of Muslims in majority and minority provinces which had been accentuated by the British policy of alternatively attempting to communalise and provincialise Indian politics". Elsewhere Jalal has enquired "how, while exercising their right of self-determination, the Indian Muslims ended up becoming citizens of two separate and

12 Thomas Blom Hansen, *The Saffron Wave: Democracy and Hindu Nationalism in Modern India*, (New Delhi, 1999), p.4. Hansen concludes that the Hindu nationalist movement "has come to power at a time when the prospects for actually imposing cultural homogeneity, political unity, and uniform governance on the country as a whole has never been bleaker", (p.237).
mutually hostile states”. The circumstances of this birth bestowed on Pakistan an identity crisis, which was not easily resolved: “Though overwhelmingly Muslim, the underpinning of Pakistani society has been defined by regional cultures some more developed than others. While all absorbed Islam, none were wholly absorbed by it”; as a result, “Islam far from acting as a cement for national integration was assisting cultural fragmentation”. Despite this and notwithstanding Jinnah’s pronouncement of August 11, 1947, Pakistan opted for Islam as the ideology of the state and proceeded to give itself an “Islamic Constitution”. The debate on this was long and acrimonious; to some at least even Islam as ideology, and Islam as state religion, were considered inadequate reflections of the desired objective that eventually took the shape of the Shariat Ordinance of June 15, 1988. Its aim was to further, and complete, the process of Islamization. “Insha Allah”, said Zia-ul Haq on that occasion, “the time is not far off when Pakistan will become in the true sense a cradle of Islam, the craze of un-Islamic values will peter out; the atmosphere of suspense and misgivings will wither away, anti-Islamic forces will become weaker and ascendancy of Shariat-I-Mohammadi will permeate every nook and corner of the dear motherland”. By definition, therefore, every aspect of state policy was to be reflective of it, including religion-induced ventures beyond the borders of Pakistan. Fourteen years later, on January 12, 2002,

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15 Ibid., pp. 287 and 289. The conflicting interests of the political, religious, and provincial elites are also highlighted by Iftikhar H. Malik, State and Civil Society in Pakistan, (London, 1997), pp.49-55.
another head of state of Pakistan felt the need to apply a corrective to this perception. Its impact remains to be assessed.

In Bangladesh, and particularly after the constitutional amendment of April 1977, the Islamic element in the policy pronouncements of the government acquired a definite profile and was expressed in a statement of President Ziaur Rahman: "We want to practice our respective religion and live under the umbrella of religion". The eighth amendment to the Constitution, in 1988, declared Islam to be the state religion of Bangladesh. This decision had its impact on domestic politics; it also found reflection in the regional policies of the government as also in the policy towards the OIC countries.  

Away from the specific historical context of the Indian subcontinent the processes of modernisation in the predominantly Muslim societies of Asia, Arab and non-Arab, did not produce the results desired, or at the desired pace. A retreat from secular politics and culture followed. Most also experienced, or responded to, political developments of a traumatic nature (e.g. the war of 1967, the Iranian Revolution, the siege of the Haram in Makkah); in this exercise, traditional beliefs were reinvented or appropriated by non traditional elites in an exercise which has been called by some scholars as the Objectification of Muslim Consciousness: "What is my religion? Why is it important to my life? How do my beliefs

guide my conduct?" Introspection along these lines eventually generated Islamist trends and strengthened the inclination to use religion as an instrument of public policy. In the process, "Islam" became the language of politics, embellished with an abundant use of Islamic imagery and symbolism; the slogan "Islam is the Solution" echoed across many lands.

That the propensity to induct religion into politics, or to take political decisions on religious considerations, is not Islam-specific even in modern times is borne out by a few other examples. In Sri Lanka, the Bandaranaike Government decided in 1956 to restore Buddhism to its "rightful place". King Mahindra of Nepal stressed in 1965 the need to "march forward to protect, strengthen and develop Hindu society and revitalise Dharma. It has become absolutely necessary for all Hindus to realise this fully for the welfare of mankind". And, of course, there is the state of Israel that came into existence as a "Jewish state" and remains so for all legal and political purposes with the religious parties invariably being included.

19 The expression "Jewish state" was used in the U.S. announcement of extending de facto recognition on May 14, 1948. [Abba Eban, An Autobiography, (New York, 1977), p.112. An interesting comment, indicative of the impact of religious perceptions on political decision-making, has been made by an Israeli scholar on the motivation for the U.S. being the first to recognise: "There can be no doubt that Truman's action was patterned on moral, cultural, and religious premises (such as the perception of Israel as fulfilling the biblical prophecy that the Jews would return to the promised land, which is particularly pervasive among Evangelicals and Christian Fundamentalists) rather than on strictly geostrategic, national security considerations". Abraham Ben-Zvi, Decade of Transition—Eisenhower, Kennedy, and the Origins of the American-Israeli Alliance, (New York 1998), p.6.
in government coalitions. In other parts of the world, observers have noted the Evangelical upsurge in the United States, Latin America, East Asia and sub-Saharan Africa. "There is no reason to think that the world of the twenty-first century will be any less religious than the world is today".20

Thus, the effort to secularise politics and the language of politics, has not been wholly successful. Visible evidence of it, in the domestic realm, is available in many countries around the globe. The domestic domain, however, is not a watertight compartment; very often the distinction between foreign and domestic policies tends to breakdown and is, in any case, characterised by increasing interdependence. Consequently, foreign policy aims and actions inevitably reflect in some measure the religious orientation of the state concerned. A deconstruct of the process would attribute this orientation to any or all of the following factors: the personal predilection of the ultimate decision-maker; the role and influence of a religious establishment or group on decision-making; and the anxiety of the ruling elite to subscribe to a set of norms. The process is simpler to discern in societies having integrated religio-political systems and using the religious orientation as the principal instrument of legitimacy.

What role do such perceptions and policies play in inter-state relations and in the furtherance of the traditional foreign policy agenda of the countries concerned? Can they be reconciled with the emerging global thinking on inter-state relationships?

The answer to the first question necessitates a survey of the working of such policies in a select group of countries. A case in point is Iran where, after the Revolution of 1979, the Constitution – Article 3(16) – states that the foreign policy would be framed “on the basis of Islamic criteria, fraternal commitment to all Muslims and unsparing support to the mustad’afun (dispossessed) of the world”. A decade and considerable experience later, the Testament of Imam Khomeini urged the Foreign Ministry “to do your best to improve your relations with Muslim nations, to awaken the people at the helm in other Muslim countries, (and) call them to solidarity and unity”. Available evidence in recent years suggests that the focus now is pragmatic rather than ideological and even in the neighbouring states of Central Asia “Iran has emphasised the cultural rather than the political aspect of its Islamic credentials”.21

In Saudi Arabia, on the other hand, Islam as a foreign policy instrument served a useful purpose in bestowing a centrality on the Kingdom, particularly, in regard to Islamic and OIC-related matters and in an earlier period as a source of economic assistance to the poorer Muslim countries of the developing world. The emergence of “Political Islam” and the latest developments relating to it have, however, posed a set of difficult problems for the country. As a result “a lot of Saudis now have gone into condition of retrospection”.22 A third example is Pakistan and its Islamic “forward


policy” in Afghanistan and in regard to the state of Jammu and Kashmir; the results of both are well known. Iraq is yet another example. Long known for its advocacy of Ba’ath socialism, Iraq resorted to religious symbolism when it changed its flag days after its invasion and occupation of Kuwait in August 1990. Other instances can be added to this list and it is safe to conclude that the endeavour to inject religion in the conduct of foreign policy has at best produced mixed results for the initiators and inevitably generated regional and extra-regional tensions.

A response to the second question is to be sought in the changes that have taken place on the international scene in the wake of the end of the Cold War. Little by little, innovative interpretations of the provisions of the Charter have broadened the competence of the United Nations and have propelled a re-think on the scope of “domestic jurisdiction” of the Member states and the meaning of their pledge to “co-operate” (Article 56).


24 James Piscatori. “Religion and Realpolitik: Islamic Responses to the Gulf War”, in Piscatori (ed.), Islamic Fundamentalism and the Gulf Crisis, (Chicago 1991), pp.1-27. The paper traces the transformation in the Iraqi approach to religion at the start of the crisis, as also the responses of the Ulema and “the street” to it in other Muslim countries and opines that it “highlighted the important mobilising role that that Islamic symbolism plays in the politics of the Muslims”.
3. Interstate Dimensions and Regional Stability

The nation-state of today is part of an international system of states that exists for the attainment of certain goals. First amongst these goals is the maintenance of their independence. Other objectives are the maintenance of peace, the limitation of violence, the sanctity of commitments, the furtherance of mutual co-operation, and the continuance of the system itself since it sustains and reinforces these objectives. Over time, the imperative of the maintenance of order propelled the members of the system to seek to develop a set of rules based on the concept of common interest. These rules had to be made, communicated, administered, enforced, interpreted, legitimised, and protected. They constitute the normative principles of world politics, restrict or regulate the use of violence, and are in essence the rules of coexistence. “At the heart of this complex of rules is the principle that each state accepts the duty to respect the sovereignty or supreme jurisdiction of every other state over its own citizens and domain, in return for the right to expect similar respect for its own sovereignty from other states. A corollary or near-corollary of this central rule is the rule that states will not intervene forcibly or dictatorially in one another’s internal affairs. Another is the rule establishing the ‘equality’ of all states in the sense of their enjoyment of rights like that of sovereignty”.

These principles of traditional international law were eventually incorporated in Article 2 of the Charter of the United Nations and provided the framework for the conduct of international relations in the post-World War II period. They were supplemented by

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Covenants, Conventions and Declarations elaborating and amplifying some of the principles of the Charter. In the process these become declaratory of international law. Some of them impinge directly on religion-induced policies of states; two have a bearing on religious differentiation in politics: (a) Declaration on the Elimination of All Forms of Intolerance and of Discrimination Based on Religion or Belief and (b) Declaration on the Rights of Persons Belonging to National or Ethnic, Religious and Linguistic Minorities.26 The former, in particular, spells out in its preamble the approach of the United Nations to this matter: the use of religion or belief for ends inconsistent with the Charter “is inadmissible”, and that disregard to the principles of this Declaration has “brought, directly or indirectly, wars and great sufferings to mankind, especially when they serve as a means of foreign interference in the internal affairs of other states and amount to kindling hatred between peoples and nations”. Article 3 of the Declaration asserts that discrimination on grounds of religion or belief is “a disavowal of the principles of the Charter” and “shall be condemned as a violation of the human rights and fundamental freedoms proclaimed in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights” and other Covenants and “as an obstacle to friendly and peaceful relations between nations”.

Another dimension is added to the question by the substantive changes in UN practice relating to the sanctity of the principle of state sovereignty. This has eroded in considerable measure the freedom of states (or most of them) to pursue policies unmindful of international norms and external reactions. The image of domestic

implosion or explosion, incorporated in the concept of a *failed* or *failing state*, has led to the enunciation – and implementation - of a new doctrine of intervention. It would, thus, seem that the external environment of an increasingly secular global community would impinge on religion-based political sentiments and movements in individual national societies, particularly, in times of stress, internally or externally.

Two other aspects of these emerging global norms need to be considered. In the first place, these are tending to be prescriptive in increasing measure; secondly, international practice is selectively developing enforcement methodologies. In conceptual terms and for several decades now, the concept of security has gone beyond military security in the conventional sense to include security of resources, of energy supplies, and the whole range of matters pertaining to environmental and demographic security. More recently, the UNDP has propounded the idea of *Human Security* to incorporate the imperatives of human rights and human development

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“since the two converge in both concept and action.”\textsuperscript{29} Furthermore, “effective governance is central to human development and lasting solutions need to ... be firmly grounded in democratic politics in the broadest sense”.\textsuperscript{30} Together, these constitute an entirely new framework for activism on the part of the international community, acting through the mechanisms of the United Nations and its agencies.

It is a different, and regrettable, matter that the global correlation of forces makes this debate somewhat lopsided. In the process, insufficient attention has been paid to the need to reconcile the twin imperatives emanating from global norms and global diversity, and to the need to allow sufficient elbowroom for genuine cultural differentiation. Nor is adequate thought given, in the context of globalisation, to the conceptual difference between the “global city” and the “global village” and to the need to structure and modulate the transition from the one to the other. Nor should it be overlooked that the advocacy of democratisation, laudable at all times, also requires for its sustenance “a theory of democracy in the interlocking processes and structures of the global system”\textsuperscript{31} – an aspect to which inadequate attention tends to be paid.

Experience shows that political and security predicaments, within the region and beyond, can no longer be resolved at the interstate level exclusively. Given the information revolution, and the

\textsuperscript{29} Human Development Report 2000, p.2.
\textsuperscript{30} Ibid., p.vi.
\textsuperscript{31} David Held, Democracy, the Nation State and the Global System, in David Held (ed.), Political Theory Today, (Stanford 1991), p.234.
overall enhancement of public awareness, the involvement of civil society has become a necessity and, in some measure, an actuality. This, however, has its own limitations since public perceptions are a product of conscious and sub-conscious thought processes of the society as a whole and, in matters relating to religions and belief-systems, can display obduracy; they are also susceptible to manipulation. For this reason, and on a matter pertaining to the “use” of religion in civic life, a considerable amount of public education would be necessary. Public opinion, and civil society at large, would need to appreciate that the use of the traditional idiom in the traditional manner is a pursuit that has failed to achieve its objectives besides being at variance with the contemporary global trends. On the other hand, religion in a broader sense also stands for the basic premises of social order and for this reason, and without forsaking the core values, the need obviously is to shift the focus and look for common values to regulate inter-state relations.

The imperative is to recognise pluralism and secularism as the normative principles of politics. This would incorporate but go beyond the “duty of tolerance”. It would need to be predicated on an unflinching adherence to the principle of equality and of equal treatment. Its advocacy would not impinge on the tenants of religion since religion depends on faith, and will, and these cannot be induced by force. It has been argued by some that the injection of the ethical principle would eventually result in a more humane world order depicting “sensitive universalism, with a dialogue between universal

32 The injunction, for instance, is emphatic in the Qur’an – ii. 256: “Let there be no compulsion in religion”; and, x. 99: “Wilt thou then compel mankind, against their will, to believe!”
values and local definitions”. Such an approach, in Muslim societies, could help overcome the traditional dilemma of the traditionalists; it could assist the process of reformulating the conceptual paradigm concerning the relationship between religion and politics.

A good example of this is the Tunisian Islamist leader Rachid Al-Ghannouchi who accepts secularism as a "progressive democratic movement" which "succeeded, notwithstanding its aforementioned evils, in awakening the Western mind from its theocratic slumber enabling it to take hold of the reins of power"; Ghannouchi goes on to assert that "a democratic secular system of government is less evil than a despotic system of government that claims to be Islamic". In Indonesia 87% of whose population is Muslim, the former President Abdurrahman Wahid of the Nahdatul Ulema (having a primary membership of 35 million) has for long articulated the view that the "paradigm of expression" has to be changed and the "political space of Islam" re-determined in the context of specific societal requirements aimed at promoting pluralism and the Pancasila ideology. Wahid has also drawn attention to the need to address the “apparent contradictions between our understanding of Islamic law

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and the universal values that we not only endorse but also proclaim to be at the heart of our faith". Such perceptions can be trendsetters.

4. Conclusion

Answers to the three questions posed in the beginning of this paper can now be attempted. States and sub-state actors professing a religion-based ideology do tend to read it with varying intensity in external policy perceptions and practices. Such projections are increasingly at variance with the emerging norms of international conduct. Local, regional and global considerations do lead to situations in which such policies are viewed as a source of tension.

Is a way out in the offing? It would depend on the ability to re-conceptualise the framework to incorporate the diversity and interdependence of present day societies. Until that comes about, “it is better to recognise that we are in darkness than to pretend that we can see the light”.

37 Hedley Bull, op. cit., p.308.
South Asian experts have described this region (South Asia) as a geostrategic entity bound together by a shared civilization, ethnic ties, linguistic, religious and social commonalities, trade, and similarities in the administrative, legal and military systems emanating from the British colonial heritage. India and Pakistan, the only two nuclearised countries of South Asia, according to Imtiaz Ahmed, are still in a state of animosity, trying to contain each other's threat by opting for higher military expenditure and more sophisticated arsenal. Needless to say, prolonged hostility between India and Pakistan, which have already fought two wars over Kashmir, makes South Asia one of the most conflict-prone regions in the world. Kashmir remains a festering sore and a major impediment to good neighbourly relations between the two neighbours. Both accuse each other of organizing, instigating and encouraging terrorist activities in the Kashmir Valley. Continuing cross-border terrorism,


ethnic clashes, rising religious fundamentalism and the massive deployment of troops by the two nuclear neighbours have ominous implications for the prospects of peace in the region.  

Despite none too pleasant political situation in the region, we have every reason to be proud of the enormously rich cultural and spiritual heritage of South Asia and its underlying values, ideals and principles. Such heritage needs to be nurtured, preserved and enriched at all costs. Nevertheless, culture, as Mr. Anisuzzaman observes, cannot be viewed in isolation. It is difficult, if not impossible, to develop cultural cooperation in an uncongenial political environment.

Religion and culture should by no means be politicised as they serve to promote the strongest bonds among people in the region. At the Fifth SAARC Writers Conference recently held in Kathmandu, Mr. Ramendu Majumdar, President of Bangladesh Centre of the ITI, deplored that religion in the region was being used for promoting fundamentalism with its negative impact on all cultural institutions such as theatre, music, dance, arts and other creative works and writings. He also observed that religious fundamentalists were seeking to impose a direct form of censorship on cultural activities. This militates against the political culture based on a liberal and secular outlook.

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Religious fundamentalism, as stated earlier, has a negative impact as it foments hatred, discord and bigotry. We live in a plural society, which tolerates and accommodates views and thoughts to which we may not necessarily subscribe. Religious fanatics, while seeking to impose their own views and radicalise the social milieu, are creating suicide squads, which, as Prof. Durga P. Bhandari, an eminent Nepali intellectual, observes, are 'more keen on dying than living'. The number of such squads is on the increase in South Asia, negating the life principle, which is central to the region's spiritual and cultural heritage. The message of true religion, whatever its name, origin or orientation, is always positive and ennobling. Both religion and culture in their essence serve as a useful and practical medium or device to foster amity, understanding, mutual trust and social harmony leading to lasting peace and stability in the region.

Nepal is a multi ethnic, multi lingual and multi religious country. The Constitution of the Kingdom of Nepal, 1990, while it guarantees fundamental rights to all citizens, forbids any act, which may instigate violence or may jeopardize the harmonious relations subsisting among the peoples of various castes, tribes or communities. To quote Taranath Sharma, a noted Nepalese scholar, 'Nepal in its long journey to modern nationhood has proved to be a unique example of unity in diversity. Within its very limited geographical configuration, we find an unbelievable array of cultural varieties. The Kathmandu valley presents a rare evolution of racial assimilation, cultural blend and religious harmony. The institution of

6 D. P. Bhandari, 'Religious Fanaticism' in a weekly discourse on Radio Sagarmatha, Kathmandu, December 1, 2002


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monarchy has played a pivotal role in the development of harmonious relations among different ethnic communities in the country.⁸ The Nepalese monarch as a symbol of national unity commands respect, affection and loyalty from all cultural and religious communities. The King not only visits Hindu temples but attends Buddhist cultural functions as well. He further bows before Kumari, the Living Goddess representing a particular caste of the Newer community, and visits many other temples or centres of worship with the same religious fervour and piety.

It is a pity that some extremist religious organizations have, in recent years, attempted to create discord and division among religious groups and communities of this country, who have lived in harmony for centuries. This country cannot afford to become a battle ground for Hindu and Islamic fundamentalists. Some Hindu fanatics in Nepal have sought to exploit the country's policy of religious toleration and harmony for political purpose. It has been Nepal's consistently avowed policy not to allow its territory or soil to be used for unfriendly activities by religious fanatics and other hostile groups against its neighbours with which this country has always maintained the best of relations in the larger national interest.

The basic parameters of Nepal's foreign policy have remained unchanged ever since the country moved from isolation to openness in the 1950s. The Constitution of Nepal categorically states that the foreign policy of Nepal shall be guided by the principles of the UN Charter, Non-alignment, the Panchsheel, international law and commitment to world peace. Situated as Nepal is between the two

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Asian giants, India to the south and China to the north, she would like to be assured by her powerful, militarily strong and nuclear neighbours that the sovereignty and independence of a small and weak neighbour, which believes in diplomacy and dialogue to settle all differences, bilateral or otherwise, would be safeguarded at all costs. Conscious of growing danger of nuclearisation of South Asia, Nepal has consistently supported, and will support, the proposal for the declaration of the region as a nuclear weapons free zone.  

On the domestic front, after the restoration of democracy in 1990, Nepal opted for the parliamentary form of government based on the multi-party system. The country, during the last twelve years, has witnessed a number of governments with constitutional legitimacy but raising fears of political instability leading to chaos and popular disenchantment. The country is faced with multiple challenges such as six-year-old Maoist insurgency, rampant corruption, bad governance, poverty and overall backwardness. Moreover, several ethnic groups and minorities are also seeking to maintain their own religious and cultural identity. It is a major challenge for the policy makers and administrators to curb the forces of disintegration and terrorist violence and integrate all communities with diverse religious and cultural backgrounds in the national mainstream. 

Nepal's faith in and commitment to the democratic system adopted by it some twelve years ago remains intact and irrevocable. In view of a close nexus between the country's foreign policy and its

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domestic policy, peaceful conditions at home based on justice, equity, good governance, transparency and accountability are as vital to national peace and security as the peaceful environment marked by goodwill, cooperation, understanding, mutual trust, religious harmony and cultural connectivity in the region.

Peace, as Prof. Abhi Subedi, a noted art and literary critic of Nepal, categorically points out, cannot be achieved if a section of the society, and the women in particular, have to bear the brunt of culture. To support his thesis Subedi quotes Veena Das of India who examines the culture in South Asia by describing the plight of women who have to pay heavily for every war fought in the past or present from the Mahabharata and the Ramayana to the modern times. Subedi adds that in the cultural matrix the people who have suffered most will continue to suffer and bear the brunt of it. It is important to understand how people have suffered within the hegemonistic structure of culture. Subedi further elaborates: “After the British left India the people who shared the same cultures, who were inheritors of the great Hindu, Islam, Buddhist and other cultures, created conditions that can be described as historical pain”.10 This pain has found expression in the writings of Indian and Pakistani writers.

South Asia, in recent years, is increasingly embroiled in and disturbed by acts of violence and terror arising from social tension and unrest triggered by injustice, discrimination, deprivation and, above all, religious fundamentalism. Tension and unrest resulting in acts of violence and terror will continue unabated unless genuine

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NEED TO DEPOLITICISE RELIGION

The grievances of the disgruntled and deprived sections of the population including the religious minorities are adequately and effectively addressed and political solutions sought to widespread insurgency movements.

Desperately seeking to replace the cult of ever escalating violence and terror with a culture of peace, South Asia, despite the shared cultural heritage, has many languages and dialects, religions and sects, ethnic groups and other communities. Besides, countries of the region have different systems of government, and they are at varying levels of socio-economic and politico-cultural development. The seven SAARC nations account for over one-fifth of the world population. They have common problems and challenges such as poverty, underdevelopment, low level of production, unemployment, illiteracy, hunger, disease and the pressure of population. Recognition of common problems and the need to overcome these problems and challenges through collective efforts, wisdom and imagination brought the seven nations of South Asia together on a common platform in 1985 now widely known as SAARC or South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation. It is generally admitted that regional cooperation in South Asia cannot make progress in achieving the objectives enshrined in its Charter unless serious efforts are made to promote mutual trust and understanding between and among member states through such measures as fostering good neighbourly relations, relieving tensions and building confidence.11 Continuing religious violence and ethnic strife become a stumbling block to the achievement of SAARC objectives.