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Politics and Religion

1 Introduction

This chapter analyses the complex and changing relationships between religion and politics in contemporary societies and nation-states.¹ It also examines the dimensions of these complex relationships as well as some specific aspects of the relationships such as civil religion, theocracy, the secular / sacred distinction and the separation between the state and religion. The approach employed here is historical, analytical, and conceptual. Each of these relationships is an attempt at conceptualising the meaning, definition and theory of religion and politics and how they interlink in practice in specific social contexts. The cultural context of this analysis is the post-colonial societies of countries in Africa where Euro-western colonialism imposed a colonial model of the nation-state, with a (formal but impactable) separation of state and religion.

In different countries and societies, the relationship between politics and religion, faith, and polity, is constantly debated and contested. In contemporary times, this is more so due to the increased visibility and resilience of religion in the face of, or rather despite, secularisation assumptions undergirding the formation of the modern nation-state. In an era of globalisation, inherited ideas and notions of politics, religion and their relationship have come under increasing scrutiny as society changes. In the face of increasing global interconnection and interpenetration as well as ethno-religious or cultural nationalism around the world, some scholars, following the lead of Hannah Arendt ([1951] 1979), argue that the power and role of the nation-state (and hence polity and politics) are increasingly declining. However, as concepts that predominate in interdisciplinary research, ‘politics’ and ‘religion’ are both contested categories, differently defined across disciplines and according to scholars’ interests. That religion and politics have shifting and indeterminate meanings is what Bryan Turner describes as “the problem of the cultural specificity of our basic concepts” (Turner 2011, 3); these concepts are deployed differently in different contexts, cultures and societies. Definitions are important, as Jeppe Sinding Jensen (2003, 63) makes clear because they embody, and are shortened forms of, theorisation. A definition of politics or religion subscribes to an implicit theory of action and practice about how these concepts perform and are expected to perform in real-world situations and within cultures. In both popular and scholarly usage, the

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meaning of politics as well as religion is part of what Willi Braun describes as “experience-near” and “untaught learning” (Braun 2000, 4) which people absorb from their cultural environments and social representations. Because these two concepts are frequently used in a context-specific manner – although driven by transcultural and transreligious goals – it is challenging to determine where their respective boundaries lie, “or what constitutes religion [or politics] as opposed to some other type of activity or thought” (Ellis and ter Haar 2012, 457). For religion and politics, the root of this challenge, among others, is “the problem of excess and spectrality: there are too many meanings and meanings are too indeterminate” (Braun 2000, 4).

In the case of religion, because of the multiplicity of meanings, and the historical association of the concept with Christianity, colonialism and western imperialism (Chidester 1996, 30–72; Chidester 2014, 59–89; Turner 2011, 3–5), Toyin Falola postulates the use of the different concept of “ritual archive” to designate what in the African world religion represents: “the conglomeration of words as well as texts, ideas, symbols, shrines, images, performances, and indeed objects that document as well as speak to those religious experiences and practices that allow us to understand the African world through various bodies of philosophers, literatures, languages, histories and much more” (Falola 2017, 703). Ritual archive, therefore, means much more than what the western-derived concepts such as ‘religion’, ‘the holy’ and ‘the sacred’ designate. Furthermore, ritual archive seems more faithful to the etymology of religion, *relegere* (as against the more frequently referenced Latin root, *religare*, to bind, see Idowu 1973, 22–75), to pay heed, to have a care for (spiritual and godly matters [Hoyt 1912, 127]). This perspective on religion recognises and unites the historic traditions of religion as “a pervasive dimension in human life” (Smith 1994, 1). Similarly, politics, while dealing with formal and informal contestations and control of managing a civil sphere through so-called rational legal structures, is construed as the arena of power involving much more than formal domination of state governance infrastructure to include “power to”, “power over”, “power for” as well as “domination” (Lukes 2005, 27; 64). It may also mean the mobilisation of non-legal, other-worldly, resources in influencing decisively these worldly structures and affairs, for example, under theocracy, to be discussed below. According to this conceptualisation – and because politics is about the distribution of power in a society – power is at the core of politics; it is the locomotive that propels and determines political activities, organisations, and objectives.

The relationship between politics (understood broadly as power archives) and religion (understood as ritual archives) is multifaceted and complex. While religion provides a moral, metasocial conceptual framework for the organisation of perception and social structure and ethical stability, politics as the sphere of (the exercise of) power depicts the arena of real interests and social capacity for action, as “productive, transformative, authoritative [domination which can be] compatible with dignity” (Lukes 2005, 109). For the purposes of this chapter, religion is conceived as “the political economy of the sacred” (Chidester 2012, 4; 44) and ritual archive; the sacred is variously referenced as the metasocial, the other-worldly or the meta-
empirical world, or the ritual economy that guides, motivates, or inspires a group or a people to interpretations, practices and perspectives related to their surrounding environment and experiences of being in the world. Framed in this broad sense, religion constitutes the tangible and intangible sociocultural and eco-political heritage of a people and society. Similarly, politics, etymologically derives from the Greek πολιτικός, which relates to the affairs of the πόλις, the assembly of free citizens or the ἐκκλησία (Seiwert 2016, 430). In both common, everyday usage and scholarly discourse, it is often understood as the political economy of power, power being variously referenced as domination, and real interest in the sphere of social reality that is separate from economics, family, or religion. The social sphere of politics, therefore, concerns the formal contestation over control of (the formation of) state policies and their implementation, political parties, and governance structure. Though the two spheres of politics and religion are diffused and protean in conceptualisation, they are also differentiated social realities. Even so, they are related and overlap in many respects. In this chapter, the relationships between politics and religion are examined in respect to the concept of civil religion, theocracy, secularisms, and the separation between state, as a formal structure of governance, and religion, as a meta-social sphere that relates citizens to extra-empirical entities and realities.

2 Civil Religion

In contemporary societies and nations, politics relates to religion in different ways, one of which is usually termed civil religion. This concept captures a set of values and norms, practices and attitudes and beliefs which a society recognises that sacralise and impose upon it a transcendental mission. In such a society, the political authorities or structure, in addition to being informed by a legal-rational ethos, also express a charismatic aura. Civil religion expresses aspects of the overarching dimensions of social reality in society. Under the ethos of civil religion, the object of belief is not the invisible realm but the social sphere where the nation becomes the transcendental repertoire of consent, loyalty and emotion that holds citizens together and, according to the famous definition of religion provided by Émile Durkheim, “unite [them] into a single moral community [...] all those who adhere to them” (Durkheim [1915] 2008, 47). In civil religion, the nation-state is set up both as a dimension of social reality and a “conception of destiny” as the “ultimate object of loyalty and devotion” (Smith 1994, 8). In the context of the secularisation debate of the mid-1960s which posited increasing disenchantment of modernity because of the consequences of technological and scientific thinking and application (Wilson 2016), Robert Bellah, borrowing the phrase of ‘civil religion’ from the title of the last chapter of Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s The Social Contract (Rousseau [1762] 1994), proposed what amounted to arguably the most powerful articulation of a civil religion thesis within the American context. Rousseau’s (Rousseau 1994, 158 – 168) version aimed at sacralising the state to avoid the divisiveness and half-hearted civil commitment which
multiple religious traditions and institutions create in terms of citizens’ allegiances. In the seminal essay “Civil Religion in America” Bellah (1967, 1970, 168–189), inspired by Durkheimian sociology (rather than Rousseau’s ideas), examines the American nation as an entity that transcends itself as an embodiment of critical ethical principles under which its citizens are subordinate. He compares how the dominant religion of America, which is Protestant Christianity, has shaped and informed social and civic consciousness of Americans, which is evident in the ritual components, metaphors, and religious ideas within political culture. Civil religion is the concept that captures what he terms “a clearly differentiated [...] religious dimension [that is] elaborate and well-institutionalized” (Bellah 1970, 167) which exists alongside traditional religion. In Bellah’s repurposing of the concept of ‘civil religion’ core Christian (read: British Puritanistic) ideas and the belief in a moral God who is the creator of humanity are the driving imperative and objective of political practice and goals. Through this concept, he undergirds the religious dimension of American political culture and social discourse and how the nation could be an object of self-idolisation and self-worship.

Every nation and society articulate specific relationships between dominant religious values and institutions and organisation of civil and political life and culture; civil religion refers to the institutionalised collection of sacred beliefs, rituals, and symbols of a nation. Bellah offers a loose definition of the concept as “a collection of beliefs, symbols, and rituals with respect to sacred things and institutionalized in a collectivity” (Bellah 1967, 175) called a nation. In this conceptualisation, civil religion is distinct and distinguishable from denominational religion even though the former borrows extensively from the latter. The ritual objects of civil religion include founding documents and constitutions which function symbolically as civil scriptures, inaugural speeches of political leaders which are likened to religious sermons. Important national celebrations such as anniversaries and Independence Day take on the value of rituals in terms of solidarity and the re-enactment of divine intervention or transcendental ethics in the life of the nation. In this sense, civil religion is a social fact that exists, a social reality that can be perceived and analysed and reconstructed; more importantly, it affects and structures how individuals relate to one another and to the state. It is a specific objective realm of action and perception, a site of convergence between politics and religion.

While it may be debated whether civil religion is a delineated realm of ‘social facts’ – defined by Durkheim as “the clearest thing in the world [which] vary with the social system of which they form a part; they cannot be understood when detached from it” (Durkheim 2008, 27, 94) – as Bellah had conceived, the concept expresses a specific manner in which politics and religion relate as social realities or objective social facts, shaping the public sphere and discourses. Consistent with Durkheimian sociology, civil religion as social fact influences – though not in a deterministic way – categories of thought in a society (Durkheim 2008, 145). In different societies, civil and political culture interpenetrates with the religious and spiritual or mythic realm, each reinforcing and strengthening the other, sharing symbols, ideas, motifs,
ethics, and concepts such as “the values of liberty, justice, charity, and personal virtue” (Christiano, Swatos, and Kivisto 2016, 65). Religion in subtle ways frames political purposes, interests, and agenda (Martin 2010).

The debates on the analytical character and utility of civil religion and the application of the concept in socio-political contexts other than the United States are still ongoing. If religions usually and definitionally reference a transcendence and are articulated in creeds, what is the creed of civil religion? According to Bellah, “[t]here is no formal creed in civil religion” (Bellah 1970, 183), and because of this, the concept is nebulous, assimilating or accommodating of anything anyone wants to describe as civil religion, “a secularized ‘cult of man’” (Thompson 1998, 104). A creedless civil religion suffers from similar conceptual and analytical muddles in the definitions of belief found in the work of David Hume, one of which is that “belief is nothing but a more vivid, lively, forcible, firm, steady conception of an object, than what the imagination alone is ever able to attain.” (Hume [1748] 2007, 48). How is civil religion conceptualised in societies where there is a plurality of institutional or organised religions or where the state enforces a specific religion rather than have religious solidarity emerge from a voluntary polity? While these questions deserve more elaborate analysis than is possible in this chapter, the explanatory utility of the concept could be found in the diverse ways in which contemporary society is reified and transcendentalised, for example, in constitutional patriotism or hyper nationalism where devotional fervours and unconditional, absolute allegiances to the nation-state are demanded of citizens. The concept also sheds some light on the boundaries between religious resurgence within spiritual communities and political nationalism that have emerged in the context of globalisation and its discontents. Furthermore, the concept is applicable outside of western democracies, for example, in the debates surrounding the possibility of Confucianism emerging as a form of “Chinese civil religion” in contemporary China (Zhe 2013, 48).

In contemporary societies under the influence of globalisation, civil religion is a veritable structure and process in which political discourses and ideas are revitalised and reinfused with moral vigour and energy. In an era of populist politics and religious hyper nationalism across the world (for example, the controversies about the faith and pastor of Barack Obama (Mansfield 2008), Conservative Protestant Trumpism, Hindu nationalism, etc.), civil religion as non-religious sacred nationalism offers some insights into the relationship between political discourse, the public sphere and religious ideas and imagination. Similarly, the raging debates surrounding homosexuality and same-sex relationship as well as the criminalisation of such behaviours in Africa, which are evidently driven by religious morality and ethical apocalypticism (Ukah 2016b, 2018a), can be analysed under the rubric of African civil religion. Also, widespread instances of religiously infused and motivated virulent hate speech (Ukah 2019) in Africa may be viewed as a form of political interaction with religion in a rapidly changing media environment. This sort of religion increasingly re-enchants political discourses with sacred and transcendental values. As Grave Davie (Davie 2001) argues, there are growing examples of what could be con-
ceptualised as a ‘global civil religion’ constituted by strands of institutions and religious practices from different parts of the world.

3 Theocracy

“Originally men had no kings except their gods, and no government except theocracy” (Rousseau 1994, 158). If Rousseau’s statement is accepted as historical and factual, theocracy becomes the oldest form of governance system. Further, if this statement is interpreted to mean that at some point in human history deities personally presided over human affairs as ‘kings’ or rulers, then it is indeed difficult to understand with any degree of analytical precision what the concept of theocracy means. However, the concept has a long and complex history, with many layers of meaning: “The theocratic form of government is particularly difficult to understand, partly because the word can be taken to mean so many different things and also because the regimes which can be labelled theocratic in one sense or another appear too different” (Ferrero and Wintrobe 2009, 1). Etymologically, theocracy is the system of government of gods and deities and their representatives of human society. Derived from the Greek θεοκρατία, meaning ‘rule by god’, the word was coined by the Jewish priest-historian, Joseph Ben Mattias better known as Titus Flavius Josephus (37 / 38 – 100 CE) specifically in reference to preferred Jewish systems of governance and the role of Moses as a lawgiver, a divine personality or ‘man of God’, and an interpreter of the will of Yahweh, the Hebrew God. According to Josephus, for the Jews, “the God of Israel was allowed to be supreme King of Israel, and his directions to be their authentic guides, God gave them such directions as their supreme king and governor; and they were properly under a theocracy” (A. J. 2.6 – 24, 3.180, 4.13, 150, 156; C. Ap. 2.75, 145, 154; see Josephus 1974, 1137; 2006, 663; on Moses as the initiator of theocracy, see van Setsers 2005, 6199). Originally, theocracy defines “divine government of the Jewish nation” (Josephus 1974, 507), which is the only way in which Josephus was able to explain and compare the Jewish political organisation and system to Hellenistic systems such as monarchy, oligarchy, or a republic. Understood as the rule of gods over humans, theocracy is an extreme form of the relationship between politics and religion or the supernatural.

Theocracy does not literally mean that gods and deities assume governmental power over humans but that individuals, particularly a sacerdotal order, assume political control of a society claiming divine mandate or commission. For this class of actors, ascribing authority to a meta-social or metapolitical order guarantees obedience and allegiance for divine guidance and precept. Theocracy, therefore, is an intensely contested system in which a class of religious officials exercise political power and authority or even rule directly. The class of religio-political actors ascend their position in their capacity as interpreters or translators of a divine will. As a rule of gods through a sacerdotal order, theocracy is also a hierocracy or an “ecclesiocracy” (Salmon 2009, 57). In a theocracy, the divine will override and overwrites the will
of the δῆμος, the people; and the source of authority is assumed to be invisible and inscrutable: god, gods, deities, the sacred, the supernatural, ancestors/ancestresses, in other words, the meta-social. Theocracy is a government based on and circumscribed by a theological faith, implicitly or explicitly, which may be derived from institutional religion or rational ideologies that Smith characterise as quasi-religions – “ultimate object[s] of loyalty and devotion” (Smith 1994, 8). These rational ideologies include humanism, nationalism, communism, or Marxism. According to Mario Ferrero (Ferrero 2009), although theocracy is transreligious and transcultural, the theocratic ruling class is historically male. Theocracies, therefore, correlate negatively with women’s participation in public power; this is especially the case with Islamic theocracies in Sharia states.

It is not infrequent that the mention of theocracy is associated with Muslim majority countries or Islamic regimes such as the Iranian state government or the Taliban during their rule in Afghanistan. Theocratic strains can, however, be noted in almost every society and type of government from the British monarchy and its relationship with the Church of England to the American system of democracy with its conservative evangelical political resurgence. Sometimes what appears as a constitutional democracy is, in fact, a disguised theocracy. Nigeria is a good example: the debate whether it is a secular or a multireligious state is a perennial one. Christians claim and insist that the operative 1999 Constitution is a secular document; Muslims decry even the use of the word ‘secular’ because to them, it means irreligious. Nigerian Muslims claim their faith does not permit them to live in an irreligious state. Furthermore, the Preamble to the Constitution states thus: “We the people of the Federal Republic of Nigeria Having firmly and solemnly resolved, to live in unity and harmony as one indivisible and indissoluble sovereign nation under God.” To live “under God” is precisely what a theocracy means in its original Josephusian sense even though the nature and character of this ‘God’, used seven times in the document, is never elaborated. Even more confounding for those who believe that the Constitution is a secular document is that while ‘Christian’ or ‘Christianity’ does not occur in the document, “Islam/ic” occurs 28 times; “Muslim/s” occurs 10 times and “Sharia” occurs a staggering 73 times. The mere appearance of words may seem insignificant but cumulatively, it is plausible to argue that they point to a major discursive, legislative, and interpretative direction, which is towards upholding, reinforcing and sign-posting Islamic legal and religious ideas, purposes, interests and agenda. Because these Islamic concepts predominate and are used in strategic contexts, 12 of the 36 (sub-national) states of the country have adopted expanded versions of Sharia penal codes since 1999/2000 (Ostien, Nasir, and Kogelmann 2005; Harnischfeger 2008; Chesworth and Kogelmann 2014), effectively practising a version of theocracy that may be called ‘theodemocracy’ or theocratic democracy.

The response of Nigeria’s large Christian population to the increasing ‘Shariafication’ of the country’s sociolegal environment and the crowding out of competing religious communities, symbols, ideas, and discourses has been confounding, too. As expected, Christians decry the imposition of Sharia penal codes in large swaths of northern Nigeria, but they fail to provide a viable alternative other than following the pathway defined by Muslims. Christians, in particular the Pentecostal community, designate the country as a ‘Christian nation’ whose leaders, especially at the national level, must be born-again Christians and ‘servants of God’ imbued with divine guidance based on the Judeo-Christian scripture. Nigerian Christians, basing their argument on articles 10 and 38(1) of the Constitution which contains the disestablishment and free exercise of religion clauses,³ insist that the nation is a secular State; they have still proceeded to supply religious arguments and rhetoric for wanting to Christianise a secular State (Ukah 2014; 2018b). In this articulation, the electorate is reduced to giving accent to divine choice rather than expressing their own will in choosing a leader through the exercise of electoral politics. For both Nigerian Muslims and Christians, therefore, politics is a religious vocation and exercise by other means. Inversely, religion is a political practice by other means. When they speak of ‘democracy’, they in practice mean and prefer a theocracy where the will and guidance of a god supersedes the will of the electorate. Theocracy shows the degree to which a government approximates to religion in its structures, ideologies, and practices. The Nigerian example, which can be multiplied across countries and continents, illustrates that a theocratic impulse could still be evident even in an ostensibly liberal democracy.

4 Secular / Sacred Distinction

The concepts of religion and politics are, in theory, conceived to represent two distinct, even if related social spheres and realities. This analytic distinction is not a given or obvious in many societies. Historically, the distinction is recent. The phenomenologist of religion, Mircea Eliade postulates about “two modes of being in the world, two existential situations assumed by man in the course of his history” (Eliade [1957] 1987, 14), these he calls ‘the sacred’ and ‘the profane’. This distinction is necessary, according to Eliade, because it better brings out “the specific characteristics of life in a world capable of becoming sacred” (Eliade 1987, 15). The sacred is the experience of the nonworld, the meta-world, while the profane is the experience of the world; both types of experiences occur within corresponding types of spaces;

³ Art.§10: “The Government of the Federation or of a State shall not adopt any religion as State Religion”. Art. §31(1): “Every person shall be entitled to freedom of thought, conscience and religion, including freedom to change his religion or belief, and freedom (either alone or in community with others, and in public or in private) to manifest and propagate his religion or belief in worship, teaching, practice and observance.”
sacred experience occurs within “strong, significant space” while profane experience occurs within “amorphous, neutral space” (Eliade 1987, 20). By extension of Eliade’s distinction, the sacred space is the religious space where structured, significant experience occurs while the profane of this world is the space of amorphous experience of politics or political mystique that degenerates human religious imagination.

Before Eliade’s writing, the distinction between the sacred and the secular was already at the root of the theory, controversies and debates about ‘secularisation’, a concept that Max Weber (1864 – 1920) invented and introduced to the sociology of religion (Weber 1946, 307, 311; 1991 [1922], 47). Etymologically, both secular and secularisation came from the Latin root of sæculum, which means an age or an era, and by extension “a spirit of an age” (Christiano, Swatos, and Kivisto 2016, 55). The secular thus means the physical, social world with all its trappings and temptations. In Weber’s theorisation, the greatest engine of secularisation is the rationalisation of thought and action which produces demystification or de-magicalisation of thought and action; it is die Entzauberung der Welt, or “the disenchantment of the world” (Hanson 2001, 105). Disenchantment is “a transformation of structures of consciousness in terms of their rationalization” (Riesebrodt 2010, 175). Rationalisation process produces secularisation and results in the disenchantment of the world in which religion, its gods and structures lose their influence on people’s imagination and the organisation of the social world. Secularisation dereligionizes the world, exiles magic and miracle and produces a declining sphere of religious influence, power, authority, institutions on human action and social organisation (Wilson 2016, 3 – 7) by freeing institutions from religious control and domination.

While Weber believed that the distinction between the sacred and the secular, and its consequent disenchantment of the world, is necessary to produce progress and development, Durkheim believes that such a distinction is necessary for the formation of society itself, a more radically foundational and fundamental idea. According to the interpretation of the German sociologist, Martin Riesebrodt,

For Durkheim, human beings and society have two dimensions, a profane and a sacred. Man is profane in his bodily needs and desires, in his egotism and self-centeredness. He is sacred as a moral, social being who is able to transcend these limitations. Society is profane in its everyday economic life, which primarily serves the needs of physical reproduction. (Riesebrodt 2010, 62 – 63)

A completely profane person or society is impossible; so also, is a completely sacred person or society. It takes the coexistence of both dimensions to coordinate and cooperate for either humans or society to exist, interact, network, produce and reproduce. The sacred realm of society represents religion while the profane sphere represents its political yearnings and ambition. Even for many societies, (for example, in Africa) where there are no words for ‘religion’ (Ukah 2016a, 48; 49 Shaw 1990, 339), this spiritual dimension exists and articulates the peoples’ non-worldly desires but exists in tension with the mundane and profane concerns that make life and living possible. The distinction between the sacred and the profane or secular is analytical;
the existence of one sphere makes the other possible. Similarly, the distinction be-
tween politics and religion is amorphous, nebulous, and analytically useful but as
dimensions of social reality, hard to concretely demarcate.

## 5 Separation between State and Religion

A nation-state is a collective formed by a government that assumes a legal and moral
right to control and reserves the use of force as a last resort in exercising jurisdiction
over a territory and its citizens (Cohen, Kennedy, and Perrier 2013, 85). In many parts
of the world, the nation-state is a recent phenomenon, although in Europe and Japan
it predates modernity. The State is (presumed to be) the core sphere of politics, the
realm of the secular and this-worldly organisation and distribution of power and
the exercise of authority over commonly owned resources through legal-rational le-
gitimation. Religion, on the other hand, is the realm of non-worldly power and exer-
cise of authority through charismatic (or in some instances, traditional / cultural),
non-legal-rational legitimation. The modern state makes claims, demands allegiance,
and exercises its power and sovereignty on territories and populations, while religion
does not make a similar claim to territorial sovereignty but demands loyalty and allegiance over populations. The separation between the state and reli-
gion in western countries as well as in many non-western nations is recent and varies
from one state to another. The arguments and purpose of such separation are subject
to debate. Some scholars argue separation constitutionally provides a level playing
ground for a plurality of religious groups and traditions, allowing the state to be the
guarantor of freedoms and rights of all citizens (Laborde 2016). Perhaps, more impor-
tant in the separation of state from church – considering the long-drawn-out reli-
gious wars in Europe – is to protect the state from religious interference in the run-
ning of government and statecraft. Separation is, therefore, a response to the fact
and reality of religious plurality and diversity and the inevitable competition to con-
trol instruments of state. It is easy to point out inconsistencies and contradictions in
both the conceptualisation and application of the doctrine of separation of spheres
of operations. In many instances, the wall of separation is a flexible, porous, and
permeable one that permits mutual interaction and influence.

In European countries, the state performs services that benefit institutional reli-
gious organisations, a practice that is not possible in the United States where the dis-
establishment of state and church is aggressively policed. However, religious organ-
isations active in the provision of social welfare increasingly benefit from
government funds in the United States. Also, in recent years, state officials promul-
gate and justify policies based on sacred scriptures (Miller and Shimron 2018). Such
services which some states provide for religious, mainly Christian, organisations in
Europe include the collection of church tax and help with maintenance of church
property. In Nigeria which claims to be an electoral and constitutional democracy,
the state spends more on religious buildings and pilgrimages than it does on the provision of education and healthcare put together.

Aside from Muslim majority states that are avowed Islamic republics, where there is an intimately intermingled circulation of power between the spheres, in many other modern states, the doctrine of separation of state structures, policies and practices from religious ideologies and organisations is the norm of political and philosophical orthodoxy (Martin 2010). In practice, however, many states – such as South Africa where religious organisations are powerful social actors and power brokers – find it impracticable to keep government policies away from religion, or religion away from the state. The overarching function of the state is partly to exercise oversight even on the legitimate exercise of the freedom of religion and other religious rights. Another factor that poses a strong challenge to divorcing the state from religious practice is the rise of religious hypernationalism across many countries (Europe and Asia; in Africa, Pentecostalism – and in the United States, the rise of Alt-Right (or Alternative Right) in its merging with conservative evangelical Christians) and its interaction with visible political roles. In the case of the Alt Right, an amorphous collection of white supremacist groups, neo-Nazis, racist ideological formations and white conservative Christians, the election of President Donald Trump has helped in no small measure to boost the visibility and embolden its online voice and influence over US State policy formulation and implementation (Futrell and Simi 2018). In this new unfolding environment, and in many other countries, old inhibitions against the mixing of state policies and support with religion is waning and old barriers are breaking down with powerful religious organisations infiltrating and controlling state organs and facilities. The principle of separation of state and religion will remain in place but will be likely observed in breaches, a point to underscore the intricate and inextricable relationship between politics and religion and the circulation of power between different domains in society.

6 Conclusion

Politics and religion are spheres of human practice and performance that exist in mutual tension. As spheres of power and domination, there are many dimensions to their relationship. Some of those analytical spheres have been discussed in this chapter, drawing examples from several societies and countries but especially from Africa where the postcolonial state is frail and fragile, often contending with residual religious institutions and attitudes. Religion as the political economy of the sacred and ritual archive is not a priori apolitical; it is intimately connected with power that claims to transcend the sphere of the social. Claiming that it is or should be separated from politics, a core and foundational domain of power, is to obfuscate complex imbrications of the mutual reinforcement of politics and religion. As the above discussions illustrate, the intersection between politics and religion is complex, complicated, and intricate because both spheres of social reality and expe-
rience are potential sources and structures of moral purpose, real interests, and social action. As dimensions of social reality, the relationship between politics and religion is a continuum. Politics and religion are structures to explain the world, providing moral meaning between events and peoples or groups and their total environment (social, economic, cultural, physical, ethical, geopolitical). Religion generates communities of belief; politics creates communities of real interest. Both domains have a direct bearing on power structures, circulation of power and ways of gaining access to and controlling or dominating these structures. Like modernity, the relationship and intersection between politics and religion embody some contradictions and tensions that can be seen in civil religion, theocracy, the conceptual attempts to distinguish between the secular and the sacred, and the constitutional separation between the state and religion in liberal and constitutional democracies; between separation/disestablishment and recognition/establishment. Through politics and religion, real “needs and interests are articulated and pursued in the framework of structural possibilities and ideological orientations” (Riesebrodt 2010, 181) inevitably resulting in contradictory outcomes and social realities.

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