

Democracy, Culture, and Catholicism

Research Project Proposal Application:
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Alter/native Democracies: Muslim and Catholic Negotiations of Culture, Religion, and Citizenship in the 21st Century

In June 2009, Pope Benedict XVI issued a new encyclical letter entitled *Caritas in Veritate*, that is, *Love in Truth*. This letter was directed to Christians and to all those who are interested in seriously engaging questions regarding democracy, justice, and development in the modern world. The pontiff concluded that in our times democracy offers the best political system for providing justice and freedom.

In modern nations where Catholics live together with Muslims in majority/minority relationships, challenges to justice and equality persist and have been addressed constitutionally in a variety of ways. However, both old and newer issues and challenges to the ability of democratic processes to ensure full equality of citizenship continue to be raised and debated in the public sphere.

The purpose of this project is to engage the seminar topic “democracy culture, and Catholicism” by studying theological and conceptual ramifications of certain practices in modern democracies that place Catholics and Muslims in dialogue and contestation with one another. In my project I intend to research two specific areas and subsequently to integrate the results of each inquiry into a broader theological reflection bringing Catholic and Islamic theological perspectives on modern democracy into conversation.

The first inquiry will consider the practice of reserving electoral seats for religious minorities in a number of contemporary democratic states with Muslim majority populations. The second related, but more theoretical piece of the project, reviews and puts into theological contexts discussions of cultural or multicultural citizenship that have emerged with the rise of Muslim immigration into the traditionally Christian nations of Western Europe and North America.

My primary academic expertise is in the Islamic religious tradition, as well as in the academic study of religion, including comparative theology. Therefore I am proposing a project demonstrating how negotiations of religion, culture, and democracy are practically and theoretically relevant to Catholicism and Catholics in interaction with Muslims.

The first topic is of particular relevance since most, but not all, of the states that reserve electoral seats, including Pakistan, Lebanon, and Jordan, are majority Muslim societies in which Catholics, along with other Christian denominations, constitute minority population groups. It will therefore be a contribution to the seminar to collect and analyze Catholic perspectives on the part of those actually affected by these systems as well as any official positions taken by the church or its representatives concerning such arrangements. This material will be examined together with sources, constitutional, electoral, and legal/theological, produced by Muslim supporters or critics of systems that reserve seats for religious and other minorities, as well as for females. For contrastive

purposes I will also consider India—where both Muslims and Catholics are minorities receiving reserved seats within a “secular” state.

Fortunately a good secondary literature already exists (Htun, Krook, Reyes) describing the constitutions and electoral processes in these countries. As an original contribution to this project I propose to explore writings by both Catholics and Muslims that take theological perspectives in addressing or justifying this phenomenon, for example, by invoking religious reasons or legal historical traditions that either support or challenge the legitimacy of reserving seats.

In terms of “justice” there are certainly arguments that having separate electoral seats is ultimately a more fair way of incorporating minorities into the democratic process, a perception that flies in the face of predominant secular notions of equal citizenship. There is also the factor that in developing countries, and in particular in certain Muslim states, expectations have been shaped by religious tradition in such a way that “justice” is not based on notions of equality, but rather resides in shari’a constructions of Muslim/non-Muslim relations that mandate asymmetrical reciprocity. This, in turn, entails a conceptualization of rights and duties that is arguably anchored in a specifically Islamic ethic. Interestingly, and this has to some extent been addressed in the existing literature, in addition to reservations for religious minorities, women’s quotas are also mandated in the electoral processes of some of these same states. (Krook, Rule)

We also know from the ongoing debates surrounding ratification of the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights that certain Muslim states, democratic and otherwise, have been reluctant to embrace the universality or equal allocation of certain legal rights. (Mayer).

It is therefore clear that in terms of religious traditions engaging democratizing norms and processes, Muslim examples in some instances will be comparable to Catholic experiences. At the same time, differences in theological and institutional elements of the religions suggest that comparison may offer opportunities to better understand their distinctive experiences of democratization in historical perspective.

The second component of the project will engage developments and challenges posed by religious identities to evolving notion of democratic citizenship in a globalizing world. For example, post 9/11, a number of scholars in Western societies have suggested that despite receiving the rights to vote and other benefits when achieving naturalization, Muslim immigrants are held to notions of cultural citizenship that exclude them from being full participants in society in other important ways. (Ewing, Maira) The very process of immigration and the possibility of becoming naturalized are most liberal in American contexts, less so in Europe, and almost impossible in many of the Muslim majority and other states that have constitutions and quota systems that explicitly structure electorates along religious lines. How does this disparity in accepting others as citizens impact perceptions of democracy?

Just as theorists of modernity and secularism such as Dilip Gaonkar and Charles Taylor have suggested the emergence of “alter/native modernities” as part of a globalized future, the varied national approaches to addressing ethnic and religious diversity in instituting democratic and electoral processes suggest that in diverse cultural and religious contexts, some version of “alternative democracies” will emerge. Certainly in the Muslim world, attempts to theorize and even implement Islamic democracy have competed with attempts to formulate systems of Islamic socialism, Islamic theocratic

statehood, and so on. More recently new “Muslim Democrats” have ridden into power in nations such as Turkey on a groundswell of populist piety that contrasts with the top-down state Islamization policies of the 1980s, and the more strident agendas of overtly Islamist political parties. (Nasr)

The second component of my project is therefore to bring religious factors and perspectives—Catholic or Muslim—into conversation with theoretical debates about these issues of incorporation and religious identity in democratic states. Such debates are particularly charged in contemporary Europe where the immigrant Muslim population has recently been constructed in some quarters as inassimilable, ostensibly due to religious commitments and cultural practices that are alien to a perceived European consensus on values and habits. One hardly needs to be reminded of instances where such tensions emerged, including the range of criticisms of Pope Benedict’s Regensburg address and the recent Swiss vote banning the construction of new minarets.

This project will certainly shed light on multiple ways in which religion has interacted with democratic movements in diverse cultural contexts. In the aftermath of the move to decolonization following World War II, nation states emerged in the Muslim World that drafted constitutions providing varying degrees of democratization. The recent problematic experiences of nation building in Iraq and Afghanistan, where democratization was a major rationale for an American military presence, are particularly salient. Such cases embody the tension between Western “secular” and local Islamic ideas of citizenship. Related divergences regarding the ultimate sources of law have also emerged in attempts to draft new “democratic” constitutions for these nations. It is, in fact, in the cases of religious minorities and women’s rights that some of the greatest tensions between secular democratic and theologically grounded concepts of justice appear in such contexts. An issue of special concern to Catholicism is “religious freedom”, in particular the freedom to convert from Islam to Christianity, which remains a sensitive issue in many Muslim majority states.

I would therefore see my research project’s place within the seminar, in addition to its own intrinsic interest as:

- 1) documenting and analyzing selected national cases and the surrounding Muslim and Catholic discourses concerning the practices of allocating reserved seats in democratic elections and
- 2) offering analysis and reflection on debates on the role of religious identity in democratic citizenship (whether cultural or multicultural) with special attention to interventions on the part of Catholic or Muslim intellectuals or representatives.

The fact that I am myself a Muslim and that I primarily focus on Islamic contexts will also provide a foil to parallel and contrasting examples and debates about Catholicism, culture, and democracy that will emerge during ongoing deliberations within the seminar.

The research methodology for this project will be textual, historical and interpretive, drawing on documentation that exists in English and any other relevant languages, for example, sources in Urdu or Arabic in which the researcher is quite fluent.

The anticipated result at present is the academic paper of publishable quality that is a seminar requirement. Potential publication outlets include various refereed journals such as Muslim World, Comparative Islamic Studies, and Comparative Studies of South

Asia, Africa and the Middle East. This researcher has already published articles in the first two journals cited.

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