

What role should
religion play in
government policies?
assignment



Political Science 1020E Professor Nigmendra Narain Term 1 Essay: What role should religion play in government policies? By Nivedita Sen Student

Number: 250589199 Section ??? LEC 575 In today's world, religion plays a profound part in many people's lives and they find it important to firmly follow the guiding principles of a religion. Religion has been around for many years and although different people have their own definition of what it may be, religion is essentially a personal belief system. An individual's belief system is the set of principles by which the individual lives his/her daily life and which direct his/her thoughts and actions.

One question that arises in today's society is: What role should religion play in government policies? This essay argues that religion should play no role in government policies because it would affect democracy of the state, influence laws on the basis of religious grounds and cause oppression of minority religions. In this essay, I first put forward 3 arguments on why religion should play no part in government policies and support these arguments with a range of scholarly articles. Next, I present two counter arguments followed by a rebuttal for each.

This is followed by my conclusion, which re-states why religion should play no role in government policies. Religion is a significant factor in determining the quality of a democratic system (Braithwaite 2). Freedom of religion, or generally freedom of ethics, means that one does not need to agree with or acknowledge a religion or belief if it is against his or her wish. Furthermore, one should not be penalized if he or she wishes to follow one religion over the other or no religion at all. In a democratic system, a person's religious faith is an extremely personal subject.

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Everybody should have the right to follow any religion they desire as long as their religious beliefs are not imposed on others. The social impact of a religion greatly depends on whether it is supported by the majority or the minority of the population. A religion supported by the majority has a significant effect on government and on societal principles. This majority religion dominates and impacts the government considerably by either controlling the government. In order for a democracy to function, there needs to be complete separation of religion from government.

Addressing the connection between religion and democracy John Adams questioned, " Can a free government possibly exist with religion" (qtd. in Braithwaite 2). Similarly, James Madison asked, " What influence in fact have ecclesiastical establishments had on civil society? In some instances they have been seen to erect a spiritual tyranny on the ruins of civil society...in no instances have they been seen the guardians of the liberties of the people" (qtd. in Braithwaite 2). If religion plays a part in influencing government policies, there will one majority religion achieving control over the government.

This will result in religiously inspired policies dominating the social dimension and citizen equality being affected. According to Braithwaite, this happens because the size of the majority religious group can influence the society and create individual preferences (Braithwaite 4). This causes the establishment of particular norms and rules about conduct of behaviour on the basis of the preferences of the majority religious group. These norms discriminate against people who do not agree with the beliefs of the majority group (Braithwaite 4).

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As a result, the democratic system is affected with the minority groups losing trust in the government as they see the majority group's religious beliefs improperly influencing the state. Morals are norms of behaviour that the society acknowledges. Religion sets rules and customs for its followers. These religious rules influence the legislative system. If religion plays a role in government policies, it would also influence laws. For example, religious beliefs and morals influence abortion laws in many parts of the world.

It is still looked upon as morally wrong on the basis of religious ideas to undergo an abortion procedure. Phillip Montague points that " legal and political debate and decision making should be governed by standard criteria for assessing reasons and reasoning, and when religious considerations fail to satisfy such criteria, they should not be allowed to influence matters of law and public policy" (Montague 17). He further states that these matters consist of abortion, capital punishment, and euthanasia along with numerous subjects of social justice such as welfare policies.

Montague claims that in comparison with secular reasons, " religious reasons fail by a wide margin to deal adequately with the complexity of such issues" (Montague 17). For instance, a person who argues that homosexuality is morally wrong for the reason that it opposes the divine law would be referring to religious grounds to support his argument and not secular. Individuals should not be arguing for restrictive laws or policies if they do not have secular grounds to support them.

They should only put across views that are based on secular reasons (Rosenblum 23). The results from Braithewaite and Bramsen's study which

examined the effects of SRAS on democracy showed that when the laws in a state are extremely sectarian and not secular in nature, the state is likely to be less democratic (Braithewaite and Bramsen 244). When religion is mixed with state, the outcome is societal norms created on the basis of religious beliefs of the majority religion and laws that are in some way influenced by it. As Nancy N.

Rosenblum points, partisan faith may forbid certain practices such as consumption of alcohol, abortion, setting up some foreign policy goals et cetera on the basis of religious reasons. (Rosenblum 21). These norms of behaviour and religiously influenced laws are also imposed upon citizens who do not adhere to the majority religion and take away their freedom of faith. Some minority groups have experienced disadvantages inflicted by the state when they were not exempted from laws that called for conduct which did not agree with their beliefs, or which inflicted additional costs on them for observing their beliefs.

They argue that enforcing such laws causes them to be penalized on the basis of their religion and prohibit them from fair membership in the society (Smithey 89). Therefore religion should be kept separate from the state or government. Another issue arising from the interference of religion in government policies is that religious minority groups may face oppression from the religious majority groups, resulting in tension between the two groups. As stated in the Canadian Charter, “ policies that privilege the religious beliefs of some and not those of others pose equality problems ecause of the potential for creating in-groups and out-groups on the basis of religion” (Smithey 88). This may lead to things such rebellion by minority
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groups, conflicts and violence. Arabs form a minority group in Israel and one cause for Israel banning Kach (religious party in Israel), whose policy was forcing the “ transfer” of Arabs from Israel, was creating social violence. Arabs were described by Meier Kahane as “ cancer in the midst of us... Let me become defense minister for two months and you will not have a single cockroach around here!

I promise you a clean Eretz Yisrael” (Rosenblum 39). A study conducted by Jonathan Fox describes separation of religion and state (SRAS) as no government support for religion and no government intervention in the religious observations of the religions in a state, whether they be a minority religion or a majority religion (Fox 3). The results from Braithewaite and Bramsen’s study which examined the effects of SRAS on democracy showed that a state that gives preference a particular religion is likely to be less democratic (Braithewaite and Bramsen 244).

It also indicated that creating a state religion and putting constraints on religious minorities also decreases democracy in a state (Braithewaite and Bramsen 244). If the level of democracy in a state is less, it would automatically lead to conflicts between religious groups, with the minority getting oppressed by the majority because of their large population. Religious tyranny may result in the minority groups expressing their frustration by rebelling and means of violence. Therefore, religion should not play any part in government policies.

Many people may argue that religion should play a part in government policies and church and state should not be separated because any

organised religion is comprised of a code of conduct or a set of acceptable principles to live by forms the moral foundation of a society and helps to guide people. However, every religion has a different code of conduct. What may be acceptable by one religion might not be acceptable by another religion. If the state decides to follow the principles and morals of the majority religion, the minorities will not accept it.

This will cause clashes of beliefs and conflicts among religions, leading to a decrease in the level of democracy in the state. Also, there might be people who believe that they should follow their own set of morals and not be overshadowed by an organised religion. According to Ates Altinordu's study of Turkish Islam in the post 1970 time period, Turkey's leading social and political groups recognized Islamic activities as a threat to their identities and happiness (Altinordu 521).

Olivier Roy firmly states that under such situations, Muslim activists possibly might face circumstances similar to that faced by a religious minority in spite of living in a society where the majority religion was Islam (qtd. In Altinordu 521) People might also argue that if religion plays a part in government policies, it will bring about unification of all the people in the state under one religion. However, this will again bring about inequality among the different religions within the state as the majority religion will dominate other religions.

The minority will not have a say as they will be overshadowed by the majority. Government cannot mandate a religion over its citizens. For example, a Turkish woman's application against banning of the Islamic

headscarf was rejected by the European Court of Human Rights (Somer 13). A person should have the freedom to practice his/her religion and wear a headscarf. Therefore, religion should be kept away from politics and should play absolutely no role whatsoever in government policies.

This essay addressed the question: What role should religion play in government policies? It argued that religion should play no role in government policies. It proved this by showing that if religion played a part in government policies, it would affect the democracy of the state, influence laws on the basis of religious grounds and cause oppression of minority religions. It is evident from this essay that mixing religion with government policies only causes conflicts.

A person's religion should strictly be a personal matter and should not be inflicted or forced upon other people. More research should be done and surveys should be conducted throughout different countries with different cultural backgrounds to see how interference of religion in government policies adversely affects the democracy of the country and its citizens. Ideally, all countries would be secular. Although complete secularism is difficult to achieve, the separation of church and state will bring about some form of secularism.

This situation would be beneficial to all the citizens and no one will face injustice. Works Cited Alt? nordu, Ates. "The Politicization of Religion: Political Catholicism and Political Islam in Comparative Perspective." *Politics & Society* 38. 4 (2010): 517-51. Web. Brathwaite, R. , and A. Bramsen. "Reconceptualizing Church and State: A Theoretical and Empirical Analysis of

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