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Religion and Politics in Ancient Israel and Modern India: Issues and Inter-Actions

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SCHOLARS ARE PAYING more attention to the interaction between religion and politics in different historical periods and seeking to relate the lessons learnt to the contemporary situation and to shape the history of the nations. One of the main reasons for this recent trend is the growing religious fundamentalism and violence in different parts of the world. Some religious leaders try to impose on their contemporary societies the conditions and requirements of their scriptures or traditions which were written or developed in a particular historical and cultural context and so try to religionize the politics. In India, *Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh* (RSS) and *Vishwa Hindu Parishad*

(VHP) try to promote their fundamentalism through the ideology of *Hindutva* and their own understanding of nationalism.

Such leaders want the politics, economy and culture of their nations to be like those of the historical and cultural milieu in which their scriptures were written. It could be a reaction against modernization and globalization which influence their societies and threaten certain long cherished superstitions, beliefs and practices. In the struggle of the Cultural Revolution, countries such as Iran and Afghanistan were dominated by Ayatolla Khomeini and Taliban leaders respectively. On the other hand, during the political revolution in countries such as Russia, Cuba and China, religions were controlled by the political leaders. The politics of many nations are controlled by religious fundamentalists. Economic policies depend on the religious lead-

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ers who often control the governments of these nations. International relations also are based on religious trends in different parts of the world.

We notice a tension between the movement to take countries back to the situation of the scriptural period and the desire to move forward with a new interpretation of the scripture and accepting modernization in order to make progress. Can religion and politics play appropriate roles without trying to dominate or control one another? Can they complement each other, and contribute to the welfare and progress of society?

In this paper I am trying to apply the method of political reading to the history of ancient Israel to highlight the interaction of religion and politics. The main resource for the study of the history of ancient Israel is the written documents in the Old Testament. I will attempt to point out the important issues relating to the study of the interaction of religion and politics in the history of Israel, covering the period from Abraham through to the birth of Jesus during the rule of the Roman Empire. During this long historical context, the religion of Israel encountered the political powers within and outside the country.

I Interaction of Religion and Politics in Different Historical Periods

The three major divisions in the history of ancient Israel are the Pre-Exilic period (which includes the period of ancestors, bondage in Egypt and liberation, settlement in the land of Canaan and monarchy), the Exilic Period in

Babylon and the Post-Exilic period of return and restoration of the land. The books of Esther and Daniel tell us of the persecution of Israelites by the Persian and Greek rulers at a later part of the post-exilic period.

1. Ancestors and the Canaanites

Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, the ancestors of Israel received promises and instructions from Yahweh. Their faith began to take shape as they received the divine revelation and started worshipping Yahweh. Their worship was simple. They used stones to make altars and sacrificed animals. The entire extended family of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob took part in the worship and enjoyed sacrificial meals together. Worship strengthened their sociological relationship. The covenant established between the ancestors and Yahweh strengthened their religious relationship and enabled them to identify themselves as a community of Yahweh. This new community which began as a religious community of people believing and worshipping Yahweh had the prospect of becoming a political nation. The three elements essential for a political nation, 'land or geographical territory', 'people' and 'becoming great', are imbedded in the promises to Abraham and confirmed by the making of covenants (Gen. 12:1-3; 15; 17) between Yahweh and Abraham.¹

Interaction with other ethnic groups which used the city-state political sys-

¹ Theotonius Gomes, 'Biblical View of Religion and Politics', *Journal of Dharma* (Bangalore: Dharma Research Association), Jan-March, 2000, pp. 251-253.

tem occurred only when the ancestors of Israel and the people of Canaan had to settle a dispute over a well of water (Gen. 21:22-31; 26:19-31) or in times of exchanging sheep and hide for food or purchasing a piece of land from the Canaanites (Gen. 23: 3-18). Settling the disputes over the well of water involved making a covenant. Although the covenant made between Abimelech and Abraham and later between Abimelech and Isaac was not strictly for a political purpose, it was an important example of interaction between a local king and tribal leaders in the interests of peaceful co-existence. The military action of Abraham against the kings who came against the kings of Sodom and Gomorrah resulted in liberating not only Lot and his family but also the people of Sodom and Gomorrah (Gen. 14).

Abraham's action in fighting against those invading kings and liberating the captives was a fulfilment of his responsibility towards his kith and kin (14:14). But it brought freedom to the kings and people of Sodom and Gomorrah. Abraham was not willing to take advantage of the victory and keep the spoil of war to himself. Nor did he accept what was offered by the kings of Sodom and Salem as a reward for liberating their people (vv. 22-24). In his interaction with these kings, Abraham showed that his action was not for profit or making himself rich, but with humanitarian motives without expecting any reward. What sort of religious interaction went on between the ancestors and the Canaanites is not clear. The Canaanites did not interfere in the faith and worship of the ancestors.

2. Egyptian politics and the faith of Israel

The religion of Israel and the political power of Pharaoh, the King of Egypt, came into conflict when the descendants of Jacob were oppressed in bondage. We can list the political, social and economic reasons for the oppressive policies of the Egyptian government. Pharaoh and his officials regarded the Israelites as a political threat. As they had multiplied in Egypt, they could come to power and rule the country. Egyptians did not like the idea of immigrants ruling over them. Another suspicion was that the Israelites could join with the enemies of Egypt and fight against them in a time of war. Doubts about their political loyalty to Pharaoh during such an emergency became a reason to oppress them. Socially, the Israelites were looked down upon because they followed a pastoral occupation. They were also racially different from the Egyptians.

From the point of religion and culture, Israelites followed a different faith, one that was exercised by their ancestors, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. They were not willing to compromise their faith with the religion of Egypt by worshipping the Sun God Re or Memphis, or to mix with them in marriage. Economically, if the Israelites could be turned into bonded slaves, they would provide cheap labour for Egypt in the building of cities and store houses. All these factors led the Egyptians to adopt the policy of oppression.

The Israelites were not only denied freedom to continue their pastoral occupation, but were also denied the supply of raw materials like straw and

clay to make bricks. They had to find their own material and yet make the number of bricks fixed by the Egyptian authorities. They experienced the cruelty and exploitation of the Egyptians, and there was no one to raise a voice against this injustice. Any uprising of the Israelites against the Egyptians was met with an iron fisted reaction.

So the Israelites cried to the God of their ancestors to remember the promise and covenant and liberate them from bondage. Exodus 2:23-24 narrates their suffering in terms of crying, groaning and longing. This is an important text for Liberation Theology. We have to understand, as Walter Brueggemann says, that their outcries were not an expression of retreat and internalizing their fate but an expression of their struggle for justice.² Liberation of the poor and marginalized can begin only when they express their rejection of injustice and begin the struggle for freedom.

Exodus 2:24 tells us that God was not silent and inactive. God's initiative ignited the interaction between the politics of Pharaoh and the religion of the people of Israel. The verbs used in this text make it clear that God saw their plight, understood their pain and remembered his covenant with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. Some questions come to our mind: Why did God allow this oppression? Why was God silent for so many years? The answer is that the oppression was not created by God. God is against injustice and exploita-

tion. God has given us the freedom and responsibility to respect others and protect their rights. God wants the people to oppose any form of violence and injustice. A few people carry out oppression for their own gain. God waits and gives enough time for them to repent (cf. Jonah 3-4) and render justice to the victims.

Changing the lives of the oppressors is more important for God than punishing them. Repentance is better but it is difficult on the part of the oppressors. Once this expectation becomes a failure, God intervenes for the sake of the victims and brings the oppressors to justice. Meanwhile God wants the victims to raise their voice against the injustice done to them and calls on other well-wishers to express their solidarity with the victims in working for the justice. This struggle and experience in the liberation of the Israelites from the bondage of Egypt became a lesson for them not to oppress anyone in and outside their community and to work for the protection of human rights (Ex. 22:21-24; 23:9).

The encounter between religion and politics began to deepen when God sent Moses to Pharaoh through a vision of the 'burning bush', a call to serve him and a mission to rescue his people.³ One of the key factors in the religious faith of Israel is that Yahweh does not approve of slavery and bondage of human beings. The Israelites wanted to live with freedom in the land promised to their ancestors.

² Walter Brueggemann, *The Prophetic Imagination* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1982), pp. 21-23.

³ J.B. Jeyaraj, *Christian Ministry: Models of Ministry and Training* (Bangalore: TBT, 2002), pp. 91-94.

But Pharaoh used his political power and authority to resist their faith and ideology and suppressed them more. So the plagues followed (Ex. 3-12). These are regarded as miracles done by God.

We need to raise the question of the purpose of the plagues. The aim is not merely to show God's power or threaten Pharaoh. Hard-hearted people cannot be blackmailed or threatened to change their ways by doing miracles in their sight. These plagues could be looked at as economic sanctions against Egypt. There was no United Nations organization to impose economic sanctions against Egypt because of their oppressive policies. God had to use nature to put pressure on Pharaoh's government. Water got polluted. Agriculture suffered. Egyptians were affected and faced calamities, which worked out like economic sanctions against them. We cannot interpret all calamities as God's punishment or sanctions, particularly when the innocent poor and powerless suffer. What happened to the Egyptians is a particular case of sanctions against their injustice for a long period. This kind of pressure could persuade the Egyptians to do justice to the Israelites.

They yielded finally when they lost their first-born sons and animals. Should God have killed the eldest of the families and animals of the Egyptians to liberate the Israelites? This question is valid. The final plague was clearly targeted against the first born of the family and was not a random measure. For, according to primogeniture system, the first born of the families were the ruling class in Egyptian society, and this ruling class was

responsible for the oppression and exploitation. Whether they sat in the royal court of Pharaoh or in a village *panchayat* (court under the tree), they failed miserably to speak out against injustice or to work for the freedom and welfare of the Israelites living in the midst of them. They were accountable in the sight of God and had to face the verdict at the court of God.

God does not take pleasure in the suffering of the people or in punishing the culprits. But God has to maintain his stand against injustice, punish the oppressors and vindicate the victims. Otherwise God cannot be the God of justice and righteousness and can be easily rejected by the suffering people. The liberation of the bonded slaves from Egypt is an important experience, showing how God took the side of the poor and powerless. Religion should challenge political power whenever politics is misused to oppress people, curtail their freedom and violate human rights.

3. Politics of occupation and practice of religion

The journey from Egypt to Canaan was not easy. The worship of the Israelites started taking shape during the wandering in the wilderness. Their faith in Yahweh as the God of liberation played a significant role in the occupation of the land of Canaan.

a) The usual understanding is that the Israelites fought against the Canaanites, drove them out of their land and settled in it. This method, termed the 'Conquest model', is supported by texts in the Book of Joshua (e.g., chapters.6, 8, 10-12). A second theory, the 'Immigration Model',

speaks of the Israelites moving into the areas where there was no opposition or resistance.⁴ A third theory suggested by some scholars is the 'Revolt model' or 'Peasants' struggle'.⁵ This theory, which links the faith of Israel with the political system of Canaan, is also an answer to the question raised by the readers of the account of the settlement. Can the righteous God of Israel take the land of the Canaanites and give it to the people of Israel by instigating violence and battle?

According to the scholars who follow this theory, Yahweh is still the God of justice and righteousness. The entire land belongs to God and God can allow the Israelites who were landless to share the land of Canaan. The violence took place because the landlords and the rulers of the Canaanite cities did not allow the Israelites to settle down in the land. The attack was not targeted against the innocent peasants of Canaan but against the rulers. The ordinary peasants of Canaan were suffering under the rule of these landlords and kings. They were longing for freedom and to have the land for themselves.

When these poor Canaanite peasants came in contact with the liberated Israelites, the theology of liberation of the Israelites encouraged the peasants to struggle for freedom and gain their rights. So they joined with the Israelites and drove the landlords and rulers of Canaan. Their joint struggle was against the rich rulers and not

against the ordinary Canaanite families. They believed that God takes the side of the struggling peasants and the landless Israelites and supports the revolt. For they understood that the God who liberated them from the political power of Pharaoh could liberate the poor peasants of Canaan from their rulers and enable all the landless to share the land. The faith of Israel had encountered the political power of the rulers and landlords of Canaan in settling on the land.

b) Encounters between the religion of the Israelites and of the Canaanites became unavoidable because the two groups were living side by side. Their new environment compelled them to move into the occupation of agriculture in addition to continuing their pastoral work. The people of Israel depended on the Canaanites to learn about the agricultural seasons, nature of the soil and seed, the skill of ploughing, sowing and harvesting and even preserving the food grains. Canaanite agriculture was connected with their worship of Baal and the fertility cult. Canaanites believed that they should sacrifice animals, human beings, bring offerings and worship Baal to get rain and abundance of fruits and practise cult prostitution as a symbol of increasing fertility. They believed that Baal, the male god married to the goddess Ashtoreth, brought blessings to their agriculture and family. Baal and Ashtoreth were nature deities. The Canaanites worshipped the creation and practised superstitions and rituals.

The Israelites were warned not to accept their religion and worship Baal and practise human sacrifice and immorality. But the Canaanites taught them their religion which is so closely

4 John Bright, *History of Israel* (London: SCM Press, 1972), pp. 126-139.

5 N.K. Gottwald, *Tribes of Yahweh* (New York: Orbis, 1979), pp. 191-220.

connected with agriculture. Israelites started worshipping trees and plants and offering sacrifices and practising cult prostitution. They tried to keep both Yahweh and Baal in their lives and practise syncretism. This violation of law and covenant brought the indignation of Yahweh who allowed the Midianites and Philistines to attack and subdue the Israelites (Judg. 2:12-15; 3:12; 6:1-2; 13:1). The interaction between the religion of Israel and Canaanites, according to the narrative in the Book of Joshua, affected the political history of the Israelites. They had to become subservient to the Midianites and Philistines in their own land and serve these foreign nations for a number of years. But their repentance brought them freedom through the leadership of judges. This phenomenon of the close integration of religion and political destiny can be seen throughout their history.⁶

4. Monarchy, state and religion

One of the main reasons for the rise of the monarchy was the constant attacks of the neighbouring nations, such as the Philistines, Midianites, Edomites and Syrians, on the tribes of Israel. The system of tribal confederation and the leadership of the judges could not provide a permanent and stable administration. The political and security threat compelled the tribes of Israel to approach Samuel and ask for a king as in neighbouring nations (1 Sam. 8:1-9).

a) Religion played a major role in selecting the political leader. First, God had to reveal the person who was

to be the king of Israel. It was God's choice and not the choice of some individuals or priests. The choice is revealed to the prophet. Second, the prophet confirmed the choice of God to the people and asked the priests to conduct the worship and pour oil on the head of the selected person and consecrate him as king over Israel. Third, all the people assembled in the worship accepted the person of God's choice as their king and shouted 'Hail the King'. Kingship was not hereditary in Israel. It needed the approval of God, the prophet, priest and the public. No man could agitate to become the leader of the nation by bribe or by military coup. This principle of linking religion in the process of selection can be seen in the cases of Saul, David and Solomon (1 Sam. 8-10, 16, 1 Kgs. 1), but it was ignored later. We notice, therefore, the appearance of coups and resultant confusion in relation to the monarchy.

b) In Israel, kings were not authoritative leaders or superior figures. They were called as servants and representatives of God to the people. They had to carry out what God wanted in their administration and leadership. They had to practise only the values and principles of God and not follow their own interests. They were to protect the nation, provide justice and welfare and promote the worship of Yahweh. But many kings violated these principles and proved themselves irresponsible and therefore they were pronounced failures. The religion of Yahweh represented by the institution of priests and prophets supported the kings as long as the kings were fulfilling the expectation of Yahweh. Quite often, these religious representatives had encounters with the political authorities, crit-

⁶ Read 1 Sam. 8-2 Kings 25.

icizing their unjust policies and actions. For example, Nathan criticized David for his injustice to Uriah the Hittite and proclaimed God's punishment (2 Sam. 12: 1-19). Elijah's condemnation of the killing of Naboth and taking his vineyard is another example of the way the atrocities of Ahab and Jezebel were challenged (1 Kgs. 21).

The eighth century prophets, Amos, Hosea, Micah and Isaiah, raised their voice against unjust policies and actions of kings and judges and demanded justice and welfare to prevail (Amos 2:6-16; 5:24; Hosea 6:6; 9:9; Micah 2:1-5; 3:1-4; Isa.1:17; 3:12-15). They criticized the injustice done to individuals, community and other nations (Amos 1: 2-15). From the reaction of kings such as Ahab, Jeroboam and others (1 Kgs. 18-19), it is clear that the message had reached them. The state took action against the prophets. The prophets who represented religion had to endure persecution or humiliation. The state and religion clashed and some priests (e.g., Amaziah in Amos 7) joined the state machinery, but others stood with the prophets.

c) Interaction between kings and prophets continued to occur, either positively or negatively, during the division and fall of the monarchy. Sometimes the prophets supported and encouraged the kings to face the critical period in their history. For example, Shemaiah the prophet advised Rehoboam not to make war against the tribes which followed Jeroboam and made him as their king. By proclaiming God's words to Rehoboam and guiding him, the prophet avoided a civil war between the tribes of Judah and Benjamin and the rest of the tribes of Israel

in the north (1 Kgs. 12:20-24). Another prophet supported the plan of military action against Ben-Hadad who came to attack Israel (1 Kgs. 20:13-20). Elisha encouraged Jehoash, the king of Israel to attack and destroy the Arameans (2 Kgs. 13:14-25). Isaiah supported Hezekiah during the attack of Sennacherib and encouraged him to trust Yahweh for miraculous deliverance from the Assyrians (2 Kgs. 19:5-7).

At other times, they opposed the policies of the kings and called on them to face the consequences. For example, a prophet from Judah condemned Jeroboam for placing golden calves at Bethel and Dan, leading the Israelite to worship them and preventing them from going to Jerusalem for worship (1 Kgs. 13:1-5). Elijah condemned Ahab and Jezebel for promoting the worship of Baal in Israel and proclaimed God's judgement on them (1 Kgs. 18). The event at Mount Carmel is significant not only for religious reform but also for showing how risky it was to oppose political authorities. Hanani, the seer, criticized Asa, the king of Judah for relying on the support of the king of Aram rather than on Yahweh. For this criticism, Hanani was put in prison by Asa (2 Chron. 16:7-10). Hilkiah, the high priest brought religious reform through Josiah, the king of Judah (2 Kgs. 22:8-23). These incidents show that prophets and priests representing Yahweh took an active role in the politics of their time.

5. Political crisis, prophets and exile

As a result of the strong Babylonian attack on Judah from 600 BC to 587 BC, Jerusalem was destroyed. Many

families were deported to Babylon; in exile, they lost their freedom and hope of returning to their land. The southern kingdom went through a political crisis for a number of years. The monarchy in Israel came to an end in 587 BC. During the critical period before and after the fall of Jerusalem, Jeremiah played an important role interacting with the kings of Judah. Officials at the court, priests and the community were deported to Babylon and the remnant were left in Judah. Jeremiah wrote a letter to the exiles and advised them not to rebel against Babylon but to settle down, prosper and seek the welfare of Babylon because the exile was not going to end soon (Jer. 29:4-7). He advised Zedekiah the king to surrender to Babylon rather than to fight and lose the battle (Jer. 38:14-28).

The remnant left in Judah started migrating to Egypt to avoid the attacks of the Babylonians and sought the advice of Jeremiah. He advised them not to go to Egypt but to remain in Judah and survive. However, the leaders of the remnant rejected his prophecy and went to Egypt (Jer. 42:1-22). Jeremiah predicted the disaster coming upon Babylon. He wrote this message of judgment on Babylon and sent the letter through Seraiah to be read in the land of Babylon and then to be thrown into the Euphrates. So, he said, would Babylon sink to rise no more (Jer. 51:60-64). To play the role of a religious leader and guide the rulers and community in the period of political crisis is not easy. Jeremiah was misunderstood, persecuted and punished. His interaction contributed to major political decisions.

Ezekiel, another prophet of the exile, was known for his visions of God

and for the prophecies about the fate of the people which he proclaimed. Unlike Jeremiah, he did not interact with political leaders and the people—except once when he advised the elders of Israel who came to consult him about the future of the nation. Ezekiel proclaimed God's decision that the punishment on Israel would continue for some more years (Ezek. 20:1-44). Ezekiel and Deutero-Isaiah might not have had personal interaction with political leaders and authorities of Babylon but their prophecies encouraged and strengthened the faith of the people of Israel in exile. They proclaimed that Yahweh, the God of Israel is powerful and would bring the Israelites to their land again from the captivity in Babylon (Ezek. 40-48; Isa. 40:1-5; 43:1-13; 49:8-18).

6. Governors, prophets and restoration

As the prophets predicted, the people of Israel were able to return from exile. It is believed that some officials and influential people of the Jewish community who lived in Babylon could have played an important role in convincing Cyrus, the Persian king, to enact the Edict in 537 BC. This law enabled the Jews to return to their land, reconstruct the temple and reorganize their society. The rise of good leaders among the Jewish community such as Sheshbazzar (538 BC), Zerubbabel (520 BC), Ezra (458 BC) and Nehemiah (445-430 BC) gave confidence to the people to return in different groups under their leadership and restore the land. However, politically, they were not able to re-establish the monarchy or govern themselves, but

instead, they had to live under the governors appointed by the Persian kings. Tattenai, the governor of the province of Judah was not in favour of the Jewish people restoring the temple and the wall. He objected to the effort of Zerubbabel and the Jewish community (Ezra 3-5).

This encounter between the political authority of Tattenai, the governor, Rehum, the commanding officer, Shimshai, the secretary on the one side and Zerubbabel, priests and people of Israel on the other side, could have resulted in the murder of Zerubbabel (cf. Isa 52-53).⁷ But Nehemiah's interaction with Artaxerxes, the Persian king convinced the king to send Nehemiah himself as the governor of Judah, granting him the authority to rebuild the walls of Jerusalem (Neh. 2:1-8). The confrontation of Tobia and Sanballat with Nehemiah did not stop the work of rebuilding the wall or reorganizing the post-exilic community (Neh. 2:9-10; 4:1-5; 6:1-9,11-12). The confrontation between the political and religious institutions became unavoidable in restoring the land.

In restoring the land and community, the prophets of the post-exilic period, such as Haggai and Zechariah, supported the effort of Zerubbabel and encouraged the people to co-operate with their leaders (Ezra 5:1-2). Not only strengthening the infra-structure such as the temple and wall of Jerusalem and its administration but also reforming their religion and society became important. Ezra and

Nehemiah worked closely with the people to bring changes in society and to set a new direction as they continued as the community of Yahweh (Ezra 7:25; 9:1-4; Neh. 5:1-3; 13:1-31). The visions and proclamations of Ezekiel and Trito-Isaiah for a renewed and restructured society provided motivation for the restoration to continue. The tremendous achievements and progress in the post-exilic period after a long period of desolation and hopelessness is evidence of healthy interaction and co-operation between the leaders of religion, politics and community.

7. Political persecution and survival of Jews in Diaspora

The word 'Diaspora' means scattered, and it is used in connection with the Jewish people being scattered in different countries such as Egypt, Syria, Asia Minor, Babylon and Persia. They went to these countries over the years due to famine, war, business or religious and political persecution. The interaction of Esther with the Persian king to save the Jews settled in Persia deserves mentioning here because it was a political action.⁸ The plot against her was based on the religious and cultural issue but initiated by the political authority of Haman (Esth. 3:8-9). As a member of the royal family, Esther was expected to support the policies of the king and the court. But she took the side of the Jewish community which was the target of genocide, and encountered the king after careful preparation, liberating the Jews from

⁷ John D.W. Watts, *Isaiah 34-66* (WBC; Waco: Word Books, 1987), Vol. 25, pp. 222-229 and Jeyaraj, *Christian Ministry*, pp. 38-41.

⁸ Jeyaraj, *Christian Ministry*, pp. 130-132.

the wicked plan of Haman. The book of Esther is not just a story of the Jews but a story of a woman activist for a humanitarian cause.

After the death of Alexander, Greek rulers were hostile towards the Jews living under their rule. Antiochus Epiphanus IV persecuted the Jews in Palestine and compelled them to accept Greek culture, philosophies and forms of worship. He went to the extreme of sacrificing pigs in the temple in Jerusalem to desecrate the temple and provoke the Jews. He placed the statue of Greek emperors in the temple and asked the Jews to follow the worship of the emperor. The Book of Daniel (Ch. 7) describes this person as the beast pitted against the Israelites. The reaction of the religious leader Matathias, the High Priest and his sons, called the Maccabees, against the political and religious persecution of Antiochus ended in the military attack in 161 BC. The Maccabees won the battle, cleansed the temple and rededicated it. A new Jewish state was born in Palestine under the rule of Matathias and the Hasmonean family.

II Issues in the Interaction of Religion and Politics

A few key issues are identified in the interaction between religion and politics in the history of ancient Israel and highlighted below. Repetition of information is unavoidable here

1. Human rights and justice

a) Religion played a vital role in establishing justice and the rights of the people. This issue is elaborated in the struggle against Pharaoh and the lib-

eration of the bonded Israelites. The liberated community of Israel was warned repeatedly not to oppress others, particularly the Canaanites when they occupied their land (Ex.23:9; Dt. 15:12-18). In this case Yahwehism stood in support of the Canaanites although the Canaanites were following a different faith and worshipping the nature deities of Baal and Astharoth. When the Egyptians were oppressed later by the Assyrians, Yahweh took the side of the Egyptians and, through the prophet Isaiah, condemned the injustice done to them (Isa. 19:19-23). Another event is the struggle of Esther in protecting the lives of Jews living in Persia from genocide.

The principle in the religion of Israel is that God takes the side of the oppressed and opposes the exploiters. That the God of Israel wants justice for all, irrespective of their faith, race and culture can be seen in the Old Testament. As the creator of all human beings, the God of Israel wants the rights of all the people, particularly the minorities and marginalized such as the poor, widows, children and aliens to be protected. That every one on this earth is eligible for justice, peace, welfare and dignity is the theology of their religion. This theology led the priests and prophets to confront the political leaders at different periods and challenge them on their violation of justice and human rights. The priests and prophets struggled to modify the religious and political laws to improve the welfare of their society.

b) Another aspect to this issue of justice and human rights is the influence of the religion of Canaan. The faith of the Israelites had to confront the wrong values of Baalism which pro-

moted the worship of nature, belief in magic, sorcery and omens, fertility and procreation through sacrificing human beings and practising cult prostitution. Some of the kings in Israel who followed Baalism promoted these values in the society. Their goal was to gain prosperity and military security by any means.

Some of the kings made political compromises by marrying the daughters of neighbouring nations and encouraging religious syncretism. They ignored the traditions of their religion and adopted the values of nearby nations. They did not care about the influence of such practices on the question of justice and rights. They went to the extreme of persecuting the prophets who raised their voice against this practice and demanded that justice should prevail (Amos 2; 7; 1 Kgs. 17-21; Isa. 1:16-17; 5:8, 20-23; Jer. 3:1-5; 10:1-10). In this encounter we notice the issue of the surrounding religions as well as the challenge of their own political leaders. Religious interaction with another religion and with the politics of a nation is necessary to establish justice and strengthen the rights of human beings.

2. Temple and worship

a) During the period of ancestors, worship was simple. The ark of the covenant and tent of the meeting became the centre of Israelite worship during the exodus and settlement in Canaan. The temple built at Shiloh to accommodate the ark of the covenant replaced the tent. However, the ark of the covenant was not accommodated permanently in one centre but was taken to different locations in their

tribal territories. During the settlement period, there was no idea of one cultic centre for the Israelites.

The notion of one permanent cultic centre was developed during the monarchy. Jerusalem was selected first to be the political capital of David's kingdom. Although it was called the city of David (2 Sam. 5:6-10), it did not get much recognition, possibly because it was in Jebusite territory. Another factor is that the place where the ark of the covenant was lodged was regarded as the important centre in Israel. The people of Israel believed the presence of Yahweh was focused in that place. It united the tribes of Israel because people went there to offer prayers, sacrifices and celebrate the festivals.

The problem then was how to gain recognition for Jerusalem, the new political centre, from all the tribes of Israel. David, the political leader, used religion to make Jerusalem an important centre by transferring the ark of the covenant to Jerusalem. The biblical account (2 Sam. 6; 1 Chr. 13) does not state this motive as the reason for transferring the ark to Jerusalem. But John Bright believes it could have been, and so he writes, 'It was David's aim to make Jerusalem the religious as well as the political capital of the realm. Through the Ark he sought to link the newly created state to Israel's ancient order as its legitimate successor, and to advertise the state as the patron and protector of the sacral institutions of the past.'⁹ His tactic of religionizing politics by bringing the ark of the covenant to Jerusalem and planning to

⁹ Bright, *History of Israel*, p. 196.

construct the temple in the political capital could have contributed to the justification and consolidation of his rule. By using religion, politicians consolidate their position and power and achieve political gains.

b) After religionizing his political centre, David went on to politicize the new religious centre by appointing his own men as the priests. Abiathar who helped David was asked to move to the capital and become the official priest of the cult in Jerusalem (1 Sam. 14:3; 22:20; 2 Sam. 8:17; 1 Kgs. 2:26). A simplistic reading of the text indicates that David was grateful to Abiathar and his family and appreciated his concern for the progress of religion. But David's use of Abiathar in this way could be seen as a hidden agenda for controlling the cult as well as using it to strengthen his rule. As John Bright says, 'David established both Ark and priesthood in the official national shrine. It was a masterstroke. It must have done more to bind the feelings of the tribes to Jerusalem than we can possibly imagine.'¹⁰

Solomon similarly politicized religion by sending away the family of Abiathar (which supported Adonijah becoming the king) and appointing Zadok as the key priest in the capital (1 Kgs. 2:26-27; 36). Jeroboam followed the same principle by appointing Amaziah as the chief priest at Bethel and using him to suppress any religious voice raised against the king or to quell any riot which might topple his government (Amos 7: 10-13). These priests either appointed or supported by the politicians had to function as

their agents (cf. Hilkiah in 2 Kgs. 22; Pashhur in Jer. 20). They might have been pleased with the encouragement of the kings towards their profession and efforts and financial support in promoting the religion in the country. Unlike the prophets, how much freedom these priests had to question the politics of the kings is not clear.

c) The priests and kings, representing the religious and political institutions respectively, join together to promote the temple ideology, that is, the temple at Jerusalem as the only official cultic centre recognized by the government and God. But the prophets, Amos, Isaiah, and Jeremiah who looked at the process of politicizing the religion and religionizing the politics through temple ideology, criticized the vested interest of the politicians and priests (Amos 5:4-5, 21-24; Isa. 19:18-25; Jer. 7:1-12). They enlightened the public about the actions of the politicians and priests by informing them on the meaning of true worship, pointing out the destruction of cultic centres and proclaiming that Yahweh required justice and not rituals and false pietism.

Jesus, standing in the prophetic tradition, pointed out that neither Jerusalem nor any other temple is important. People should worship God who is present everywhere with true spirits and minds. It is clear from the OT that giving undue importance to one place as the authentic worshipping centre is unacceptable (cf. Jn. 4). The prophetic voice clearly interacting with politics and religion is needed even today.

3. International relations

Israel was surrounded by the

¹⁰ Bright, *History of Israel*, p. 196.

Philistines, Midianites, Edomites, Moabites and Amorites, and was controlled by political powers such as Egypt, Syria, Assyria, Babylon, Persia and Greece in different periods of their history. So she had to relate to these nations on political and economic levels. Israel's attitude to other nations itself is a vast and complex subject. This issue needs a separate study. What I am trying to point out here is that the interaction of politics and religion touches the international relations and policies of a nation. How far the matter of policies and relations with neighbouring nations was developed during the period of Judges is not clear. Proper international relations could have developed from the period of David. Three key issues in international relations are war against the attacking nations and gaining security, maintaining peace and trade, and marriage with men and women of other nations. These issues were based not only on the political administration of the day, but also on their religion.

a) During the monarchical period, political and military powers were vested with the kings but religious authority remained with the priests and prophets. Saul could not go to war without the blessing of Samuel (1Sam. 13).¹¹ Religion controlled the power of the kings, otherwise kings would have become the most powerful persons having political, military and religious authority vested in them. Before going to war to defend themselves, the kings

waited for the word of Yahweh either through a seer or prophet or by the use of *Urim* and *Thummim* by the priests and the offering of the sacrifices. Kings could not call for war and mobilize the people whenever they wanted to attack another nation or gain territorial expansion.

In times of attack by other nations and crises of security, prophets played a role in proclaiming God's word to the kings and people, gave guidance and interceded for the nation (1 Kgs. 12:20-24; 20:13-20; 2 Kgs. 13:14-25; 19:5-7; Isa. 7:1-17). Prophets also condemned the actions of kings when they violated the procedure and justice of other nations (Amos 1:3-2:3; Isa. 19:18-25; Jer. 51:24-49).

b) Negotiations for peace and trade with other nations initiated by the political administration were encouraged by the prophets. David established a good relationship with Tyre. Hiram, the king of Tyre sent cedar logs and labourers to build the palace of David (2 Sam. 5:11). Solomon also had a good relationship with the king of Tyre and with the Queen of Sheba (1 Kgs. 10:10). He received cedar and labourers from Tyre in exchange for food, materials (1 Kings 4:20-21,25; 5:8-11; 9:26-28), gold and other things from Sheba. Solomon received large sums of tribute money from neighbouring countries (1 Kgs. 4:20-21). The peaceful situation promoted overseas trade and economy (1 Kgs. 9:26-28). When the Israelites became exiles in another country, the prophets encouraged them not to rebel but to seek the welfare of the nation where they lived as captives. The Jews were asked to seek the peace, continue their business wherever they are scattered and make

11 J. B. Jeyaraj 'Religion and State' in *Biblical Insights on Inter-Faith Dialogue* (ed. I. Selvanayagam; Bangalore: BTE/SSC, 1995), pp. 143-145.

progress (Jer. 27-29).

c) Religious leaders condemned the policy of marrying men and women of other nations whether they are kings, priests or people. This attitude was not based on racial discrimination or cultural differences but was aimed at avoiding religious syncretism in their faith and life (1 Kgs. 11:1-13; Ezra 9). The history of Israel shows the success and failures of their international relations. However, the principles cherished in relating with other nations were peace with neighbours, security and economic progress.

4. Nationalism

a) When Israel become a nation is a debatable question. The answer depends upon the definition of 'nation'.¹² Abraham and his extended family could be regarded as a nation in the sense of an ethnic group governing themselves. Similarly a tribe as an ethnic group could be regarded as a nation. The twelve tribes of Israel occupying the land and governing themselves under the leadership of elders and judges could be regarded as a nation. David's kingship having a political capital, royal court with different officials of administration and a standing military gives the idea of nation in the political sense rather than ethnic sense.

Three components are important in being a nation: people, land and gov-

ernment. Nationhood could be strengthened further if a standing army is added to these components and international relationships are promoted. Since the nationhood of Israel is a gradual development, their understanding of nationalism is also a developing process. Different definitions for the word 'nationalism' are suggested—political nationalism, religious nationalism, majoritarian nationalism and cultural nationalism. I notice three kinds of nationalism in the history of Israel and call them for convenience sake as *Theological Nationalism*, *Political Nationalism* and *Cultural Nationalism*.

b) Theological nationalism and cultural nationalism have their roots in religion. But there is a difference. Theological nationalism is 'religion-as-faith' and cultural nationalism is 'religion-as-ideology'. Theological nationalism was dominant during the period of ancestors, Egyptian bondage and the settlement period. It was based on the belief that they were elected and covenanted by Yahweh to exist as Yahweh's community with an experience of liberation and to function as a paradigm community in the land given by Yahweh. Their leader, administrator and king is Yahweh himself. He moves with his community wherever they go and live. Yahweh is not bound by one place. He is on pilgrimage with his pilgrim community. They are stewards of Yahweh. They need not be a political nation like the nations around them. On the other hand, they should continue as a community realizing and implementing the liberating impulses of their exodus-covenant theology.

The theological nationalism of Yahweh's community, worshipping and

¹² The Hebrew Word *goy* is used to refer to people as nation in the ethnic and political sense. Refer to *TDOT*, 1988, vol. 2, pp. 426-433. A. R. Desai, *Social Background of Indian Nationalism* (New Delhi: Popular Prakashan, 2000), p.xxx.

fulfilling the commandments prevailed not only in the earlier period but was subverted to a certain extent during the monarchical period. However, prophets tried to revive the exodus-covenant theology during the period of division, decline of the monarchy, loss of land, temple, military and governance by themselves (Hos. 3:16-20; 11:1-4; 12:13; Micah 7:15; Isa. 40:1-5; 41:1-10; 42:6; 51:9-11; Jer. 11:10; 14:22; 22:9). Although, theological nationalism continued in the post-exilic period, it was constantly encountered by the idea of political nationalism in which the monarchy existed from the dynasty of David. Messianic prophecies were used to bring political nationalism again in Israel.

c) Political nationalism is based more on having a king, royal court, structured government, standing army, territory under the control of the king, people as subjects, trade within and outside, collection of taxes and economic policies. This idea of political nationalism was dominant in the period of monarchy. Kings in Israel who cherished political nationalism attempted to overthrow any foreign domination and to expand their territory by war and trade. They made political and military negotiations with other nations.

d) It is my assumption that the problems of monarchy such as constant violation of justice and human rights, promotion of syncretism, adopting the customs and culture of other nations, neglecting the official cult of Yahweh and its centre in Jerusalem and the decline of the economy provided an opportunity for the growth of cultural nationalism which emphasized the philosophy of 'One People, One God, One

Land and One Cultic place'. This philosophy is seen in sections of Deuteronomy (7:6; 12:5-7).

This ideology could have been developed from the exodus-covenant theology and used as a reaction against the growing problems in their religion and society. Ezekiel's vision in chapters 40-44 promoted cultural nationalism by re-establishing the temple in Jerusalem, and restoring the priesthood and rituals to the state they were in during the monarchy. The Book of Chronicles too emphasized the centrality of the temple in Jerusalem more than the exodus-covenant theology.¹³

Trying to create cultural nationalism by over-emphasizing the aspect of the election of Israel or Jerusalem or the promise of the land or the covenant of Yahweh and thrusting it upon people of other race, religion and culture who lived together in the land would be oppressive. It could have brought disaster in society as well as violating the true spirit of Yahwehism. People of other races, faiths and culture continued to live in the midst of Israelites. The Israelites could not expel them from their land but instead forced them to conform with the new Israelite culture (Judg. 1).

On the one hand, we notice an emphasis on 'One God, One People, One Land and One Temple'. On the other hand, some prophets criticized the atrocities of political nationalism and the fallacy of cultural nationalism. Amos reinterpreted the tradition of

13 Scaria Kuthirakkattel, 'Fundamentalism: Biblical Perspective', *Jnanadeepa: Pune Journal of Religions Studies* (Pune: Jnana Deepa Vidyapeethi), Vol. 6, 2, (July 2003), pp. 37-38.

election for punishment. He criticized the rituals and sacrifices, and predicted the destruction of cultic centres. He ranked the Cushites, Philistines and the Arameans as equal to Israel (3:2; 5:5-6, 21-27; 9:7). Hosea demanded justice, mercy and true knowledge of God rather than sacrifices. Jeremiah criticized the false temple theology of the people and predicted the destruction of Jerusalem (7: 1-12) and announced a new covenant (31:31-33).

Some of them emphasized election and covenant less or even ignored or reinterpreted them to emphasize the responsibility of being an elected community with responsibilities towards others. They tried to uphold theological nationalism although they did not deny the monarchy. Whenever political or cultural nationalism tried to dominate, the nation of Israel faced the loss of monarchy, land, political governance and cultic centre. The nation was reminded of their theological nationalism which accepted and protected the people of other faiths, race and culture. Theological nationalism which provided an understanding themselves as the community of Yahweh for service to others was a challenge to the political or cultural nationalism of Israel.

III Modern India: Issues and Inter-actions

From a methodological point of view, shifting from ancient Israel to modern India needs detailed explanation. However, my interest is to point out briefly that the interaction between religion and politics has been going on for a

long period in India, particularly with reference to the modern period. This calls for a special study comparing and contrasting the interactions in the history of these two nations.

1. India has a long history of interaction between religion and politics. The history of India can be classified broadly into three major periods: pre-colonial, the colonial period of the British Empire and the post-colonial period. It is not easy to discuss each period in detail except to highlight certain interactions and issues particularly with reference to the modern period of India.

With the arrival of Aryans and the growth of Hinduism in the ancient period, the Brahmins, particularly the priests ministering to the gods and goddesses, had a close relationship with the kings and local rulers. They performed the rituals for the temples, consecrated the kings and played an important role in giving advice to the royal families and the court. Some of them acted as messengers during war time, negotiating peace between the parties. In turn, the kings and rulers gave land, gifts and status to the priests. Both the rulers and priests worked together. During the Islamic rule of more than 1000 years, Islam was made the official religion and Hindus were encouraged rather than forced to embrace Islam. The values of Islam penetrated politics, society and culture. Tension also mounted in different parts of India between Islamic rulers and local communities.

2. Interaction began to reach different levels during the British colonial period. On the one side, the British rulers and the western missionaries interacted on two or three issues viz.

conversion of Indians to Christianity, secular education and supporting the independence struggle of Indians.¹⁴ Some of the British rulers and missionaries got along well in promoting Christianity and secular education. The Anglicists believed that the Hindu culture needed to be challenged. The way reforms could be introduced was to convert Hindus to Christianity and to offer western education. To a certain extent, this resulted in some reforms in society.

However, this policy was criticized by the leaders of Hinduism and the Orientalists.¹⁵ Some of the Hindus could not differentiate between the attitudes and policies of the British rulers and those of the missionaries. The established opinion was that British colonialism was for Christianizing India. So some of the social work of the missionaries to transform the society were opposed since reform was misunderstood as the tool for converting Hindus.

Regarding the participation of the missionaries in the independence struggle movements of *satyagraha* (non-violent protest) organized by the Quit India movement, the British rulers restricted the missionaries and

pastors and instructed them not to support the independence struggle or to identify with the leaders of the National Movement.¹⁶ The missionaries were expected to do only their religious duties and not to enter into political matters which were contrary to the policy of the British colonial rulers.

On the other side, the interaction between the British rulers and the religious leaders of Hinduism and Islam was based on the intention of securing political freedom and building India. Those leaders who supported the idea of an independent India as a secular and democratic state did not bring their religion into the politics. However, on the basis of the teachings of V.D. Savarkar and Golwalker, the RSS wanted independent India to be a Hindu nation and promoted the ideology of *Hindutva*.¹⁷

This tension between religious fundamentalism and political governance on the basis of secularism resulted in the clash between Hindus and others in different parts of India. It posed a problem for national integration and the aim of uniting a fragmented India under one banner. Ever since the beginning of the period of indepen-

14 Antony Copley, *Religions in Conflict: Ideology, Cultural Contact and Conversion in Late Colonial India* (New Delhi: OUP, 1999) and J.C. Ingleby, *Missionaries, Education and India: Issues in Protestant Missionary Education in the Long Nineteenth Century*, (Delhi: ISPCK, 2000) discuss these issues in detail.

15 Arun Shourie, *Missionaries in India: Continuities, Changes, Dilemmas*, (New Delhi: Rupa Co., 2004) quotes the responses of M.K. Gandhi, adding his criticism based on the documents of the British rulers and Orientalists.

16 D. Arthur Jeyakumar, 'Christians and the National Movement in India: 1885-1947' in *Nationalism and Hindutva: A Christian Response* (Ed. Mark T.B. Laing, Delhi: ISPCK/UBS, 2005), pp. 91-102.

17 John Zavos, *The Emergence of Hindu Nationalism in India*, (New Delhi: OUP, 2002) and Christophe Jaffrelot, *The Hindu Nationalist Movement and Indian Politics: 1925 to the 1990s* (New Delhi: OUP, 1999) discuss the history and development of *Hindutva* ideology and Hindu nationalism.

dence, the tension between Hindu fundamentalism and the secular polity of India has been growing.

3. Scholars have differences of opinion about the modern period of India. Some believe that the modern period began with Nehru as the Prime Minister of independent India. Others argue that Nehru laid the foundation for the growth of industrial and technological progress with the political polity of democratic socialism. Some others think that the real modern period of India began with Rajiv Gandhi as the Prime Minister who initiated the policy of liberalization and Dr. Man Mohan Singh, the then Finance Minister laying the foundation for globalization and Structural Adjustment Programme (SAP).

This modern period of India started witnessing economic progress, growth in foreign currency reserve and FDI as well as the growth of religious fundamentalism and clash of civilizations. As a reaction to modernity, RSS emphasized the ideology of Hindutva and Hindu cultural nationalism. They want society and politics to be governed on the basis of Hindutva and to establish the Ramraj having Ayodhya as its political capital as narrated in the *Ramayana*, and to have a religious centre with Ram temple. The leaders of RSS are willing to allow the rest of the minority communities to live in India as secondary citizens under the ideology of Hindutva.

To make it a political reality, RSS started supporting the BJP in the last election, resulting in a BJP victory so that it ruled the nation. RSS exerted so much pressure on the BJP government to revise the Constitution, bring an anti-conversion bill on an all India

basis and change the curriculum to include their interpretation of Hinduism, history and culture. The RSS cadre demolished the Babri Masjid in Ayodhya on the 6th December, 1992 and went on to construct the Ram temple in its place claiming that place as the birth place of Rama.

The issue of constructing the Ram temple in Ayodhya became their election mandate and an important agenda to be carried out during the rule of BJP. The main reasons for constructing the Ram temple in Ayodhya are to give historical evidence for the myth of Rama and to unify the Hindus around the temple, in the same way as Jews have Jerusalem, Christians have Rome and Muslims have their Mecca as a focal point for unity. Constructing the Ram temple is not merely a religious issue. The *Hindutva* ideology can be strengthened only by historicizing the myth of Rama and theologizing the Ram temple in Ayodhya as the realization of the Kingdom of Rama.

Integrating religion and politics in the issue of Ram temple indicates to Hindus that India is under the rule of Rama and Hindu ideals and culture would be promoted under this rule. Secular forces in India and the other religious communities resisted these efforts of making India a Hindu nation. Some of the issues emerged in religionizing politics during the BJP period were nationalism, freedom of worship and conversion to another religion, pluralism and national integration.

4. Conservative Christians in India insisted on freedom of worship and conversion. In addition to freedom, ecumenical leaders insisted on the importance of pluralism, dialogue and redefining nationalism and raised their

voice for national integration.¹⁸ A significant development which occurred as a result of the problems created by the BJP rule was that even those Christian pastors and evangelists who separated their faith and politics, started discussing their role in shaping the politics. Extensive discussions went on in local churches of many denominations (including fundamentalists) regarding support for political parties in the next election. Christian Minority Forum in local regions took a stand to support the secular forces and cast their votes in favour of the Congress and their allies as UPA in the election three years ago.

There has been an awakening among Christians about political trends in the country and increasing interest about their role in the election for the State Assembly and Central Parliament. I see this awakening and growing interest in using their faith in shaping the politics as a new beginning towards socio-political transformation. However, Christianity, particularly evangelical Christianity, has a long

way to go to integrate its faith for transforming the electoral system, critical co-operation with political parties, playing the prophetic role for justice and challenging the policies of the government.

IV Concluding Remarks

Interaction between religion and politics in a society is unavoidable. Each of these institutions should challenge the other and contribute to the welfare and progress of society. The norm or the basis for their interaction is not merely the Scriptures or Vedas which could be interpreted to promote fundamentalism or liberalism or even to destroy nature and humans. The scriptures of the various religions can be one of the guiding principles along with the values drawn from humanism, secularism, economics, sociology, science, and so on.¹⁹ Both religion and politics should have the perspective of how God would want the interaction to be. The divine values such as love, sharing, justice, equality, welfare and peace should become the foundation of the inter-action whatever the political system of the state.

18 J.M Athyal, 'The Return of the Sacred: An Indian Christian Perspective on Religion and Politics' (pp. 145-161), Kirsteen Kim, 'Indian Christian Theological Responses to Political Hinduism' (pp. 162-176) and L. Stanislaus, 'A Christian Response to Hindutva' (pp. 177-203) in *Nationalism and Hindutva* (ed. Mark Laing, Delhi: ISPCK/UBS, 2005).

19 J.B. Jeyaraj, 'Inter-Faith Relations for Transformation and Higher Education' in *Inter-Faith Relations and Higher Education* (ed. M. Valliammal, Delhi: LDC/ISPCK, 2007), pp. 1-30 and also in *Asia Pacific Journal of Intercultural Studies*, 2,1, (Jan 2006), pp. 65-86.