State and Religion in Afro-Eurasia, c.1200–1450

By Trevor Getz

In the thirteenth through fifteenth centuries, relationships between government and religion were usually quite close, although at times they clashed.

State and Religion

The state and religion are two powerful types of communities that have historically played a big role in human societies. Belief systems probably arose before states in many parts of the world, and we think of them as each having a different role. Organized religions and other types of belief systems provide ways to explain the world as well as moral guidance for behaving properly. The state provided law and order and governed the sharing of resources and the distribution of services and goods to people.

Despite their seemingly different roles, however, governments and belief systems have historically been quite closely connected. Religious figures were often among the most learned and skilled people in society. They worked as scribes, advisors, and government officials. Rulers frequently have provided money and support to religious institutions like churches, temples, and shrines. Sometimes, rulers have been seen as religious leaders themselves. Often, they have claimed to have the support of God or the gods, or to be connected to spirits of the land. At other times, of course, religious leaders and state rulers have clashed with each other.

Angkor Wat temple complex in Cambodia, the largest religious structure in the world, was built as a Hindu temple by the rulers of the Khmer Empire in the twelfth century. When the rulers became Buddhist, it was transformed into a Buddhist holy site. By Dennis Jarvis, CC BY-SA 2.0.

All of these kinds of relationships existed in the period c.1200-1450 CE. But, as we will see, state and religious leadership usually supported each other in ways that might seem strange to us today.

The Islamic World

The relationship between state and religion was often very strong in the Islamic world. Between the seventh and tenth centuries, the area in which Islam was practiced was akin to a single state—the Caliphate. By 1200, this unity was gone. In its place was a large region of the world— stretching from West Africa to parts of Southeast Asia— where Islam was a dominant religion, but where political authority was divided among lots of different states.[1]

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1 Rulers of later states like the Ottoman Empire claimed to be Caliphs – spiritual leaders of all Muslims – right up to the 20th century. But they didn't really have that power or authority.

Nor was Islam really a single religious faith in this period. Most Muslims were members of one of two sects: Shi'a (which was based in Persia) and Sunni (which was more widespread). Those two sects disagreed about who should govern and how to interpret religious texts. Most importantly for our purposes here, they provided different sources of religious authority for rulers to align themselves with. In both cases, Muslim intellectuals and scholars served as *qadi*, or judges. They provided order in the service of sultans and other rulers. In return, the rulers funded Islamic schools and temples.

However, Islamic thought could also inspire some to oppose the state. In particular, a mystical movement emerged within Islam known as Sufism, which emphasized personal spiritual experience. Sufism was usually quite egalitarian. It stressed brotherhood rather than obedience to authorities, and often mixed local religious traditions with Islam. For these reasons, it could be a tool used to resist rulers who were seen as too oppressive or too powerful. Many Muslim rulers saw the growing Sufi movement as a threat, so Sunni and Shi'a leaders became united in their persecution of Sufis in their territories.

Religious pluralism in South and Southeast Asia

In South and Southeast Asia, Islam communities and networks existed alongside populations that embraced other religions, both local and those which had developed outside this region. Two of the largest-scale religions in the world by this period, the Hindu faith and Buddhism, emerged first in South Asia. Hinduism is a polytheistic faith, meaning that Hindus worship many gods rather than only one. Hinduism was based on older practices from northern India, and developed a powerful priestly class, the *brahmins*. Hinduism spread as far as Southeast Asia by about 200 CE.

Buddhism emerged in the sixth century BCE, in the same region and from the same set of older practices as Hinduism. However, Buddhists took a very different approach. Neither polytheistic nor monotheistic, Buddhism emphasized personal pathways to enlightenment, rather than gods and the authority of a priestly class. Buddhism spread rapidly into Southeast Asia and then to China, Korea, and Japan, eventually becoming a *polycentric* (having more than one center) belief system. As a result, Buddhism took on many different forms and developed distinct schools of thought.

Map showing the spread and major divisions of Buddhism. By SY, CC BY-SA 4.0.

In general, Hinduism proved to be more useful as a religion to rulers in South Asia. Rulers of kingdoms— the *Rajputs*—in both northern and southern India became patrons of Hindu temples and religious orders. As a result, a

strong alliance emerged between the priests (*brahmins*) and rulers. However, many states in this region were *pluralistic*, meaning that their populations included Muslims, Zoroastrians, and Buddhists, as well as Hindus. As a result, many rulers were careful to tolerate and even sponsor other religious organizations. In Southeast Asia, meanwhile, many rulers embraced Buddhism, and established a series of monasteries. The monks and nuns from these monasteries gained quite a bit of political influence in states across the region.

The Chinese model

China, similarly, was a region with a strong degree of religious pluralism. Buddhism had become very important in the Chinese state by the time of the Song Dynasty. But it existed alongside Daoist practices, a belief system popular among peasants that emphasized naturalness and harmony with the world. Actually, these two belief systems often proved troublesome to the government as neither emphasized obedience to the state.

Instead, the Song Dynasty government promoted the philosophical system known as Confucianism, based on the ideas of the fifth century BCE thinker (and internet quotation favorite) Confucius. One outstanding Confucianist scholar, Zhu Xi (1130–1200 CE), collected the ideas of Confucius in a book that became the basis of examinations for scholar-officials. This work emphasized the importance of social hierarchies and loyalty, including relationships between ruler and subject. It argued that these relationships reflected the cosmic relationship between Heaven and earth.

Students taking an exam, based on the work of Confucius, to become scholar-officials for the Song Dynasty. Public domain.

Christendom

In Christian Europe, religious leaders and rulers formed alliances as well. This was especially true in the Byzantine Empire, where the *patriarchs* (religious leaders) of the Orthodox Church and the Byzantine Emperors generally worked quite closely together. They governed the empire and spread the religion to neighboring people, such as the Slavs in Eastern Europe. Christian clergy also provided rulers with administrators and a unifying ideology elsewhere in the Christian world, including Ethiopia (northeast Africa) and Armenia (in the Caucasus).

In Catholic Europe, as well, rulers relied on priests and monks for professional work (as scribes and accountants), advice, and legitimacy. Priests generally called upon people to obey their kings and princes, who were believed to rule with God's approval. The two leaderships also cooperated on crusades—wars against Muslims in the Mediterranean and pagans in northern Europe.

However, there was also a division here. The Catholic popes were political figures as well as religious leaders, and they often competed with powerful kings. Popes could, in some ways, charge taxes and raise armies of their
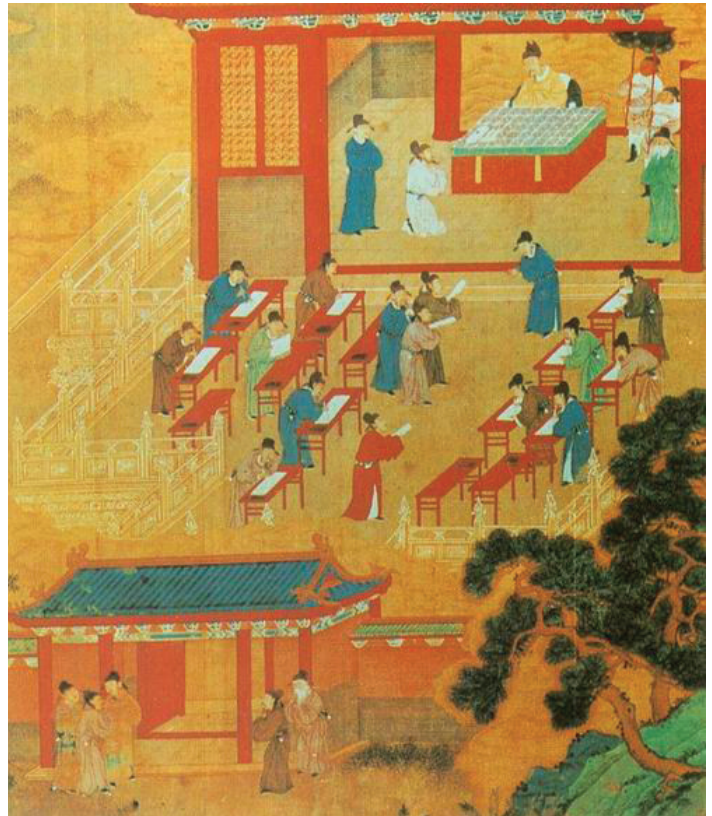
own, even in territory controlled by kings or princes. They also wielded another powerful weapon. They could *excommunicate* people, which meant expulsion from the community of Christians. In addition to the spiritual anguish this might cause, an excommunicated ruler faced the risk of rebellion from their faithful Catholic subjects. In the mid-thirteenth century, the most powerful rulers of central Europe, the Holy Roman Emperors, fought with the pope for influence in that region. Emperor Frederick II was excommunicated by Pope Innocent IV in 1239, but in return Frederick expelled many priests from his territory.

Excommunication of Emperor Frederick II by Pope Innocent IV. Public domain.

In general, however, Christianity was too important to the population, and priests too useful to rulers, for a permanent break to occur. Indeed, the Catholic Church, managing the many different powers of western and central Europe, was pretty much the glue holding the cultural world together.

Bantu rulers and social healing

In Sub-Saharan Africa outside of the Islamic world, rulers were also closely tied to belief systems. This was true throughout the Bantu-speaking world, the vast region of central, southern, and eastern Africa. Here, in most cases, they didn't really have separate religious leaders. Instead, communities held a set of ancestors, spirits, and belief practices in common. Because many Bantu-speaking states were confederations made up of several communities, the ruler of a confederation could wield practices and beliefs to "heal" disagreements between communities and unify the different groups.

Of course, in many parts of sub-Saharan Africa, power was really in the hands of very local authorities. These were chiefs or village councils, who often held both religious and political leadership together. This wasn't only true in Africa. In Europe and Asia as well, politics and religion were often very local. Few governments, especially outside of China, were powerful and sophisticated enough to really govern day-to-day local life, and local religious authority was in the hands of local priests, monks, and others as well. Sometimes, these two types of authorities were one and the same, and even if they weren't, they often supported each other. Frequently, belief systems instructed people to obey local authorities. But this wasn't always the case. In some cases, religion provided a means for people to unite against political authorities. In general, however, state and religion were much closer together in this period than they are in most countries today.

The Mongols

When the Mongol armies swept into many of these regions, they found they had built an empire that included Buddhists, Muslims, Christians, Jews, and followers of many other faiths. Their own ancestors were generally animists, venerating a number of different gods, spirits, and ancestors. But they quickly adapted to their new surroundings. In the center and south of the Mongol Empire, many converted to Islam, although they mixed the new faith with their own preexisting practices and traditions. In China and surrounding regions, many Mongol leaders adopted Chinese or Tibetan versions of Buddhism. In the west, some Mongol leaders became Christians, especially following Syrian versions of Christianity.

The Birth of Muhammad, from Rashid-al Din's history of the world, the Jami' al-tawarikh, created for a Mongol Ilkhan. This scene is about the Muslim Prophet, but adopts a Christian style based on art about the birth of Jesus. It is part of a global history meant to describe the Ilkhans as inheritors of all religious traditions. Public Domain.

What did this mean for the Mongol state? Mongol Khans generally embraced religious pluralism and tolerance. They defended religious minorities, invited debate and exchange in their courts, and sponsored temples and churches of many different faiths. Some scholars have argued that this was necessary to keep the peace in a vast empire. Others see it as a form of *celestial insurance*, meaning they sponsored all faiths just in case one turned out to be the "true" religion. Still others see the Mongols, especially the later Ilkhans, as trying to depict themselves as the peak of a long history of civilization in which all faiths and states culminated in Mongol greatness.

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Image credits

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Angkor Wat temple complex in Cambodia, the largest religious structure in the world, was built as a Hindu temple by the rulers of the Khmer Empire in the twelfth century. When the rulers became Buddhist, it was transformed into a Buddhist holy site. By Dennis Jarvis, CC BY-SA 2.0. https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Cambodia_2638B_-_Angkor_Wat.jpg

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The Birth of Muhammad, from Rashid-al Din's history of the world, the Jami' al-tawarikh, created for a Mongol Ilkhan. This scene is about the Muslim Prophet, but adopts a Christian style based on art about the birth of Jesus. It is part of a global history meant to describe the Ilkhans as inheritors of all religious traditions. Public Domain. https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Birth_of_Muhammad_from_folio_44a_of_the_Jami'_al-tawarikh.jpg