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Political use of religion Its many faces

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POLITICS is always about power, and the ways to power are many and various. And of these the use of religion is both time-honoured and effective. Religion, when used in politics, does not remain spiritual. It becomes materialistic in its manifestations as well as intent. Its faces, however, have changed with time and circumstances.

Kings have used religion to invest themselves with divine rights and authority. Even in modern times the King of Nepal, for example, went on claiming to be a living incarnation of God, until he was overthrown. Emperors have found it to their advantage to rouse religious fervour among their soldiers while invading and conquering foreign territories. Religious wars were not unknown in the past, and even George W Bush, the down-right imperialist as he was, called the international community to join him in a crusade against the so-called Islamist terrorists. His might have been a slip of the tongue as he later claimed it to be, but crusades were quite familiar in the middle ages, designed purportedly to recover the Holy land, particularly Jerusalem, from the Muslims. The real intention behind such adventures, nevertheless, had been as transparent as that of George Bush -- it being the desire for plunder, territorial expansion and trade.

The medieval domains of the Roman Catholic Church had assumed the character of the Holy Roman Empire. And Protestantism, which began as a movement of religious reform, was also a protest against the 'imperialism' of Catholicism and was not unconnected with emergence of nationalism in Europe, which it did not fail to promote. The Puritans in England had fought against royal authority and gone to the extent of beheading a ruling monarch. Puritanism, we all know, had, at the same time, contributed to the rise of both individualism and capitalism, which were, of course, interlinked both historically and operationally. The French Revolution was very clearly a political uprising, but one of its marked objectives was to bring down the power and authority of the Church.

Colonialism was a brutally economic phenomenon, having nothing spiritual in it; and yet it too had found it convenient to make use of religion in its functioning. Although the most potent instrument in the hands of the coloniser was the gun, the use of religion helped him to deepen the roots of colonial occupation. The conquest of the heart followed that of the land.

Colonialism had been a matter of very bitter experience for us in the Indian subcontinent. It would, perhaps, be worthwhile to recall the collaboration between politics and reli-

gion that had occurred here. Initially, there were the Christian missionaries who had volunteered to bring the uninitiated on to the light of Christianity, hoping, even if without formal declaration, to help the process of colonisation. But the men of the East India company who were bent upon colonising the whole of subcontinent had realised that trade was more efficacious than the gun and religion. Through experience they had gathered the knowledge that proselytisation might even be counterproductive. Nevertheless, the use of religion for political purposes continued to be operative in two contrary ways. The colonisers used it to separate the two communities -- the Hindus and the Muslims -- and the colonised themselves used it as a source of inspiration in their struggle and drive the colonizers away.

The 1857 uprising of the sepoys was an ominous phenomenon for the English rulers. The spark that ultimately set the resentment of the Indian soldiers ablaze was the knowledge that the new brand of cartridges they were given to use contained 'unholy' grease obtained from cows and pigs. Ironically, it brought the Hindu and the Muslim soldiers together as never before. Later, almost in a vengeful manner, the English rulers managed to set the middle classes of the two communities against one another in a political manner which proved to

be irreconcilable. The nationalist leaders of the two communities began to identify themselves as Hindus and Muslims, and the anti-imperialist struggle degenerated into communalism, helping the rulers to divide the country, ultimately. The partition of the subcontinent, which caused unprecedented bloodshed and migration of people, owes largely to the political use of religion.

The rulers of Pakistan decided to call their state Islamic. The intention was to divert the attention of the people from worldly problems to other-worldly issues and also to rouse feelings against India, which in their perception was a Hindu state. The Pakistani rulers wanted to keep East Bengal as their colony, and when East Bengal stood up demanding independence their soldiers perpetrated a genocide on the Bengalis on a scale seldom recorded in history. This, of course, was done in the name of saving Islam.

India, on the other hand, had sworn itself to be a secular state. But even in secular India religious communalism persists. The bourgeoisie does not always find it easy to disenfranchise himself of his religious inheritance. Moreover, there are political organisations like the Bharatiya Janata Party who thrive on the political use of religion. The BJP has its compeer in Bangladesh which calls itself the Jamaat-e-Islami.

That the Jamaat-e-Islami who were war criminals and collaborators in the 1971 War of Liberation, should be allowed to function and flourish in Bangladesh which established itself discarding the religion-based two-nation theory is, apparently, a matter of surprise. But it is not difficult to explain why this should have happened. The new rulers of Bangladesh were reluctant to be fully secular because of their past affiliation to the Pakistan movement. When Ziaur Rahman came to power in 1975 he and his colleagues felt disinclined to call themselves Bengalis, and set up a new brand of nationalism called Bangladeshi nationalism.

The reasons were two; first their own training in the Pakistani army and, secondly, pressure from the capitalist world and the Middle Eastern Muslim states, who had coalesced, as they usually do, in their antipathy towards secularism, considering it to be perilously close to communism. Zia's 'revolution' has also to its credit the removal of secularism and socialism from the basic principles laid down in the original constitution of Bangladesh. All these are, of course, of a piece and remind us of the new political line his government had made up its mind to follow. The usurping and notoriously corrupt ruler, General Ershad

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