

Religious Aspects of Leadership as Seen by Political Anthropology¹

Petr Skalník

Political anthropology on the role of religion in politics

Religion can be very broadly defined as those aspects of human social existence which are subject of belief and not of scientific proof. It is the belief in the existence of an invisible world and the possibility of communication with this world supposedly inhabited by spirits who are to influence human existence on earth.² It would be futile and Eurocentric at the same time to describe religion as generically positive because religion is not a search for meaning of life but rather a means, motivation or a path towards influence on the everyday existence and especially on politics. By this I mean that religion contains both positive and negative instruments. Politics is the area where power is implemented, but that power is supplied by religion, historically and presently. Religion is the ultimate source of power. It implies that although some teachings and practices reject programmatically religion as a reflection of the supernatural, they can be seen as religions albeit secular ones. Marxism and 'scientific' communism are examples of such secular religions because their purported scientific basis has been shown to be a hoax. Instead, the factor of creed and belief in these ideologies, whether contained in their historical calling or in their leaders, is dominant.

World religions such as Christianity, Islam, Buddhism, Hinduism or Judaism, by their claim to uniqueness of their faith patterns and accompanying theologies, by their claim to power on earth, have been so politicised that in a way they can be seen as secular and instrumental in politics, too. Also leaders acting within orbits of these religions show now and again that they are political leaders with a stake in power predominantly here on earth. They prove this in practical mundane efforts where they act as other politicians, though counting, certainly, on their added value stemming from their position within their religion. The Roman Catholic Pope, the Dalai Lama, the Coptic Pope, patriarchs of the

¹ This article is an aftermath of the grant project A8111001 "Political culture during the transition to democracy in countries with different historical and social conditions" provided to the author by the Grant Agency of the Academy of Sciences of the Czech Republic in the years 2000-2003. Britt-Marie Öberg willingly read and corrected the manuscript for which I am very grateful to her. However, I remain fully responsible for the ideas and assertions contained in the text.

² Ellis and ter Haar 2004.

Russian Orthodox Church, the Lebanese Maronite Church, as well as informal Christian leaders in Latin America or elsewhere in the world are examples of political leaders with special religious “blessing“ who co-shape today’s world. Some of them have even received acclaim by winning the Nobel Peace Prize (for example Desmond Tutu, Anglican archbishop of Cape Town and Roman Catholic archbishop Ramos Horta, the newly elected President of East Timor). They often attend both religious and secular events organised in different countries. Similarly, secular political leaders, by rubbing shoulders with religious personalities during their visits to the Vatican or the respective seats of other religious dignitaries, hope to strengthen their political position within their countries or worldwide or at least within the particular church or religious movement whose representative they seek to contact.

Political anthropology is very much interested in religion because authority, power, and their derivatives have been intertwined with politics for millennia to such an extent as to find it quite surprising when religion and politics are today viewed as separate domains. In effect, it appears that this division has been fairly artificial because of late we again have difficulties with the separation of religion and politics. Religious ideology influences and virtually determines political behaviour within societies and beyond their borders.³ There are no societies which lack religious belief even though there are societies which, through their ideologues, deny the existence of religion. However, at the same time they actually admit the existence of religion because they assert that societies are governed by rules and laws which are invisible and invincible, similarly to the qualities of gods. If we admit that all human societies face the existential questions of security of their survival, the direction in which each society moves (sometimes literally) and develops, and how to keep social order, then it is not surprising that religious creed, beliefs in invisible forces that govern individuals and societies accompanied each human group at its every step. Political archaeology, studying Palaeolithic settlements, has already established that leadership in the bands of the then hunters and gatherers was linked to beliefs in invisible, divine power which determined whether the group succeeded in a hunt or on a gathering expedition. The benevolence of the supernatural forces was often expressed through the leader who could or was believed to communicate with these forces. Research on the meaning of rock paintings in southern Africa has shown that persons depicted in trance or moving outside their bodies symbolise relations between neighbouring hunting groups as supervised by invisible powers of divinities.

³ Kertzer 1988.

Historical cases

In early states such as Egypt, China, Inca, Benin, Tibet, Bali, Angkor or Hawaii, to name just a few, evidence of sacralisation of power or direct divinization of rulers is abundant.⁴ If sovereigns in these and other polities were not identified with gods they were at least believed to have connection with god or gods and that his (rarely her) person was sacred. Such a sacred ruler was never seen to touch ground, he never ate, did not speak, and could transgress otherwise respected rules of behaviour, incest taboo included.⁵ The health and strength of the ruler was a guarantee of the prosperity of the whole realm. If beliefs inherited from pre-centralized past were not taken over, the new polity created a state religion for itself. This was the case of the Inca polity, early medieval Christian state formations in Europe, but also France in the wake of the revolution of 1789.⁶ So-called world religions also started as protest movements, promoting monotheism as against polytheism, and soon became official ideologies of states and their often violent expansions. Certain methods of governance were usually spread under the banner of religion. Arab conquest since Muhammad preceded Christian crusades. *La reconquista* of Spain, Portuguese colonialist ventures in Africa and India, and Cortes' submission of the Aztecs in Middle America were presented and carried out as god's wish. The Ottoman Empire was both a religious and economic venture. The advent of the Russian empire, after Muscovy shed off the Mongol yoke, was accompanied by both religiously and economically substantiated advance into Siberia and the Far East.

As we advance into modern times, materialist soberness seems to play a stronger role than religion. For example Cecil Rhodes' advance into the interior of Africa had almost purely materialist incentives (i.e. diamonds and gold) but he was driven by almost blind *belief* in the British Empire as the teleological fulfilment of history. Paradoxically, his adversaries were the Boers or Afrikaners whose Calvinist creed carried them not only towards a nearly impeccable direct democracy (limited only to themselves!) but eventually also to the exclusivist ideology of apartheid. Apartheid was presented as god's will and its ideologues searched the Bible for quotations supporting this cultural racism. Afrikaner *volk* was compared with the god-chosen Jewish nation.⁷

Zionism is a modernist ideology which was described as secular and even socialistic but its implementation was carried out with such a religious fervour that even at the moment of the foundation of the State of Israel in 1948 it was in effect not a purely secular state formation. It is much less so today when religious elements in Israeli politics are clearly stronger than they were sixty years ago.

⁴ Claessen and Skalník 1978, 1981; Claessen and Oosten 1996.

⁵ De Heusch 1972.

⁶ Kertzer 1988, p. 153-161.

⁷ Giliomee 2003; Novotná 2007.

Palestinian Arab liberation doctrine of the Fatah also started as a secular ideology but the cult of Yasser Arafat has assumed religious dimensions already during his life but especially after his death. Today it is the religiously militant Hamas which determines politics among and of the Palestinians. The less resolvable the Palestinian-Israeli conflict seems to be the more it is being 'resolved' with the help of ideology, religious by nature. A genuine vicious circle has emerged, full of unending violence, prejudice, passionate hatred, all in the name of god.

The history of communism, especially from the moment Lenin and his comrades took power in Russia in 1917, is the history of fanaticism, secular in form but religious in its content. Communism in its practical implementation is based on the beliefs about infallibility of the communist party and some of its leaders such as Lenin and Stalin. It is therefore no wonder that communists fought against church and formal religious beliefs. As they were busy creating a new state and party religion they could not tolerate a competition in the form of neither Orthodox, nor Catholic or Islamic religions. Their new set of fanatic beliefs ostensibly based on Marxism as a super-scientific knowledge has been the source of the rise but also the fall of communism. Once too many untrue assertions were revealed publicly, especially after Stalin's death in 1953, this political religion started to crumble. Any religion can be successful only and as long as it manages to prevent that the promised ideals did not materialise. Once communist leaders concretized their promises too much and began to assure the public about dates of fulfilment of various material achievements, every revelation about non-fulfilment of plans and promises inevitably led to the desacralisation of the communist creed. The secular religion then crumbled under the weight of evidence: "the king was suddenly naked". Because the promises were very attractive and the terror and isolation were almost complete, it took quite some time before communism was debunked as a creed of false prophets.⁸

Religion in/as politics today

Modern monarchies such as the British one do not hide that their heads of state have become King, or Queen, by the grace of god. The sovereign is also nominal head of the dominant religion, Anglicanism. The highest prelate, the Archbishop of Canterbury, is supposed to have an easy access to the British sovereign in order to discuss with her or him the questions of the realm from the viewpoint of the religion and church. Declan Quigley in his theoretical introduction to a recent collection on kingship stressed that it is ritual which ensures that all subjects are connected to the king:

⁸ Furet 1995; Mead 1955; Veber 2001, 2003.

King's relation to his people is unique in relying on ritual alone to separate him from the world since his function requires him precisely to stand apart as a perfect being who is separated from the contaminating concerns of ordinary people... The ritual must be continually repeated because as soon as it stops the king becomes sucked into the mundane world of intrigue and poison.⁹

One could object by pointing out that modern kings in constitutional monarchies are not politicians, have nothing to do with politics. Yet that would be to simplify the issue especially as in some monarchies, such as British, most subjects are believed to be identifying the monarchy and the person of the king/queen with the most cherished traditions of the political system they live in. In brief they believe that if the monarchy is gone or abolished the political system would be stripped of its flavour, of its essential characteristics which are inevitably connected with the religious belief and ethics which go with it. Indeed, the current crisis of the British monarchy is seen as a threat to the establishment.

In other contemporary monarchies the transition to republicanism was not resisted. This seems to be the case of Portugal and Greece but it is also true of the transitions from monarchy to communist republics in Russia, Hungary, Romania, Bulgaria, Yugoslavia, Albania, Vietnam, and Laos. However, a certain degree of nostalgia for monarchy with its religious trappings can be documented by rehabilitation and reburials of the last tsar Nicholas II and his family in Russia, as well as by recent appointment of the former Bulgarian tsar as that country's prime minister, and by the discussions about the return of Romania's king from exile. Still in other case, that of Spain, the monarchy was restored after a brief republican interlude in the 1930s and subsequent dictatorship of the 'Caudillo' (=leader) Francisco Franco which maintained that Spain was still a kingdom. However, for long 35 years he did not make the return of the king from exile possible. Austria has had a secular republican regime since 1918 when the monarchy collapsed. After the totalitarian interlude which for seven years followed the Hitlerite Anschluss in 1938 the republic was restored but discussions about monarchs and monarchy seem to be daily bread for journalists and many other people in this Alpine state. For tourists, in Vienna but also in other presently or formerly royal capitals of Europe, everything connected with monarchy and royalty is of great interest, certainly the ritual underpinnings. For example in Prague, where things reminding of the Catholic Habsburg imperial rule used to be effectively forbidden after 1918, the tourists now admire the royal castle which was to a considerable degree expanded by the Habsburg emperors. The Habsburg-built wings of the castle are now used by Czech presidents as their offices and representation spaces. The castle's heart is Saint Vitus cathedral and opposite the main entrance of the Prague castle stands the Archbishop's palace.

⁹ Quigley 2005, p. 5-6.

Recently the Roman Catholic Church made an unsuccessful attempt at repossession of the cathedral which for decades was the property of the secular Czechoslovak and Czech states. The embeddedness of religion in politics and politics in religion is here obvious. Yet, the same Czechoslovakia and its successor the Czech Republic has a history of uneasy relations with the Holy See, or the Vatican, the only ecclesiastical state or theocracy in Europe. The relations were tense between the two world wars and they were hardly visible during the 41 years of communist Czechoslovakia. It is noteworthy that to this very day the post-communist democratic Czech Republic has not signed the usual treaty regulating mutual relations with this world's smallest but powerful state.

Religion and politics in an African chiefdom: the case of Nanuŋ

My own research in the neo-traditional polity of Nanuŋ in the north eastern Ghana, extending for almost thirty years (it began in 1978), dealt with the colonial and post-colonial roles of the chiefs. The Nanumba agriculturists form an ethno-cultural unity because they all submit themselves to the highest value of their society called the *naam*. This term has been translated as chieftaincy or a hierarchy of chiefs but this could be misleading if we would consider chieftaincy solely as a political phenomenon. In fact the *naam* has been a complex term associated historically with mounted immigrants, who are believed to have brought it with them when conquering Nanuŋ. However, according to oral historians, the horse riding chiefly people encountered autochthons whose existence was believed to be dependent on the earth cult physically represented by the local shrines. Eventually the holders of the *naam* agreed to respect the *tinja* (earth divinity) of the autochthons and the legitimacy of the *naam* depends since then on the goodwill of the earth-gods. In the politics of the succession to the *naam* the representatives of the autochthons co-decide who is going to become the paramount chief, i.e. the *naa* of Bimbilla. The process of succession to the *naam* of Bimbilla starts with the ritual funeral, *naakuli*, of the deceased paramount in which a decisive role is played again by the representatives from sacred villages of the autochthons. Other autochthons are decisive among the electors of the supreme chief. The seemingly secular power of the *naam*-holders would be unthinkable without being sanctioned by the ritual specialists from among the original inhabitants.¹⁰ The two most recent successions following the death of the Bimbilla Naa Dasana in 1981 and Bimbilla Naa Abarika in 1999 were expressions of an utmost politicisation of the procedure which traditionally is shrouded in a mystery of performance of various rituals.

The 1981 case was marked by the delay of the *naakuli* for at least one year more than the norm. The reason for this was not the person or chiefly house of the

¹⁰ Skalník 1996, 2004.

successor but repercussions of the Nanumba-Konkomba armed clash of 1981 which was believed to cause the death of Naa Dasana. The latter died under very suspicious circumstances during the same night of 31 May 1981 as his Kpatihi or skinmaker, the top courtier who technically installs new chiefs on behalf of the Bimbilla Naa. The two crucial personalities of Nanuŋ were rumoured to have died after ingesting some herbs which eventually caused their death. It was also believed in Nanuŋ that the paramount chief did not perform the rituals which he was supposed to perform thereby inducing the disaster of the armed clash upon his chieftom. The male descendants of the deceased paramount could not reconcile themselves with the sudden death of their father and delayed with lame excuses the ritual funeral which was their responsibility. While no funeral was performed the eldest son acted as *gbonlana* or regent, thus prolonging the rule of the Gbugmayili or Lion chiefly house. With the ritual funeral performed, the *naam* of Bimbilla is free to pass within a week to the alternating chiefly house, the Banyili or Bangle chiefly house.

The 1999 case was more complex because, after enormous delays caused by disunity among the succeeding Gbugmayili members, the *naakuli* was performed in 2003 but it was not followed by an orderly installation of the new Bimbilla Naa because the nine electors were divided into two groups each supporting a different candidate from among Gbugmayili princes. The traditionalists' choice was a great grandson of a Bimbilla Naa, incumbent of the *naam* of the Gbugmayili gate town of Nakpaa. The modernists chose instead the eldest living son of the Bimbilla Naa Dasana who, however, was no chief which normally is a precondition for such a candidacy. Eventually both factions installed a Bimbilla Naa thereby causing a schism in Nanuŋ. Ghana police, more or less permanently monitoring the developments in Nanuŋ since the devastating ethnic war of 1994, was now alerted. The electors were summoned several times to the regional capital to see the executive state officials and the modernist candidate was arrested and interrogated by the secret police. At present, four years since the *naakuli*, Nanuŋ has two paramounts, none of them recognised by the state. What suffers most is the *kali* or tradition according to which the person of the Bimbilla Naa is the embodiment of the sacred values of the *naam*. The Nanumba society passes through a crisis of identity, perhaps worse than that when the Nanumba stood against the Konkomba and faced the possibility of defeat.¹¹

The case of Melanesian cargo cults

After World War II anthropologists working in Melanesia described a phenomenon which they called *cargo cultus* that existed on various islands. The central notion of these religious cults was *kago*, in Melanesian pidgin meaning

¹¹ Skalník, forthcoming.

load of consumable goods, supposed to come by air or a ship from faraway. These cults emerged after the departure of American and Australian armies in the wake of World War II. While fighting against the Japanese, these armies had also brought with them a lot of goods, hitherto unknown to the islanders. The disappearance of these goods after the war ended had called forth the cult which in some places led to the construction of makeshift airfields which were supposed to enable the return of the planes with cargo. This cult may have seemed as a purely economic affair be it not connected with the war and post war pro-independence movements. Actually it has lots to do with the personage of *bikman* or big man. Bigmanship was described by anthropologists as a political leadership based on economic performance of the redistribution of goods to followers. However, it appears that a bigman can be the one who, like any politician anywhere in the world, makes exaggerated promises. Thus in the island of Bougainville, Francis Ona formed the Bougainville Liberation Army and told his followers that the island will be free from the exploitation by the Papua New Guinea state. Indeed, this happened, but with it also the closing of the Panguna copper mine which used to be the source of *kago* not only for the PNG government but for the island as well. Eventually Bougainville separatism was defeated with the help of foreign mercenaries. In some places these cults expressed the longing of various local societies for independence from now independent governments. In New Hanover, for example, a Johnson cult was described. It called for U.S. President Johnson to become the supreme chief of the island. On the neighbouring island of Manus the cargo cult Wind Nation, also known as the Paliau movement, dominated the scene for decades. The leader, Paliau Maloat, branded the state, whether colonial or postcolonial, as Lucifer. The movement fought the state-Lucifer by organising demonstrations, riots and court cases. Wanek, who travelled around PNG with the National Theatre Society, concluded that this and other cases were an organised opposition against the state, a part of what he called the ‘polycentric process’. Local politics with traditional ingredients ruled the scene whereby PNG national politics was rendered obsolete.¹²

My own fieldwork in Lihir in 1988 and 1990 identified a Catholic-derived cult which, however, hinged to a considerable extent on bigmanship. Lihir consists of four islands situated to the north of the island of New Ireland: Niolam, Mali, Masahet and Mahur. By merging the first letters from the name of each island the name for the politico-religious cargo cult – Nimamar – emerged. Originally it was founded some years prior PNG’s independence in 1975 by a local bigman Theodore Arau. Then it was named TIA, meaning a self-sufficient development association. Arau was inspired by the Johnson cult on New Hanover. However, TIA was anti-state but not anti-church. The prophet’s goals were to unite the people of Lihir and proclaim Lihir’s independence.

¹² Wanek 1993.

The association/cult soon captured the imagination of the Lihir islanders across the clan and village boundaries. Indeed people united under the banner of the association and a storage shed was built at Londolovit on Niolam because it was believed that *kago* comes from tankers passing by. In every village and hamlet shrines of the cult were erected, some hamlets were founded by the followers of the cult. At the same time the association functioned as a business company as well. It wielded power normally reserved to a government. The members refused to pay council tax and by praying for police and offering them food they averted any police action against them. Under the new leader, Ferdinand Samare, the association promulgated its own ten laws styled on the ten Biblical commandments. In 1979 the disobedience culminated in TIA designating itself the government and Lihir declared its independence from Papua New Guinea. In 1982 TIA members voted for Jesus Christ¹³ during the National Government elections. Samare was detained for a month and presented himself as the first TIA martyr. TIA/Nimamar welcomed the discovery of gold deposits as the visible confirmation of cult's activities. Before the exploration for gold started *kago* was expected from Jesus Christ himself who was celebrated as redeemer in 1984 during the celebrations of 100th anniversary of Catholic Church in New Guinea. Since the explorations started in mid-1980s, some TIA/Nimamar members were identified as 'land owners' in the deposit area and thus prime receivers of the benefits from the gold *kago*. These people whose hamlets were to be moved from the plot where the gold refinery was to be built were the most active in their demands for expensive new housing and removal of non-Lihir workers from the island. The new leaders were local have-beens, i.e. men who lived and worked elsewhere in PNG and now returned as brokers for their fellow islanders. They became the new bigmen along with Father Pong, a powerful Catholic priest of local origin. Whereas the traditional bigman was a leader combining the qualities of warrior, sorcerer and hunter, now it was the know-how of the rule of the outside world which mattered. Both traditional and new leadership was, however, not hereditary but a purely personal achievement. Whereas traditional leaders had to defend the tradition, the new leaders were appreciated for their innovativeness and fighting spirit irrespective of the tradition, but on behalf of the Lihir people. That they were mainly pursuing their own profit was not considered anything strange by their supporters.¹⁴

¹³ It is curious that in Poland in 2006 some politicians also call for Jesus Christ to be declared head of state.

¹⁴ Skalník 1991, 2004.

Other African cases and developments

The articulation of religion and politics in contemporary world can be perhaps best shown on African cases. Indeed Africa may be seen as a harbinger of the new trend which signalises that religion will play decisive role in today's and tomorrow's world politics. As Ellis and ter Haar have noted:

Religion is taking a place that was hardly foreseen even twenty-five years ago, including in Africa. Analysing the role of religion in public life in Africa tells us something about the world as a whole...Although Africa is going through a difficult period of its long history, there is no reason to think that Africa has ceased to matter to the rest of the world...Africa and its diasporas are playing a key role in the realignments of religion and politics that seem set to become a major challenge to everyone in the years ahead.¹⁵

The anthropologist Isak Niehaus who worked in South African Lowveld before and after the 1994 historical rupture, showed that the occult power, namely that of witchcraft, has a lot to do with contemporary South African politics, both on local and national level. The apartheid regime tried to suppress and eliminate 'superstitions' such as witchcraft as its proponents believed it was not civilized. However, as most people's experiences were very discouraging and difficult to explain (Niehaus mentions four reasons: proletarianisation, villagisation, Christianity and democratisation), witchcraft accusations continued to proliferate. Since new South Africa was coming to existence after 1989 and apartheid laws and practices receded „postcolonial discourses fail to transcend a central assumption of the colonial civilising mission: that witchcraft is a residual survival of a pre-literate African culture“. Witchcraft accusations and beliefs in witchcraft's existence are not limited to the Africans but it is a fact that they continue to exist in post-apartheid South and even seem to dominate the life of people in rural settings: „For villagers witchcraft has less to do with civilisation and African identity than with their experience of misery, marginalisation, illness, poverty and insecurity in South Africa's overcrowded former Bantustan areas.“¹⁶ Vendula Řezáčová's research in the former homeland of Venda has reached similar conclusions although she studied illness and spirit possession. *Tshikuani*, i.e. 'ways/things/places of the whites' signify alien and dangerous modes of livelihood. People who got into touch with *tshikuani* are ill and afflicted and must be removed through healing cult and ancestor worship. Myth and ritual are then functioning as anti-hegemonic practices.¹⁷ The result is that extended households where healing takes place become centres of identity politics.

¹⁵ Ellis and ter Haar 2004, p. 9-10.

¹⁶ Niehaus 2001, p. 192 and 193.

¹⁷ Řezáčová 2006, p. 207.

All African heads of state, according to the famous Guinean writer Ahmadou Kourouma, author of *En attendant le vote des bêtes sauvages*, have their *marabout* or magician.¹⁸ He asserts that political power and magic are in effect amalgamated. There were and still are leaders who have been members of secret societies of either European origin (Freemasons, Rosicrucian, Temple Solaire) or African such as Poro, Ndjobi, Mwiti or the societies of their own making such as late President of Togo Eyadéma's cult of Vodun type with centre in the place of the plane crash from which he miraculously emerged unhurt. Not only primitive Central African emperor Bokassa or the cruel socialist president Touré of Guinea but also devout Catholic Houphouët-Boigny, founder-president of Côte d'Ivoire, was rumoured of staging ritual killings. Marxists and pro-western liberals alike sought to strengthen their power by membership in cults, secret societies, or praying as Muslims or Christians. The currently longest serving African president, Omar Bongo of Gabon, claims that he has managed to guarantee his longevity in power by a mighty mixture. He is known to have been a) a member of Ndjobi and Bwiti secret societies, b) the Grandmaster of the 'Dialogue' lodge, and c) El Hajj, i.e. a Mecca have-been. As Ellis and ter Haar show even such 'reasonable, progressive and sincere' leader as President Kaunda of Zambia, known for the African Humanism doctrine, has appointed two Indian mystics as his closest advisors who erected David Universal Temple, named after Kaunda's middle name. Kaunda also co-opted other religious movements known as successful into his spiritual arsenal.¹⁹ Kaunda's successor Chiluba, a born-again Christian, made religion the instrument of policy and Zambia was proclaimed a Christian nation. Mozambican president Chissano, a former Marxist, got enthralled by transcendental meditation and soon his family, the ministers of his government and civil servants were strongly advised to meditate for 20 minutes a day. South African leaders of diverse, opposed political camps and persuasions such as P.W.Botha, F.W. de Klerk, Nelson Mandela, Zak de Beer, Mangosuthu Buthelezi and even the radical Pan-Africanist Congress politicians wowed Christians of independent churches such Zion Christian Church to give them support. The secrecy of the dealings of the Afrikaner Broederbond and the South African Communist Party, in principle adversaries during the apartheid era, put them into one bag of a mixture of explicit secularism and religious sacredness and exclusivity. What is also remarkable that these secret societies, whether traditional or modern, are all-male networks of power, at least as far as Africa is concerned. Secret societies, clubs and esoteric cults are not considered inconsistent with the secular aims of politicians and the voters do not see anything absurd or untrustworthy about these associations. Secrecy means control of information and information is power.

¹⁸ Ellis and ter Haar 2004, p. 81.

¹⁹ Tamtéž, p. 70-81.

Mathieu Kérékou, twice the President of Benin, combined Marxism with Vodun beliefs and the services of a Malian *marabout* Amadou Cissé. This man managed to be appointed a minister responsible for secret services in Benin. He was known as Djine or Devil because of his infamous practices including the use of torture as an instrument of repression. He ended as a convict for fraud. Kérékou was returned to power by popular vote as a born-again Christian. Ellis and ter Haar suggest that esoteric spiritual knowledge combines well with “worldly political skills as intelligence-gathering and illicit financing”. The mentioned Cissé thus learned about planned coups and various secrets of his clients within the ruling state elite. Sometimes these religious advisors themselves attempt to grab power which was the case of Niger under the President Kountché when a marabout and the chief of national intelligence in the same person attempted to stage a coup.²⁰ So we could continue *ad nauseam*.

Islamism as politicised religion

Islam has always been rather radical in its demands on believers and in its rejection of the (active) non-believers. However, the colonial or semi-colonial subjugation of most Muslim countries by western (=Christian) countries and subsequently launched modernization which took shape of westernization has triggered off Islamist responses. These today seem to have acquired quite threatening forms as the attack on New York’s World Trade Center in the first year of the 21st century shows quite graphically. There have been various assessments of Islamism. Those who assert that Islam and especially its militant manifestations such as Taliban rule in Afghanistan or Al-Qaeda network are aspects of a backward, mediaeval ideology appear to me as particularly wrong. With Ernest Gellner I concur that Islam is not a religion comparable with other ideologies but a practicable worldview which manages successfully to govern the lives of hundreds of millions. Gellner showed quite persuasively that *umma*, that worldwide community of adherents of Islam, has succeeded better to adjust to the challenges of modernity than the secular religion of Marxism: “puritan, revivalist, or fundamentalist Islam can perform precisely the function which nationalism has performed elsewhere: provide a new self-image for people no longer able to identify with their position in village, lineage, clan or tribe.”²¹

Gellner pointed out that Iranian revolution, though considered in the West as the epitome of fundamentalist Islamism, was rather untypical because it was dominated by the Shi’a sect of Islam which nurtures cult of personality and martyrdom, unlike the “religiously more egalitarian cult of the Law” (meaning Sunni ways). “Martyrdom is more rousing stuff than jurisprudence and theology,

²⁰ Ibid., p. 86-87.

²¹ Gellner 1994, p. 23-24.

and this enables Shi'a scholars to communicate with the masses more effectively than their Sunni opposite numbers". Khomeini in Iran has "profoundly Sunni-fied Shi'ism. In deeply Sunni spirit, he equated Islam with the implementation of *the Law*"...the Shi'ite polity will be a kind of republic with a special bias towards the authority of scholars, a republic implementing the will not of the people but of God, as manifested in a unique Holy Law."²² Whereas Umma has become 'an overall community based on the shared faith and the implementation of its law', concrete Muslim polities suffer from clientelism and 'government-by-network'. Power holders and their institutions are not governed by law but by 'informal connections of mutual trust'. The religious structure of society governs daily life but not the 'organization of power'. Against this are directed the fundamentalists who reject institutions of compromise and who in contrast strive for 'absolutely untainted implementation of Islam. Gellner wonders whether these 'latterday puritans' seize power and if they do whether "their version of the withering of the (earthly) state will be as catastrophic as the somewhat parallel fundamentalism of the Bolsheviks."²³ The Muslim religious Umma retained its unitary nature but kept 'the distinction between the divine and the mundane'. The result is the successful sway over the faithful whereas the Bolshevik communists confused the divine and mundane, and 'sleazy mediocrities' such as Brezhnev could not simply pass as top priests of the 'sacred revolution' of the earthly world.²⁴

Conclusion

Religion and politics are today, as they were in the past, intertwined so that if they do not form an inseparable couple then they are simply a unity which only the analytic eye of the scholar can distinguish. However, there are social processes underway which indicate that the possibilities exist for a society of citizens who do not need to divinize either the state or anyone else, at least not for public purposes. That religion deserves respect is undeniable, especially when it caters for individuals' balance of personality or those social needs which rationalism cannot fulfil. But together with Gellner and Lessnoff I am of the opinion that it fulfilled its role as 'the forerunner and progenitor of modernity'. Protestantism and High Islam fulfilled their respective modernizing roles. But in the modern world religion has no 'legitimate cognitive role'. Science has made claims of religion 'incredible' and all reinterpretations of religious modernists deserve 'no intellectual or moral respect'. Lessnoff credits Gellner with 'exactly' mirroring Max Weber's viewpoint.²⁵ Political anthropology can agree with this

²² Ibid., p. 24-25.

²³ Ibid., p. 26.

²⁴ Ibid., p. 42.

²⁵ Lessnoff 2002, p. 155.

provided we also realise that the globalizing world as we experience it today is by far not completed. The tension between those who are marginalised and prepared to believe in leaders and prophets whether genuine or false, and those who arrived to see their modernity as a liberation from religious faith and thus a chance for a self governed truth-seeking civil society, will be there still for a very long time ahead.

Bibliography

- Claessen, H.J.M. and Skalník, P. (eds.): *The Early State*. Mouton, The Hague 1978.
- Claessen, H.J.M. and Skalník, P. (eds.): *The Study of the State*. Mouton, The Hague 1981.
- Claessen, H.J.M. and Oosten, J.G. (eds.): *Ideology and the Formation of Early States*. Brill, Leiden 1996.
- Ellis, S. and ter Haar, G.: *Worlds of Power. Religious Thought and Political Practice in Africa*. Hurst, London 2004.
- Furet, F.: *Le passé d'une illusion. Essai sur l' idée communiste au XX^e siècle*. Robert Laffont/Calmann-Lévi, Paris 1995.
- Gellner, E.: *Conditions of Liberty. Civil Society and Its Rivals*. Hamish Hamilton, London 1994.
- Giliomee, H.: *The Afrikaners. Biography of a People*. Hurst, London 2003.
- Heusch, L. de: *Le roi ivre*. Gallimard, Paris 1972.
- Kertzer, D.I.: *Ritual, Politics and Power*. Yale University Press, New Haven and London 1988.
- Lessnoff, M.: *Ernest Gellner and Modernity*. University of Wales Press, Cardiff 2002.
- Mead, M.: *Soviet Attitudes Toward Authority. An interdisciplinary approach to problems of Soviet character*. Tavistock, London: 1955.
- Niehaus, I.: *Witchcraft, Power and Politics. Exploring the Occult in the South African Lowveld*. Pluto Press, London: 2001.
- Horáková, H.: *Národ, kultura a etnicita v postapartheidní Jižní Africe*. Gaudeamus, Hradec Králové 2007.
- Quigley, D.: Introduction: the character of kingship, in Quigley, D. (ed.), *The Character of Kingship*. Berg, Oxford 2005, s. 1-23.
- Řezáčová, V.: Politics of meaning: (re)constituting private sphere through symbol and ritual in the former homeland of Venda, South Africa, in *Transcending Postcolonial Conditions: Towards Alternative Modernities. Programme for a conference 3-7 December 2006*. University of Cape Town Printer, Cape Town 2006, s. 207.
- Skalník, P.: Lihir society on the eve of gold mine operations. A long term project for urgent anthropological research in Papua New Guinea, in *Bulletin of the International Committee on Urgent Anthropological and Ethnological Research* No. 32-33, 1991, s. 9-36.

Skalník, P.: Authority versus power: democracy in Africa must include original African institutions, in special issue edited by E.A.B. van Rouveroy van Nieuwaal and D.I. Ray of *Journal of Legal Pluralism and Unofficial Law* 37-38, 1996, s. 109-121.

Skalník, P.: Chiefdom: a universal political formation?, in *Focaal. European Journal of Anthropology* 43, 2004, s. 76-98.

Skalník, P.: Politická kultura na asijském pomezí: srovnání Libanonu a Papua Nové Guineje, in P. Skalník (ed.), *Politická kultura: antropologie, sociologie, politologie*. Set Out, Praha: 2004, s. 157-169.

Skalník, P.: Rethinking chiefdom, in (forthcoming).

Veber, V.: *Komunistický experiment v Rusku 1917-1991*. Set Out, Praha 2001.

Veber, V.: *Leninova vláda (Rusko 1917-1924)*. Triton, Praha 2003.

Wanek, A.: *Fighting Lucifer. The State and Its Enemies in Papua New Guinea*. PhD. Dissertation, Stockholm University 1993.

PhDr. Petr Skalník, CSc., Department of Social Sciences, University of Pardubice.

petr.skalnik@upce.cz