

THE NECESSITY OF RELIGION IN PUBLIC LIFE: ARISTOTLE'S PERSPECTIVE

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There have been many arguments in many quarters in favour of the position that religion and politics belong to completely two different orders – the sacred and the mundane. Thus religion should stay out of politics while politics should have nothing to do with religion. Some people have gone to the extreme of considering religion irrelevant and unnecessary in the modern scientific world. However, while we may try to avoid the controversy and the direct confrontation of science with religion and while at the same time respecting their boundaries, can we really rule out religion from public life? Is there any relationship between religion and the day-to-day living of human beings? What place does religion have in politics? There is no doubt that Aristotle may be considered as the philosopher par excellence and indeed the originator of many sciences. But can he also be seen as having a place for religion in his philosophizing or in his political doctrine? The objective of this article is to critically look at and analyze what Aristotle considers necessary in the organization of the state and see from there the importance he accords public worship for the good order and excellence of the city.

The Functions of the State

There is no doubt that Aristotle was neither a priest nor did he identify himself with any particular religious cult of his time. At least we have not seen such evidence in his writings. But in book seven, chapter eight of his *Politics*, Aristotle enumerates what he calls “indispensable to the existence of a state, for what we call the parts of a state will be found among the indispensables.”¹ Aristotle

1. Aristotle, *Politics*, in *The Basic Works of Aristotle*, ed. Richard McKeon (New York, NY: Random House, 1941), VII. 8. 1328b3-4.

then goes on to enumerate the necessary functions of the state as providing: “First, there must be food; secondly, arts, for life requires many instruments; thirdly, there must be arms, for the members of the community have need of them, and in their own hands, too, in order to maintain authority both against disobedient subjects and against external assailants; fourthly, there must be certain amount of revenue, both for internal needs, and for the purposes of war; *fifthly or rather first*, there must be a care of religion, which is commonly called worship; ...”² We can summarize these necessary requirements of the state to include: food, arts or crafts, arms or ammunitions, money/property and finally religion. But the curious note is that religion or public worship is not merely placed as last of the necessary items, Aristotle adds “or rather first”. As if this was not enough, Aristotle goes on to name the sixth item: “sixthly and most necessary of all, there must be a power of deciding what is for the public interest, and what is just in men's dealing with one another.”³

The sixth item here is understood to be “judiciary” or rather simply “justice”. The confusion, however, lies on the concluding phrase of the first five items – “fifthly, or rather first” and the phrase “most necessary of all” which introduced the sixth item indispensable for the existence of the state. In this context of the *Politics*, it is not clear and Aristotle has not explained whether religion is “rather the first” of the six items necessary for the existence of the state or religion is the first – *primus inter pares* – of the first five items or whether justice is the most important and the first of the six items or justice is the most necessary and in its own class. In other words, we can ask the question simply: religion is “rather the first” in what sense? And Justice is “the most necessary of all” in what sense for the existence of the state? These are difficult questions to tackle especially in the context of Aristotle's *Politics*.

But Aristotle offers us an interesting treatment of priority and posteriority in chapter eleven of book five of his *Metaphysics* which may shed some light in our apparent *en passé*. Here Aristotle

2. *Ibid.*, VII. 8. 1328b5-11. (emphasis added)

3. *Ibid.*, VII. 8. 1328b12-14. Here after all references to the *Politics* will be cited within the text unless otherwise necessary for the footnote.

notes that the terms “prior” and “posterior” are applied to place, time, movement/motion, power, arrangement/ordering, knowledge, substance, potency and activity.⁴ Looking at the above list of words or terms in which things are said to be prior one to another, we cannot but notice that substance stands out as that “which is neither predicable of a subject nor present in a subject.”⁵ All other terms are relations. Only a substance can be prior in place, time, movement, knowledge, potency and activity. Now we can return to our competitors – public worship and justice. Worship is an activity towards the gods whereas justice is an activity towards the city. Aristotle states that

The words 'prior' and 'posterior' are applied to some things (...) because they are nearer some beginning determined either absolutely and by nature, or by reference to something or in some or by certain people; e.g., things are prior in place because they are nearer either to some place determined by nature (...), or to some chance object; and that which is farther is posterior.⁶

If we then consider the object of religious worship and the object of justice – the gods and the state – respectively, we can begin to see which is prior and which is posterior “either absolutely by nature or by reference to something” else. In this case, the gods would assume priority not only in substance but also in place, time, movement, power, knowledge and in activity. And again, we must note that for Aristotle, all causes are sources.⁷

This, then, would seem to suggest that justice is “the most necessary of all” human activities towards the state whereas religion or public worship is “rather the first of the six elements indispensable to the existence of the state. “A state then should be framed with a view to the fulfillment of these functions. There must be husbandmen to procure food, and artisans, and a warlike and wealthy class, and priests, and judges to decide what is necessary and expedient” (VII.8.1328b18-20).

4. Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, in *The Basic Works of Aristotle*, V.11. 1018b10-1019a14.

5. Aristotle, *Categories*, in *The Basic Works of Aristotle*, ch. 5. 2a11-12.

6. Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, V.11. 1018b10-14.

7. *Ibid.*, V.1. 1013a15-19. “That from which a thing can first be known – this also is called beginning of the thing, e.g., the hypotheses are beginnings of demonstrations. (Causes are spoken of in an equal number of senses, for all causes are beginnings.) It is common, then, to all beginnings to be the first point from which a thing either is or comes to be or is known; but of these some are immanent in the thing and others are outside.”

The Ordering of the State

It is significant to note that Aristotle does not discuss or treat public worship as a subject in his *Politics* – at least not as a topic of its own. But the mere fact that Aristotle does not discuss it in that manner would not in any way overlook the importance he attaches to it in the organization of the state. Aristotle does not just stop at outlining the various functions of the state, he goes on to show how the different functions need to be organized in “the right distribution of offices” (VI. 8. 1321b4). Here again, Aristotle prominently features the office of public worship. “Another set of offices is concerned with the maintenance of religion; priests and guardians see to the preservation and repair of the temples of the gods and to other matters of religion” (VI. 8. 1322b 19-21). That the office of religious affairs is set aside and distinct from other offices is a strong indication of the importance of religion in the wellbeing of a state. By wellbeing of a state we mean, in Aristotle's own term the proper functioning of the state and the harmonious existence of its citizens. This is not to say that without religion the state cannot function properly or that the citizens of the state would not live in harmony. But the fact that Aristotle sees religion as an important organ in the structure of the state means that religion was probably seen from a perspective different from what we see it today. However, within this office of religious affairs, there is a further distinction between the duties of the priests and guardians of the temple and those who may be appointed by the law to perform or carry out public sacrifices that “derive their dignity from the public hearths of the city” (VI. 8. 1322b28-29). This requires the organization of the state in such a way that the common or public “hearths” of the city can be identified for which sacrifices are made.

It is however, worthy of note that in the ordering of these offices, the office of public worship comes last after all the others, i.e., food, arts, military, finance and justice. But in summarizing the necessary offices indispensable for the existence of the state, “the offices concerned with matters of religion” (VI. 8. 1322b31) is listed first before all others. But here the offices are grouped into three sets. Within the office of public worship are included those of military, revenue and expenditure, market, city, harbours and with

the country. The second group is concerned with the execution or enforcement of justice, while the third group is saddled with deliberation and decision on the issues of justice. What is crucial here is to recognize the importance of religion as an independent element of the state and not subsumed by the issues of justice, as indispensable as it may be in the proper functioning of the state. Secondly, to note that religion stands at the head of food, crafts, military and finance and not under them.

As we have seen, religion or public worship is accorded a significant place in the official ordering or cabinet arrangement of the state. Aristotle is also very specific about the site of the temple or religious structure in the city. According to him, “The site should be a spot seen far and wide, which gives due elevation to virtues and towers over the neighbourhood” (VII. 12. 1331a28-29). His master and predecessor had already recommended in the *Laws* that “The temples, then, should be built around the market square, and in fact round the whole city, on elevated sites with a view at once to security and cleanliness.”⁸ The temple must be like “a city built on hill-top [that] cannot be hidden.”⁹ The elevated or conspicuous spot of the temple is informing since it is not just for the sake of being conspicuous and seen but for the purpose of commanding “virtue and towers over the neighbourhood.” In other words, the temple commands excellence. This is to say that the temple stands on the elevated grounds not merely for the architectural adornment of the city, it is a holy ground, and symbol of holiness and virtue. This excellence or virtue or holiness must be seen by the gods that the people worship and by the people of the surrounding area who look up to it as a model.

Here we cannot fail to remember that the god of Aristotle is the unmoved mover, who moves not by any form of activity, but who, by its excellence and attractiveness, draws everything towards itself. Aristotle further indicates that “Below this spot [i.e., below the temple] should be established an agora,¹⁰ such as

that which Thessalians call the 'freemen's agora'; from this all trade should be excluded, and no mechanic, husbandman, or any such person allowed to enter, unless they be summoned by the magistrates” (VII. 12. 1331a30-35). The magistrates are ordinary people with extraordinary character, who uphold the standard of excellence and virtue to be seen, observed and imitated by the citizens. For Aristotle, it should be borne in mind that the nearer one is to the gods, the more perfect one becomes. This would further suggest that the magistrates themselves, even though are symbols of excellence and virtue to the people yet derive their excellence and virtue from the contemplation of the temple since the temple represents divine excellence.

It is now not difficult to see that the placement of the temple at the conspicuous location in the city is significant for Aristotle. The temple inspires excellence and virtue and enforces them particularly in the magistrates/leaders, who, inspired by divine excellence by extension offer their services in the manner of excellence and also in their administration of justice. It is the magistrates “who deal with contracts, indictments, summons, and the like and those who have the care of the agora and of the city respectively, ought to be established near an agora and some public place of meeting” (VII. 12. 1331b11). Aristotle does not forget the temple priests, “for whom public table should likewise be provided in their proper place near the temples” (VII. 12. 1331b5-6). This is because it is the functions of the “priests and guardians to see to the preservation and repair of the temples of the gods and to other matters of religion” (VI. 8. 1322b20-21). The necessity of the priesthood and the indispensability of its functions are so significant for Aristotle that he recommends that firstly, the office of the priesthood should not be combined with other necessities of daily life – so “that the worship of the gods should be duly performed” and, secondly, the office of the priesthood is reserved for the elderly who have resigned or retired from the worries and concern of day-to-day living. “Those who from old age have given up active life . . . should be assigned the duties of the priesthood”

8. Plato, *Laws*, in *The Collected Dialogues of Plato*, Bollinger Series LXXI, eds. Edith Hamilton and Huntington Cairns (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1989), VI. 778c.

9. The Gospel of Matthew, *Jerusalem Bible*, 5.13ff. “A city built on a hill-top cannot be hidden. No one lights a lamp to put it under a tub; they put it on a lamp-stand where it shines for everyone in the house.”

10. An Agora is an open place of assembly. In Aristotle's context, it seems to suggest an open place where the most learned gather to discuss things of highly intellectual that are beyond the knowledge of the common man. This is probably why such gathering should exclude all forms of trade, artisans, farmers, or any such person, unless they summoned by the magistrates.

(VII. 9. 1329a27-34).¹¹ This is insightful. The office of the priesthood should be left for the mature and people of experience whose sole responsibility is the spiritual needs of the state. They bring people to God and bring God to the people.

Whenever and wherever the issues of religion, the gods, the priests or the guardians of religion are discussed, the issues of prayer cannot be completely excluded. It is the function of the priests or the guardians of religion to pray and make sacrifices to the gods who are believed or perceived to be higher beings. The human beings constantly find themselves in helpless situations and thus they resort to the higher being than themselves for help. Aristotle is not oblivious of this fact. Some things are readily available in the state but others must be provided. Therefore, the necessity of prayer: “May our state be constituted in such a manner as to be blessed with the goods of which fortune disposes (for we acknowledge her power)” VII. 13. 1332a28-30). This seems to suggest that the best human effort in organizing the city is not merely enough, the citizens must still depend on good fortunes which only the gods can provide. This is a clear indication of human limitations which obviously beckons on the power of the transcendence.

The efficacy of prayer cannot be overemphasized. For a state “to be happy and well governed,” Aristotle states that there are two necessary components: the choice of the right end or aim and the discovery of the proper means to attain the chosen end.¹² The state needs to pray for its leaders so that they may not only lead the people in the right direction but also that the proper means and decisions may be taken at every step of the journey to arrive at the desired ends. This is why religion is not only necessary but must have a proper place in the organization of the state. The

worship of the gods and the citizens' prayers to them assure humans of some confidence in a being who is higher than them and a being who can provide the needs that humans cannot provide themselves. This is then the reason why a city needs strong and stable foundations to be able to satisfy the needs of its citizens. The good of the city requires the “knowledge and purpose” (VII. 13. 1332a31) of the citizens otherwise how would the citizens pray for the end they do not know? The citizens should not be ignorant of the purpose of the state and should not be ignorant of the direction in which their leaders lead them. This can only happen if the citizens participate in the government of the state.

Aristotle insists that “A city can be virtuous only when the citizens who have a share in the government are virtuous, and in our state all the citizens share in government; . . . for in the virtue of each the virtue of all is involved” (VII. 13. 1332a32-39). We are to be mindful of the fact that slaves are not citizens in Aristotle's state. Citizens are those who participate in the affairs and running of the state. That is why the excellence of one involves the excellence of all. Aristotle has already noted that a happy man is a virtuous man. “For no one would maintain that he is happy who has not in him a particle of courage or temperance or justice or prudence” (VII. 1. 1323a27-29). It follows therefore, that for the state to be most happy, it must possess of men who are most virtuous and virtuous life cannot be attained without leisure (VII. 9. 1328b35-40). Here we see the close link between the worship of God, virtuous life, happiness and leisure. It should be emphasised here that this statement does not imply that one cannot be virtuous without religion or being religious, it rather indicates that virtue gives credibility to religion. What else does a state require except to provide all the necessities of life which bring about the happiness of its citizens?

Leisure, Virtue, Contemplation and Happiness

According to Aristotle as we have indicated above leisure is necessary for a virtuous life and no one can be happy without being virtuous. But Aristotle is quick to classify virtue as a means to something else and as an end in itself. In *Nicomachean Ethics*

11. See *Leob Classical Library edition*, with an English translation by H. Rackham (Cambridge, MA; London: Harvard University Press, 1990), VII. 8. 1329a28-34. “Priests must be appointed neither from the tillers of the soil nor from the artisans, for it is seemly that the gods should be worshiped by citizens; and since the citizen body is divided into two parts, the military class and the councilor class, and as it is seemly that those who have relinquished these duties owing to old age should render to the gods their due worship and should spend their retirement in their service, it is to these that the priestly office should be assigned.”

12. See *Politics*, VII. 13. 1331b26-30. “There are two things in which all well-being consist: one of which is the choice of right end and aim of action, and the other the discovery of the actions which are means toward it; for the means and the end may agree or disagree.”

book ten chapter seven he states:

So if among virtuous actions political and military actions are distinguished by nobility and greatness, and these are unpleasurable and aim at an end and are not desirable for their own sake, but the activity of reason, which is contemplative seems both to be superior in serious worth and to aim at no end beyond itself, and to have its pleasure to itself (. . .), and self-sufficiency, leisureliness, unweariedness (so far as this is possible for man), and all the other attributes ascribed to supremely happy man are evidently those connected with this activity, it follows that this will be complete happiness of man, if it be allowed complete term of life (for none of the attributes of happiness is complete).¹³

The above passage reveals that the activity of reason which is contemplation stands not only at the head of all other virtues but it is also superior in kind, for it is sought for its own sake and has no end beyond itself. The highest form of leisure is contemplation. This is why, for Aristotle, the activity of the gods is contemplation which surpasses others in blessedness. Consequently, of human activities, that which is most akin to contemplation must be most of the nature of happiness for “happiness is thought to depend on leisure.”¹⁴

Moreover, contemplation is not alien to humans, it is in accordance with human nature, it is the best and most pleasant, and it is that which brings the most happiness.¹⁵ Aristotle adds that “if reason is divine, then, in comparison with man the life according to it is divine in comparison to human life.”¹⁶ There is a lot more to derive from these passages. Aristotle implies that a life of contemplation is a life of blessedness and vice versa. But above all, to be involved in a life of contemplation is to be most beloved by the gods. “For if the gods have care for human affairs, as they are thought to have, it would be reasonable both that they should delight in that which was best and most akin to them (i.e., reason) and that they should reward and honour those who love this most,

13 Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, in *The Basic Works of Aristotle*, ed. with Introduction by Richard McKeon (New York: Random House, 1941), X. 7. 1177b16-24.

14. *Ibid.*, X. 7. 1177b5.

15. *Ibid.*, X. 7. 1178a5-8. “It would be strange, then, if he were to choose not the life of his self but that of something else. And what we said before will apply now; for man therefore, the life according to reason is best and pleasantest, since reason more than anything else is man. This life therefore is also the happiest.”

16. *Ibid.*, X. 8. 1179a22-28.

as caring for things that are dear to them and acting both rightly and nobly.”¹⁷ The point in all these is that the worship of the gods leads to and is most profoundly expressed in contemplation and contemplation endears humans to the gods. It would be difficult, therefore, to imagine a people who are thus beloved by the gods and who would not be happy. It follows also that no one would attain happiness derived from contemplation and brought about by public worship, would be without virtue. While it is true that virtuous life is not limited to those who are religious, it is surely expected and presupposed. After all, for Aristotle, happiness consists in living virtuous life.

The link between leisure, virtue, contemplation and happiness will surely manifest itself in good political life, and a good political life is manifested in the excellence of justice. A just man is not only equipped with the “necessities of life” but “the just man needs people towards whom and with whom he shall act justly.”¹⁸ This spells out the necessary truth that religion is not merely a private enterprise neither is it disconnected from public life. If all worshipers of God were to have a firm foundation in the religion to which they are affiliated, then, they will radiate the excellence of the God they worship. It is in this context that Agang notes that “In short, religion permeates every aspect of human behavior. It is all embracing because of its natural ability to provide a transcendent moral perspective. It connects finite men and women with the infinite.”¹⁹ Therefore, while it is possible that many people may reject religion for the sake of the religious, in other words, the inability of the religious to live up to expectation, it cannot be denied that religion has an indispensable place and role in our public life. Human beings are not just alienated in a hostile society. Those who turn their back against religion or are hostile to religious activities should better know that religion has not lost its value neither has God abandoned his creation. Human beings are intimately connected to God as a reality which transcends our finite existence and upon whom we depend for true and lasting happiness.

17. *Ibid.*, X. 7. 1177a32.

18. *Ibid.*, X. 7. 1177a31-32.

19. Sunday Bobai Agang, “Repositioning Religion for a Sustainable National Development,” *Journal of Christian Religion and Education* 6, no. 1 (2009): 29-59, at 40.

Conclusion

The human person is a composite of body and soul, in other words, an embodied spirit. We may claim and indeed pretend to ignore the immaterial aspect of the human person and concentrate on the physical, but the natural tendency of him or her yearns for and goes beyond the physical to the transcendence. This yearning is not only peculiar to the individual human beings for their perfections, but also to the conglomerate of humans in a state for the very perfection of the state. In this article, we have taken a very close look at Aristotle's organization of the state in his *Politics*. We have seen and tried to show that Aristotle did not only acknowledge the existence of the gods or the higher beings, but they had a role to play in the proper functioning of the state. The gods possessed the excellence of virtues. Thus, the worship of the gods or public worship predisposed the citizens to benefit from divine excellence which in turn is manifested in the administration of justice in the state. If at that time that revealed religion was not as popular or wide spread as it is today, public worship was seen as a necessary element for the well-being or proper functioning of the state and the harmonious existence of its citizens, how much more necessary should it be today? Has human nature changed? Has human being surrendered his/her spiritual component to the material? Could it be that the God of today does not possess the excellence which is connatural with his essence? Could it rather be that the worshipers of God are not practical worshipers? Why then does religion seem to lose its credibility? These and many more questions beg for answers.

However, it is our belief and deep seated conviction that God and religion still have important role to play in human life and by strong extension, in the life of the state. The apparent credibility crises that religion is experiencing today are not due to religion itself but due to the weakness and selfishness of humans – a manifestation of human limitation. Religion is a necessary element for the proper functioning of the state.