

What distinguishes a small religion from a large cult?

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Abstract. When we take big and small as inherent characteristics of a religion, then it is not merely a question of religion, but of political theology. This article will illustrate this argument with the example of Christianity. This article will illustrate this argument with the example of Christianity. In this discussion, there is no shortage of praise for purely religious life and criticism of universal religion in pursuit of political influence. Political influence is not the original intention of purely religious life. The spiritual structure of religion means that religion is a relationship between man and God, not between man and man.

Keywords: religions; inherent characteristics; Christianity; politicization.

1. Introduction

When we divide religions into large and small, and when we regard large and small as the inherent characteristics of a certain religion, if the large and small here refer to the size of the political area of religious transmission (that is, whether people in certain areas should all believe in a certain religion as politically correct), then this is not just a purely religious issue, but a political-theological issue. This article will use the example of Christianity to illustrate the argument. So far (by 2020), the Christian population has accounted for 2.38 billion, accounting for one-third of the world's population. Although Christianity is no longer the dominant ideology in today's world, this number can still illustrate the political appeal of Christianity as a universal religion. Finally, this article will conclude that what distinguishes a small religion from a large cult is its relationship between politics and the extent of its politicization.

2. What is the concept of and distinction between small and large religions?

Before talking about the large and the small of religion, it is necessary to clarify what is a purely religious life.

"For there is one God, and one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus; Who gave himself a ransom for all, to be testified in due time."

This text was once a focus of contention between Martin Luther and the Catholic Church. Luther once tried to use these texts to separate religious life from politics and return to the most original Christian beliefs (although the later development of Protestantism does not seem to be as Luther expected). Luther further said, "In fact, we are all consecrated priests through Baptism, as St. Peter in 1 Peter 2[:9] says, "You are a royal priesthood and a priestly kingdom," and Revelation [5:10], "Through your blood you have made us into priests and kings." The so-called "universal priesthood" or "priesthood of all believers" (although Luther did not adopt such an expression) means that people's belief in God can be practiced without the help of other priests (such as the Catholic Church). We can think of Luther as recovering the authentic Christian faith and religious life. In that case, it becomes clear that this life has nothing to do with other people, especially with authorities such as the Church. For a Christian like Luther, religious belief is his asceticism on the one hand, and at the same time, it is the meaning of the whole world to him on the other hand. This article defines this life as a purely religious life.[The most classic embodiment of this purely religious belief and structure of existence is the life of Abraham(Søren Kierkegaard, Amélie Nothomb, Adriana Hunter, Fear and Trembling, St. Martin's Press, 1999.).In this sense, if we have to ask about the largeness and smallness of religion, it means not just focusing on the relationship between God and man but rather on the question of the universal legitimacy of religion- namely, the political power of a certain religion, and the question of

the ontological structure of that religion as a political ideology. Nevertheless, a difficult problem must be resolved. Suppose Abraham's life and spiritual structure can be regarded as purely religious and apolitical.

In contrast, weaving the characteristics of "large" and "small" and political transmission projects into the above-mentioned religious life forms the religious authority (such as the Church). From then on, the religious life related to the "large" and "small" was no longer purely religious. In the case of the Middle Ages, religion became a tool of political legitimacy that kings scrambled for, becoming a political theology[The concept of political theology became famous from the teachings of Carl Schmidt. According to his theory, all important modern political concepts are secularized theological concepts. This makes the topics of political theology and religion severe and crucial in contemporary society, not just for museum exhibits. However, this article will not go deep into modern ideology but will discuss issues of traditional religions.(Carl Schmidt, Paul W. Kahn, Political Theology: Four New Chapters on the Concept of Sovereignty, Columbia Univ Press, 2012)

Combined with the previous definitions, a large religion is one whose authority may be most widely recognized. In other words, a large religion is a religion that can serve as the most universal political ideology. So the largest religion imaginable must first be a universal religion. For example, since St. Paul put forward "justification by faith", Christianity has broken through the scope of the Jews and developed in the direction of universalization[King James Bible, Romans 1:16, "For I am not ashamed of the gospel of Christ: for it is the power of God unto salvation to every one that believeth; to the Jew first, and also to the Greek." which is clearly illustrated by the development of the Catholic Church in Europe, as the original meaning of "catholic" is all-embracing.

However, it is impossible to say whether any "one" religion is universal[The popularity of Christianity is almost limited to the Catholic Church, the Orthodox Church, and the Protestant Church formed after the 17th century.]. We must also be aware that there are denominations in Christianity, not all of which are universal, and not all of which are orthodox or authoritative. For example, as the opposite of the most authoritative Catholic and Protestant churches, the Anabaptists formed during the Reformation never gained any authority. Anabaptists are known for their extreme fundamentalist teachings and were brutally persecuted by both the Catholic Church and the Protestant Church (it has to be said that this is similar to the fate of Christianity in the Roman Empire). Unlike the Catholic Church and the Protestant Church, the Anabaptists had hardly any official church organization from the beginning to the end (although there are some informal organizations); at a time when religion was a serious and central part of political life, if Anabaptists had one thing in common, it was persecution. In Richard Overton's terms, "Who writ the histories of Anabaptists but their enemies?" [Alberto Toscano, Fanaticism: On the Uses of an Idea, Verso, 2010, p.ix.]. The opposite of a large religion is a small religion. If the Catholic, Orthodox, and Protestant churches were the large religions, the Anabaptists were the small religion (we might see similar traits in the Amish today).[Similarly, compared to Christianity, a universal religion, Judaism, which is only spread among Jews, is a small religion. Likewise, there are more fundamentalists and smaller numbers of Haredi(Ultra-fundamentalist Jews) in Judaism. Similarly, suppose Buddhism is said to be a large religion. In that case, Esoteric Buddhism is a minor religion (according to the history of Indian Buddhism, it died out just because of the prevalence of Esoteric Buddhism). We can also think that Greco-Roman and Nordic polytheism did not spread as widely as Christianity. However, they also had a significant role in Greece's political life before the 3rd century BC, Rome before the 4th century AD, and the Nordic countries before the 11th century AD. It plays an important role but does not tend to spread generally(Huston Smith, The World's Religions, HarperOne, 2009.). Zoroastrianism, including the Achaemenid and Sasanian dynasties in Persia, is similar. Although it has limited spread, it is far weaker than the spread of Christianity, Islam, and Buddhism. The fundamental difference between these religions and the Abrahamic religions (Christianity et al.) is that the gods and creeds in these religions are too concrete compared to the purely abstract God in Christianity, and both in all Abrahamic religions. The difference between Christianity and Judaism is that the justification of Christianity is universal; the difference between Christianity and Islam is that Christianity is tolerant

of the law (Such as referring to the medieval Christian religious judgment in *The Cheese and the Worms: The Cosmos of a Sixteenth-Century Miller* (Carlo Ginzburg, John Tedeschi, *The Cheese and the Worms: The Cosmos of a Sixteenth-Century Miller*, JHUP, 2013)) (At least the abundance of Bedouin traditional practices in Sharia limits this, in other words, Islamic societies tend to be more committed and faithful to their Sharia than Christianity (Bernard G. Weiss, *The Spirit of Islamic Law*, Univ of Georgia Press, 1998.)). Moreover, the difference between Christian churches and minorities like Anabaptists is that minorities tend to be more extreme and faithful to the Bible.

To sum up, a large religion is a religion that can accommodate everything and can smoothly integrate itself into secular life, even if it is a religious life in a capitalist society [Or the capitalist life itself is an extension of technology of this religion (Michel Foucault, *Security, Territory, Population*, Picador, 2009.)]. Next, this article will explain that the universality of creeds and God's abstraction (emptiness) guarantees its smooth integration into secular life.

3. Universalization of Doctrine or Creeds

If we read the *The Rule of Saint Benedict*, we will find that the precepts of monks in Christianity, especially monks, are not flexible and not tolerant.

"To yield obedience in all things to the abbot's precepts, even if he himself act contrary to their spirit, the which be far from him: being mindful of that precept of the Lord: 'What they say, do ye; but what they do, do ye not.'"

This is one of the many precepts in the fourth chapter of the *The Rule of Saint Benedict*. This rule is strict; it is connected with a series of ascetic practices in the pre-medieval and medieval periods. This article does not attempt to present the content of these ascetic practices in detail but explores their stark contrast to, in Weber's words, the close connection between the Protestant ethic and the spirit of capitalism.

Weber pointed out that Protestantism proposed a kind of asceticism that is not the same as the asceticism mentioned above: the Protestant view of vocation. The Protestant view of "vocation" holds that people should not pursue God's promises by breaking away from secular life and transcending secular morality; instead, they should fulfill their responsibilities and obligations in their professional positions in the secular world.

In Weber's words, "One of the fundamental elements of the spirit of modern capitalism, and not only of that but of all modern culture: rational conduct on the basis of the idea of the calling, was born — that is what this discussion has sought to demonstrate — from the spirit of Christian asceticism."

There is a stark contrast between this Protestant conception of vocation and the abovementioned Benedictine precepts, which can be integrated with the secular (the development of capitalism) while the latter cannot. Similarly, we can think of the lives of the Amish in the United States, a life of fundamentalism that must make them a minority.

4. The Abstraction of God: Negative Theology and Cynicism

When the creeds of a spiritual religion can be integrated with the secular world, the religion also shows tolerance for all non-religious things. Religion still exists, but there is no religious life anymore. Instead, it will degenerate into religious cynicism: I believe in God, but I will do it no matter what the secular society tells me to do. In this religious cynicism, God is absolutely abstract, negative, and empty.

"And the Word was made flesh, and dwelt among us, (and we beheld his glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father,) full of grace and truth." "For the law was given by Moses, but grace and truth came by Jesus Christ."

The above is the famous account of the incarnation of Christ in the Gospel of John. This article cites this example to show that God was not empty to the prophets (such as Christ, Moses, and

Abraham). God's law and grace have the content. In other words, Revelation means a direct connection between God and the prophets, meaning that all truth is given to Jesus by God. This truth ultimately allowed Jesus to have no fear of persecution by secular regimes.

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Suppose we use the definition of "positive theology" and "negative theology(apophatic theology)" to depict the epistemological structure of the prophets as positive theology. In that case, they know what God is, but it seems that ordinary people only take the approach of negative theology, where we can only say what God is not. According to Jacques Derrida, negative theology can avoid the metaphysics of presence[Jacques Derrida, *Derrida and Negative Theology*, Albany: State University of New York Press, 1992, p.135.("How to Avoid Speaking: Denials")]. Although Derrida is often seen as a radical political philosopher influenced by Martin Heidegger and Western Marxism, the above assertion is not original to Derrida; since Nicholas of Cusa wrote "Of Learned Ignorance", this idea is widely spread in theology and philosophy. The so-called "avoiding a metaphysics of presence" means: avoiding being the name or tool of any secular ideology. In other words, to say "God is not something" means to deny that God is any secular authority and existence in real politics. A mortal who cannot directly listen to God can realize a religious life independent of secularism and politics if he can implement negative theology.

A large religion is characterized by integrating religion and secular life. People still cannot know what God is in a politicized universal religion. However, unfortunately, the negative theology in political theology, the final result of saying "what God is not" is not to affirm one's limitation and ignorance but to find the emptiness of God. More concisely, the large politicized religion is exactly what Derrida criticizes as the "metaphysics of presence"; that is, a certain abstract principle serves as the legitimacy or legitimacy of real politics. And in the history of Christianity, it can served as the state religion of the Roman Empire; it can also served as an authority of legitimacy for medieval monarchs, and even after the Industrial Revolution, it can become the source of the spirit of capitalism (if Weber is correct). This universal religion has no fixed object of support but drifting cynicism. Any secular political form can find its source of legitimacy in this "God". When "God" becomes the articulation or connection of all political ideologies or structures, it has no content in itself, not even negative content. In the most extreme form conceivable, it cannot negate any secular behavior. In this sense, we can say that God is emptiness(an empty signifier) in the ontological structure of universal religion. Emptiness implies that whatever God is, it can be combined with any secular political life. God, as emptiness, is the ontological structure of tolerance. In this religion, man has changed from the lamb of God to the lamb of secular politics and history.

5. Conclusion

In the discussion of this article, there is no lack of praise for pure religious life and criticism of universal religions that pursue political influence. Political influence is not the original intention of pure religious life. The spiritual structure of religion means that religion is the relationship between a person and God, not the relationship between people. Religion must adhere to this structure to be pure religion. Once the relationship between people pressed into religion, religion became political theology, and eventually, with the birth of a certain universal belief, people no longer remember the life of the prophets but can only experience a kind of religious cynicism. The universality of religion means the compromise of religion with politics, which ultimately leads to religious nihilism. The

transition from religion to political theology implies the death of God, as Friedrich Nietzsche asserts: "What are these churches now, if they are not the tombs and monuments of God?"

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