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Unit 8 Current Issues in Eastern Traditions

INTRODUCTION

The modern era has presented certain challenges to the religious traditions we have studied in this course. For example, the development of the modern secular nation state has changed the way in which religion and government intersect. Increased mobility and immigration has also resulted in the creation of pluralistic societies, which has created a need for interfaith dialogue among different religious groups that share the same space. This current issues unit will touch upon some of these topics and explore how religion, modernity, and politics come together in our contemporary world and influence personal, collective, and government decisions on issues ranging from the environment to human sexuality.

THEMES

Some of the key themes in our discussion of current issues include:

Key historical developments

- ➔ Religion & Politics
- ➔ Fundamentalism
- ➔ Bioethics
- ➔ The Environment
- ➔ Gender & Sexuality
- ➔ Diversity and Pluralism

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

By the end of this unit you should be able to:

1. Identify the key issues that religious traditions have faced in the modern era;
2. Explain some of the ways in which certain religious traditions have addressed these issues; and
3. Articulate the ways in which pluralism has changed or can change the way a person views cultures, religions, or ethnicities that are different from their own.

READINGS

World Religions: Eastern Traditions 5th Edition, Ed. by Amore, Hussain, and Oxtoby – Chapter 8:
Current Issues in Eastern Traditions by Roy C. Amore and Amir Hussain

HOW TO PROCEED

Proceed through this unit by following the steps outlined below:

1. Read Chapter 8 in the textbook paying special attention to the highlighted terms (definitions are in the glossary at the end of the chapter). It may be useful to keep a list of terms and definitions as you read through the chapter to use as a quick reference later when you are preparing for the final exam.
2. Read the Unit 8 course notes and complete the exercises.
3. Answer the study questions provided at the end of the course notes.

Course Notes

RELIGION & POLITICS

The relationship between religion and politics is complex, particularly in the modern era. Historically, the two have been inextricably linked together in many cultural and geographical contexts. However, in the post-Reformation period, there were moves to separate civic and religious authorities, which This is still the case in many places; for example, in 1979 there was a revolution in Iran where the Shah of Iran was overthrown and there was a new government installed led by Ayatollah Khomeini. An Islamic theocracy was created where the system of governance is predicated on Islamic doctrine and law.

In some sense this can be understood as a response to modernization and secularization. In 1923 Ataturk, a Turkish army officer, moved to dismantle the remains of the crumbling Ottoman Empire and he established the Republic of Turkey. During this process, he implemented the use of the Latin alphabet instead of Arabic, he banned certain forms of Islamic dress like the fez, and he suppressed groups that engaged in overt displays of religiosity such as the Sufi mystics. This resulted in the emergence of revivalist Islamic groups that sought to re-establish the link between politics and religions through the creation of theocracies (like in Iran).

Exercise #1 – Conduct a google search using the terms ‘religion and American elections’. What type of results do you get? How has religion influenced elections within the past 20 years in the US? How are Republican or Democratic views on ‘political issues’ such as abortion or stem cell research connected to religion? How does this seem to influence voters?

FUNDAMENTALISM

What do you think about when you hear the term fundamentalism? This term has different meanings, which are dependent on context. However, there are some general features that are often associated with fundamentalist understandings of religion such as the inerrancy of scripture, a militant defence of their beliefs, conservative views on personal conduct, and an apocalyptic worldview. In some cases, groups that are labelled fundamentalist may employ violence against perceived enemies and assert that their tradition is the only 'absolute truth'.

Bioethics

Technological advancements in the field of biomedicine have prompted religious traditions to consider the various ethical and moral dimensions of certain practices such as abortion. One of the main Indic principles that is often applied in discussions on ethics and abortion in an Eastern context is the doctrine of ahimsa, or non-violence. Typically, this principle is used to discourage abortion, which some consider a form of violence. In some cultural contexts, male children are preferred for social and economic reasons and sometimes female foetuses are aborted.

THE ENVIRONMENT

Many religious traditions are using sacred texts and doctrinal teachings to articulate a particular environmental ethic to address modern concerns such as pollution and global warming. However, it should be noted that most Eastern traditions have never understood human beings as completely separate or dominant over the planet or nature. We have noted the principle of ahimsa in Indic religions and this conception of non-violence informs people how to behave and interact with their environment. For example, killing animals for food (other other reasons) would be prohibited in Buddhism or Jainism because these traditions prohibit harming other living beings.

GENDER & SEXUALITY

Eastern traditions have recently begun to challenge traditional gender roles and talk about homosexuality. For monastic communities (in Buddhism, for example) sexual orientation is not an important issue because most monastics take a vow of celibacy. However, in places like China and India, where historically homosexuality has not been acknowledged or welcomed, negative views are slowly changing and there is an increasing level of tolerance and acceptance.

RELIGIOUS DIVERSITY

The ease of air travel and recent patterns of immigration in North America and other parts of the world has led to a significant increase in diversity of cultures, ethnicities, religions, etc. Certainly each of the religious traditions we have studied throughout this course have unique features but we have also noted many similarities along the way such as ritual practices like fasting, prayer or communal meals.

Interfaith dialogue attempts to focus on these similarities in order to foster a sense of understanding and acceptance. However, a pluralistic society must also knowledge (and perhaps even celebrate) those differences in order to acquire a better understanding of different religious groups. There is a history of debate in most religious traditions (as we have seen in many cases), which has led to sectarian divide. On the other hand, some religious groups are more open to dialogue and debate. The aim of such an enterprise is to exchange ideas and consider alternative interpretations. This is an important move in the modern world because the acquisition of knowledge about other religions can lead to tolerance and understanding, which is not necessarily equivalent to acceptance. Just because a person understands Hindu philosophy does not mean they must commit to that tradition. There has been a distinct shift in pluralistic societies to focus on a personal truth rather than an absolute truth, which leaves room to acknowledge the validity or legitimacy of other belief systems but still reaffirm your own religious commitments. The textbook notes the importance of dialogue in our world because understanding can lead to a greater sense of interconnectedness and sense of humanity.

Terms to Know

Bollywood

dowry

fundamentalism

Hindutva

separatists

Study Questions

1. Explain the link or interaction between religion and politics in the modern age. Do this by outlining the details of one of the case studies listed in the textbook or course notes and describe how religion has influenced politics in your chosen case.
2. What is fundamentalism? How can this be read as a response to modernity and secularism?
3. What are some of the goals and aims of interfaith dialogue?
4. How have various Eastern religious traditions responded to current environmental concerns?
5. What is pluralism? How does this concept differ from diversity?
6. How are Eastern traditions addressing issues surrounding homosexuality?

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