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*From Religion to Politics: China and the Middle East*

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One frustrating aspect about dealing with the difficulties in the Middle East is the alliance between political opposition and religious extremism. Whether it is the Palestinian opposition to Israeli occupation, the opposition in Iraq to American military presence, or the former Taliban party's rise to power in Afghanistan, the expression of dissent is not limited to politics, but takes form in religious language and action.

Religiously-based groups are most vocal in their statements and most extreme in their actions. It is the religious sanction of voluntary death that helps motivate many suicide bombers. Why does this link between political dissent and religious extremism exist?

The quick answer is that apart from Turkey, few Muslim countries allow open political debate. The idea of a free press, of the right of political parties to form, express opinions and have candidates run for political office is foreign in most of these countries. The only way groups of people can meet together and express ideas is through religion.

Most religious organizations, of course, do not get involved in political matters. They remain gathering places for prayer and worship. But since they provide the only context in which people can organize themselves not sponsored by the government, they become the umbrella under which sincere believers can apply their beliefs to political questions and then develop plans, even illegal plans, to act upon the answers to those political questions. Thus, by squashing the right of political assembly and organization but allowing the right of religious assembly and practice, governments of Middle East Muslim countries shifted political activity into the religious sphere. Political dissent thus becomes cloaked with the authority of belief in God.

Middle Eastern governments may not have been able to see this development arising or have had the power to prevent it, but Communist China did. When communism arose there in the early 20th century, it saw that religious organizations could be as dangerous as political organizations. They saw little distinction between the two since for more than a millennium Confucianism, interwoven with Buddhism and Daoism,

had provided the administrative structure for China's imperial government and organized the universities that trained the civil servants.

So the communist government banned religious organizations and worship sites, outlawed the priesthoods, and forbade religious belief and practice. Once religion disappeared from public life, the government organized informers to root it out in the lives of individuals. Mao's Cultural Revolution in the 1960s did this in a particularly thorough manner.

China's recent economic liberalization has led to attempts at political expression. China's state apparatus has consistently put these down. The most organized of these attempts have come from religious organizations. Falun Gong, a form of Buddhism that emphasizes physical well-being and meditation, was allowed to gain followers in China in the 1980s when the government viewed it as a sort of exercise club. But when in the 1990s it became known that Falun Gong promoted certain religious beliefs and the group organized peaceful public protests, the government took steps to eliminate the organization and to rehabilitate its members.

In recent years, evangelical Christianity has made a few converts in China. Small groups of these Christians also have turned their beliefs toward political questions and become critical of the Chinese government. As the government has become aware of this, these believers have found themselves in jail, prevented from even communicating with their families.

The lesson here is that banning the right of people to organize and express political beliefs leads to the shifting of political thought and expression into the religious sphere. There it can become part of the religious structure and gain authority from religious leaders, beliefs, and from God (or gods). From that point, it can erupt into religious extremism. This can of course be prevented by outlawing religious expression as well, but this suppression requires great expenditure of state resources and disrupts the lives of many people.