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WHEN POLITICAL RELIGION
IS A ‘GOOD THING’?
Feminist storytelling around less-heard
understandings of ‘political religion’
Sariya Cheruvallil-Contractor

Introduction
This chapter is a reflective essay that offers a new theorisation informed by feminist non-hierarchi-
cal thinking to interrogate the idea of political religion, which is itself a layered term that may be
understood in a myriad of ways. Here I postulate that current theorisations of political religion that
emerged as way of explaining the use of religion and/or religious structures by fascist groups in
the early twentieth century have significant gaps. Current theorisations are arrived at from Euro-
centric and Western intellectual lenses. In this chapter, I present new understandings that while
still Eurocentric, draw largely on the experiences of minoritised religious migrants to the UK.
These understandings will contextualise and include within theorisations of political religion,
the ways of thinking and being of minoritised religious groups who arrived in the UK in the
1960s and who had to engage with British and European political and social structures. This
chapter demonstrates how as they sought to build homes in their adopted countries, they fore-
grounded their religious social capital in their negotiations with political structures to garner rights
for themselves and their communities. As they did so they negotiated spaces for themselves within
British civil society from where it was possible to be heard in political and societal structures. In
this regard, I provocatively ask whether political religious activism can ever be a ’good thing’?
I thus add to the debate about understandings of political religion about which Gentile
declares that it is “not necessary to have the gift of prophecy to predict that the question of
political religion is the one which will never be resolved to the satisfaction of all scholars” (Gen-
tile, 2005). I aim to add a new perspective to this ongoing debate – a perspective that is shaped
by the voices and experiences of those who were previously not heard in intellectual rumina-
tions on political religion.

A brief note on my positionality
I write this chapter as a religious intellectual, a product of Eastern and Western forms of think-
ing, who lives and works in both zones, simultaneously an outsider and an insider. In writing
this chapter and being transparent about my positionality drawing on Rose (1997) and Sultana
(2007), I encourage intellectual production:
That is transparent about who researchers/scholars/authors/thinkers are and the impact of their identity on their intellectual production

Which acknowledges the existence of deeply held unconscious biases that shape how we think about various concepts, experiences and ideas

Which recognises the intellectual opportunities that emerge when researchers from different positionalities think and write

Thus, writing this chapter is a form of personal and intellectual political action, undertaken with the aim of demonstrating the unique intellectual lens that I and intellectuals with positionalities similar to mine have.

Terms of reference: political religion and a feminist approach

In this chapter, politics is used in a wide and interdisciplinary sense aimed at capturing the diversities, contradictions and porous boundaries within its conceptualisation. Politics can be about the structures of government. It is also about the hierarchies within everyday life and ‘ordinary’ people’s negotiations with these hierarchies, often motivated by a need to realise their agency. For this chapter, ‘politics’ includes the myriad ways in which people galvanise to secure equality and rights through critical engagement with structures of government, through challenge of prejudicial attitudes within their communities and through transformative consciousness-raising of their own selves.

Within the discursive intellectual space that is ‘politics’, this chapter is particularly concerned with ideas and theorisations of ‘political religion’. It is clear from various texts that the term ‘political religion’ (as well as the term ‘totalitarianism’, which this chapter is not focussed on) emerged in the period between the two World Wars, as scholars sought new vocabulary to make sense of Nazism and other forms of fascism as they emerged in Europe and beyond, and in relation to which ‘previous notions of dictatorship and tyranny no longer seemed appropriate’ (Burrin, 1997, p. 321; Gregor, 2012; Maier, 2007; Stowers, 2007; Gentile, 2005, 2004; Gentile and Mallett, 2000). The concept ‘political religion’ is often used as a synonym for civil religion, secular religion, public religion, politicised religion and religious politics (Gentile, 2005), although theorists distinguish between these terms. In relation to civil religion (again a term that this essay is not focussed on), it is important to point out seminal work by Bellah in which he draws upon the political histories and experiences in the USA to define civil religion. He describes this as a reified but nevertheless all-pervasive, elaborate and well-institutionalised system of rites, morals and values that influences and in turn determine social and political experience in the USA (Bellah, 1967).

Coming back to political religion, this term has its roots in the separation of religion and state in European contexts and the rejection of any form of divine basis for secular power. During this time, Europe also witnessed its acceptance of modern understandings of political governance and ideas such as democracy, liberty and agency, which culminated in the modern political religions. Political religion as a term conceives modern despotisms as surrogates for religion (Maier, 2007; Payne, 2008) and ‘depends upon highly criticized expressive-symbolist theories of religion and an implied opposition to the religion of genuine [sic] Christianity’ (Stowers, 2007, p. 9). Nazism, fascism, communism and other forms of totalitarianism were the peak of plurisecular developments in Europe (Burrin, 1997). The use of the term ‘political religion’ did not flourish (as opposed to the word ‘totalitarianism’ which caught on in both academic and media circles) and suffered from the lack of interest in religion in the then largely secular academic milieu (Burrin, 1997).
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Two aspects of Burrin’s discussion of the evolution of the term are critical to the new theorisation that this chapter postulates. Firstly the early theorists of ‘political religion’ used this term to describe what were essentially secular phenomena that were rooted in a secular European rejection of religion. There was a sense that these new ‘modern religions’ would replace or at least compete with the traditional ‘world religions’. Gentile describes this as the ‘sacralisation of politics’:

The sacralisation of politics is manifest in the way the ideal of politics was conceived, experienced and represented by its supporters, in their style of life as well as in their attitudes towards the adversaries and opposing ideals. Modern political movements are transformed into secular religions when they: (a) define the meaning of life and ultimate ends of human existence; (b) formalise the commandments of a public ethic to which all members of these movement must adhere; and (c) give utter importance to a mythical and symbolic dramatisation in their interpretation of history and reality, thus creating their own ‘sacred history’, embodied in the nation, the state or the party, and tied to the existence of a ‘chosen people’, which were glorified as the regenerating force of all mankind.

(Gentile, 2005, p. 29)

While these theorisations relied on comparisons with the structures of religions – deeply held beliefs, passionate adherence to shared norms and rules and a sense a larger goal – what is missing from these is any acknowledgement of the political and social agency of those who within these secular norms in Europe, continued to believe in one or more of the traditional world religions. In this regard, Maier questions the legitimacy of ‘political religion’ as a concept, asking whether it can truly be used to explain or illuminate political phenomena without distorting the basic idea of religion in the process (2007). This leads to my second reflection on Burring’s commentary – that this term was employed, albeit hesitantly, by a largely secular academic milieu, which was suspicious of religion. I wonder whether an inherent suspicion of religion led to an unconscious effacing of the political agency of religious groups and individuals. This is the gap or indeed the opportunity that this chapter addresses – how can current theorisations be extended to be inclusive of religious groups? Maier (2007) and others share my concerns about this category or concept, with Maier asking:

We have to ask whether all this is permitted: is it permissible to describe political phenomena in terms of religious categories? Does one understand what one is doing? Does one not draw religion into a questionable sphere, into an area of double meaning and ambivalence? Are the boundaries between religion and criminality not finally blurred? If one wishes to apply religious terminology, should one not speak of anti-religion, pseudo-religion, religious ersatz or ersatz-religions?
Sariya Cheruvallil-Contractor

Having asked these questions, Maier reflects on what may be understood about political movements like fascism and Nazism, from the metaphorical use of religion and political religion, including the fervour of believers/adherents and the resilience of religions that do not go away but return in different forms. This is perhaps what is apparent in the current growing visibility populist movements across the globe. I seek to go in a different direction, aiming instead to understand and uncover the political agency and politics of religious people, whom I position as lesser heard at least in the study of politics.

**Why a feminist approach?**

Feminism is important to this chapter as it provides an intellectual framework through which voices at the margins of European intellectual discourse can be heard and included. This chapter has already alluded to the challenge of trying to define ‘politics’ or ‘political religion’. Definitions of the term ‘feminism’ similarly fail in gaining any form of consensus, with some women (of all ethnicities) embracing it as a ‘label’ for their struggles and other women eschewing it as a white Western construct that is of no relevance to women from other ethnicities. A key criticism of feminism is that it privileges histories of white Western women’s struggles – starting with the suffragettes, 1890s onwards (Holton, 1995) – and overlooks women’s struggles for rights prior to the 1890s. The historical activisms of women of colour are ignored including for example by anti-slavery female activists (Watkins et al., 1992) who prior to the 1890s spoke about diverse women’s rights. For example black activist Sojourner Truth (c. 1797–1883) demanded equality and rights for women but did not call herself a feminist. Nawab Sultan Jahan Begam (1838–1901), ruler of the erstwhile princely state of Bhopal (now in India), did not call herself a feminist. Yet she used her political power to reform women’s education and to institute political and marital rights for women in India (Lambert-Hurley, 2007). Although feminism may be a recent word, throughout history women have challenged their marginalisation in ways that reflected their local contexts.

In their struggles for equality and rights, feminists realised that there was a need to question and disrupt existing sources of knowledge that were created by and for dominant social groups (namely white middle-class men) and which were biased towards the interests of these groups. As they attempted to reclaim systems of knowledge and governance for women, feminists realised that the tools they developed could be used to further the cause of any marginalised group (not just women) who, like women, remained under-represented or mis-represented in traditional discourses of knowledge. For some thinkers, feminist thought has evolved to advocate emancipation and rights for any ‘othered’ group within society, who may be marginalised on account of ethnicity, gender, sexuality, religion or age (Cheruvallil-Contractor, 2012). According to Flax,

> Feminist philosophy thus represents the return of the oppressed, of the exposure of particular social roots of all apparently abstract and universal knowledge [p. 249]. . . . Feminism is a revolutionary theory and practice. It requires simultaneously an incorporation, negation and transformation of all human history, including existing philosophies.

*(Flax, 1983, p. 271)*

Feminist thought may best be understood through its deconstruction and interrogation of traditional conceptualisations and constructs of truth, objectivity and neutrality (Cheruvallil-Contractor, 2012; Cohen et al., 2000; Webb, 2000). For this author, and others who use a feminist
standpoint, the intellectual influence of feminism now extends beyond a celebration of women’s social contributions. It includes for example the work of thinkers such as Hannah Arendt who has written among other things on revolution, human rights and political action (Arendt, 1967, 1966); Saba Mahmood who is critical of secular liberal politics and liberal feminisms which she considers inadequate to explore the lived experiences of religious women (Mahmood, 2005); and Michelle Le Doeuff who interrogates the politics of knowledge production (Le Doeuff, 1998). In this chapter, I draw on a discursive feminist approach to challenge dominant secular Eurocentric narratives of political religion. Instead I seek to hear those who are at the margins of European society but who nevertheless engaged in political activism.

A different story political religion?

Methodologically, the idea of narrative and stories, particularly those that remain unheard or less heard is important for this chapter. From the narrative enquirer’s perspective, a story captures the complexity and subtleties of human experience. Stories are constantly being reconstructed to reflect the ongoing personal, cultural and communal narratives (Webster and Mertova, 2007), and here I tell a story that showcases the significance of religious belief to the political activisms of certain individuals and communities. The story I tell in this paper represents a critical connection between the personal subjective experience and the larger political action, between individual and the collective (Lambert, 2002):

People tell stories not just to work out their own changing identities, but also to guide others who will follow them . . . telling one’s story is a responsibility to the commonsense world. . . . Storytelling is for another as much as for oneself. In the reciprocity that is storytelling, the teller offers herself as a guide. . . . The other’s receipt of that guidance not only recognises but values the teller. The moral genius of storytelling is that each, teller and listener, enters the space of the story for the other.

(Frank, 1995, pp. 17–18)

This story draws upon ethnographic and interview data conducted as part of various sociology of religion projects that I have been involved with. The main story revolves around an interview that I conducted in 2011 with a retired Sikh male police officer. The story is then embellished and built using narratives from more than one individual, from relevant literature and from my tracing of the evolution of human rights law from the Magna Carta to present times (Cheruvallil-Contractor, 2019). All three quotes used are from the original interview with the retired Sikh police officer. Personal details and any other identifying information have been modified to mask the identities of participants. The research was conducted after receiving ethical approval from the University of Derby where this project was based.

Kam’s religion and politics

I met Kam, as part of a research project funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC) & Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC), Religion and Society programme on discrimination and equality on the basis of religion or belief, which was led by Professor Paul Weller (Weller et al., 2013). When I met him, Kam was in his late 70s. He was a retired police officer who arrived in the UK in the late 1960s. He was a Sikh of Indian heritage but had lived in eastern Africa all his life. His ancestors had been moved by the British government from India to eastern Africa to manage plantations, creating a class of India managers between a
class of black African labourers and the white British plantation ‘owners’. Kam was a qualified police officer and worked as an officer in the British police. He had to flee his home country in the 1960s, when a wave of politics known as Africanisation meant that non-indigenous communities were no longer welcome in East Africa. Kam considered going to India, but he and his community were told they were not Indian and despite being British citizens, they were initially told that they could not come to Britain. However, as subjects of the former British Empire, Kam and others like him had the right of entry, work and settlement in the UK.

After much bureaucratic negotiations with the British government, Kam and his community were able to move to the UK, where they settled in various locations across the Midlands of the UK and beyond. Kam and his community were different from the other South Asian–heritage migrants. They were British citizens prior to coming to the UK, they were knowledgeable of the processes and systems of British civil society, most spoke English and they were generally well-qualified. This created a societal hierarchy within British South Asian communities. There was also another hierarchy at play – although Kam was a qualified and experienced police officer, when he initially applied for police jobs in the UK, he was told that South Asians could not be police officers. Yet within a few years of his initial application and when White British officers realised that they lacked sufficient cultural understanding to work with migrant British South Asian communities, he was approached and was appointed a police officer. This was a moment of great pride for Kam, and he recalls how his appointment made him one of the first Sikh police officers in the UK. It bought agency for South Asian communities in his city across faith community groups. He was able to explain to local government the religious and ethnic needs of South Asian communities, which had been previously treated with suspicion because they were unfamiliar in British contexts. He was a police officer but also became a negotiator and a representative of his and other cultures and faiths.

Kam’s story continues. The turban that he wore for religious reasons became a bone of contention. He was not allowed to undertake certain duties as he was told that his turban posed a ‘health and safety’ hazard. He faced discrimination at a personal level too. He recalled how none of his colleagues would eat with him in the cafeteria and would get up from a table if he sat at it. They told him his food ‘smelled’. With a twinkle in his eye and a chuckle he reflected how attitudes to Indian food have changed:

I remember 20–25 years ago when my wife used to cook an Indian meal, Punjabi meal, and our kitchen windows used to be on the road side, open, and over the weekend when she is cooking, and people used to pass by. Because I was the only Asian family living there and you can see them make the faces, what is this stinky smell over there, but after a few years when they started to experience the food and eating the food in the Indian restaurants, those very people started coming to the window asking her what are you cooking? What a lovely smell!

At work, he continued eating Indian food despite his colleagues’ disdain, then he says someone sat with him and tasted a bit. That he says was the beginning of a new story. Food can be of great significance to migrant communities as they build a semblance of familiarity and normality. As they share food they build new social bonds with indigenous communities (Abdelhafid, 2023).

It is important to note that these experiences occurred before the Race Relations Act (1976), which aimed to prevent discrimination on the grounds of race, colour, nationality, ethnic and national origin in the fields of employment, the provision of goods and services, education and public function. The Race Relations Act is important as many minority groups sought legal
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recourse against discrimination using the provisions of the Race Relations Act. In due course, this act in part led to the recognition of Jews and Sikhs as ethnic groups. Kam remembers this act well. He remembered in his own way supporting and lobbying for this act and then being involved in educating his communities on the significance of this act. For him to be able to support minoritised faith groups of South Asian Heritage – Muslims, Sikhs and Hindus – was an important act of solidarity with those whom he shared aspects of his identity. He recognised that his faith and ethnicity gave him insights into the cultural nuances of these communities that his White peers lacked and so he sought to use his agency as a police officer in a secular force and as a religious Sikh man to enable socio-political change at a local level.

In 1976 and 1988 Sikhs successfully campaigned for turbaned Sikhs to be allowed an exemption, on religious grounds, from the requirements of the Road Traffic Act 1972 for motorcyclists to wear safety helmets. This was enshrined in law in the Motor-Cycle Crash Helmets (Religious Exemption) Act 1976 and the Road Traffic Act 1988. This had personal ramifications for Kam. Although the ruling was in relation to motorcyclists, Kam recalls that lived experience of the law for him was that his turban was better accepted in the workplace. Media and local community discourses meant that people around him better understood the significance of the turban for Sikhs. His colleagues realised that the turban was not just a sartorial choice, but something that he wore out of deep religious conviction. With this recognition came acceptance and, to a certain degree, respect.

According to Kam, another enduring debate about religious communities’ sartorial choices is evinced in media debates about the hijab or headscarf that Muslim women wear. It was also interesting how historical tensions around the turban re-emerged after the tragic events of 11 September 2001 (9/11) and the growing visibility of the Taliban, who incidentally also wore turbans. The Taliban turbans were different in style and purpose to Sikh turbans, but this was not apparent to those who lacked cultural understanding. As Islamophobia rose in British streets, a number of Sikh men experienced verbal and physical violence. A young Sikh man had stones thrown at him – ironically he was an interfaith practitioner who worked towards understanding between different communities. Kam says that this did not dampen the young man’s passion to forge bridges of dialogue across faiths and cultures.

Kam spoke about the unprecedented growth in Islamophobia post-9/11 and how this affected not just British Muslim communities and Muslim communities the world over, but how it also had an impact on the lives of those who were not Muslim, but who in Britain looked like them. The leader of a Hindu temple once told him about a chat he had to have with a young white male with far-right leanings who would regularly call the temple phone number and leave Islamophobic hate messages. One day the temple leader was able to answer the phone and managed to catch the attention of this young person. He then explained to him that the temple had nothing to do with Islam.

Kam also described how life in the UK had changed significantly for migrant ethnic and religious communities. When he first arrived in the UK, it was not possible to buy ‘ethnic’ ingredients easily. One funny memory was of him and his wife on a holiday back from India, packing their bags with fresh Indian vegetables, spices and Indian pickles – they were stopped by a bemused customs officer at the airport but were allowed to take home all the produce they had bought. But through what he claims was the socio-political agency and business acumen of Indian-heritage traders, most ingredients are now easily available, with the big supermarkets also selling South Asian goods. There are clearer examples of the civic agency of these migrant communities, for example in ensuring provision of culturally and religiously appropriate food in hospitals for patients of South Asian and other migrant backgrounds. He remembered the sad story of an elderly Hindu woman who had died in hospital after brief illness. Her bereaved
family discovered that the life-long and religiously committed vegetarian had been fed non-vegetarian food in her last days. In her semi-conscious state, she had not realised. Less poignant but perhaps equally important was that many South Asian–heritage convalescents in hospitals could not eat the ‘bland’ (!) British food. These and other occurrences led Muslim, Sikh and Hindu communities to work with the National Health Services in the UK to ensure that hospital menus met the religious and cultural needs of the community.

Another civil society ‘win’ was around funeral processes. Most South Asian communities prefer to bury or cremate their dead as soon as possible after a death has occurred (usually within 24 hours of the death). However, funerals in the UK typically take weeks to organise. Again these minoritised communities engaged a process of slow and careful negotiation with various local authorities to ensure the paperwork after a death is expedited so that funerals can be expedited in line with their religious and cultural preferences. Then there were also negotiations with planning departments of local governments so that places of worship were allowed to have architectural features like domes and embellishments that were not in standing with local architectural norms in the UK. Over and over again Kam described various ‘everyday’ struggles that were addressed through consistent political action and lobbying with local and central government:

Even in the police headquarters we have got the prayer room established. So I think that things have moved on but if you think that 100% we have achieved this goal, no it can never be achieved even by any strict rules or regulations or any legislation. It is participation of both sides, we cannot expect somebody to be coming along and alright everything is done. And it also depends upon us, a minority community, how are we going to think about giving this trust and the confidence to the country we are living in. [. . .] So these are the things within which we have to be playing a very important role ourselves to making this country. If we have made this country our home, we have to be true citizens of this country. We should be raising the issues if we are having the flexibility and also the rights and also the acceptance we have got here.

To conclude Kam’s story, we look at his reflections on his current role within the community. He has retired from the police force but continues to play an active role in his community via the local Gurudwara. He speaks about his work with young people on interfaith dialogue. Post the Salman Rushdie affair, there was a cleavage in South Asian groups along faith lines (Weller, 2008). Following political tensions between India and Pakistan, these lines of separation have hardened. Hindu, Muslim and Sikh communities compete with each other for resources socially and politically (Weller et al., 2013). In his interfaith educational work, he likes to remind young people of times when South Asian migrant communities worked together to raise funds for each other’s places of worship:

I think it doesn’t matter how many laws and legislation you are going to create they are not going to work. Always the community is getting together to work together, to sit together, to communicate with each other, and also going into each other’s religious centres.

Reflections on this one man’s story

As I write and tell the story of a single Sikh migrant to the UK, I aim to humanise the story of all migrants, as individuals who with resilience and fortitude engaged with the political systems of their adopted land. This enabled transformative change, in policy and practice, for themselves
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and their families. As the story demonstrates, these people relied on religious and cultural social capital, both tangible and intangible, to enable their work, yet current commonly accepted theorisations of political religion present largely pejorative readings of the role of religion in individual and social lives, thus doing a disservice to those for whom religion is an important aspect of their lives.

Secondly, for these people religion is a motivator for 'doing good'. Kam was pleased that he was appointed as a police officer because it allowed him to lobby for his own faith community, as well as for other faith communities he was familiar with due to his ethnic heritage. The religious freedoms that people from minoritised backgrounds take for granted in Britain today were hard-fought wins that individuals like Kam negotiated. They worked with various forms of government and within accepted social hierarchies of their time (for example racism, religious prejudice and anti-migrant sentiment) to enable positive societal changes for their own communities and, through their interfaith dialogue work, for wider society. This engagement is political in everyday sense, and also through its engagement with governmental structures. Yet current definitions of political religion do not have a space for experiences such as Kam’s.

In relation to ‘religious’ political religion, there is much written about political Islam and more recently around political Hindutva groups in India, yet this literature emphasises violent and/or fundamentalist groups. From Kam’s story, it is apparent that his political activism (if we can agree to call it that) was ordinary and everyday, in the sociological sense. He lobbied for more inclusive hospital menus, faster paperwork for funerals, more resources for diverse places of worship and respect for his family meals. But his articulation of political and personal agency in the most mundane of contexts is an exciting opportunity to transform how political scientists understand the category of political religion. This is an opportunity for theorising new ideas and perhaps new language that is inclusive, that is more egalitarian and which privileges the voices of the ordinary and the lesser heard in the annals of politics.

This is also an opportunity to start reflection on the impact of living in a postsecular age. Weller et al. write about religion or belief contours of Britain being less Christian, more plural and more non-religious (Weller et al., 2013). Religion has not declined, it has simply taken on more diversity, bringing different flavours, tones and willingness to engage or not with state political systems. However, coloured by vestiges of secular intellectual suspicions of religion, there has been significant interest, indeed fetishisation, of the more fundamentalist ways in which religion engages with the state. Ordinary, peaceful and arguably more impactful voices need more inclusion in theorisations of political religion.

Through their peaceful and everyday political negotiations, Kam and others like him achieved many political ‘wins’ for their communities including representation in local and national government as well as political forums where they could be heard (see for example the work of the All Party Parliamentary Group on British Muslims). Through such grassroots work, communities secured what I describe elsewhere as the right to be human, by articulating their needs in a voice that was both religious and political (Cheruvallil-Contractor, 2018). Far from emerging at the separation of religion and state, this ‘political religion’ thrives on the interconnections it forges. Furthermore, rather than rigid adherence to structural forms of authority, Kam’s form of political religion is less didactic and more dialogic. Its political goals are achieved through reflection on shared values, part of which is to challenge and address prejudice and unfairness but underpinned always by a philosophy that in Galtung’s sense seeks to establish positive peace (1986).
Conclusion

At the start of this chapter, I quoted Gentile’s assertion that, “the question of political religion is the one which will never be resolved to the satisfaction of all scholars” (Gentile, 2005). To the quandary that is ‘political religion’, this chapter aims to add a new critical insider perspective that recognises the significant positive societal impact religious people can have through their religio-political activism. At the start of this chapter, I also provocatively asked whether political religious activism can ever be a ‘good thing’? This question I shall refrain from answering. However, what I hoped to have achieved in this chapter is to provoke further reflection and theorisation on the topic of political religion. By writing and sharing Kam’s story, I hope to have muddied the waters sufficiently for a different kind of thinking within political religion.

References


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