

The Role of Religion in Statecraft: A Comparative Analysis of Al-Ghazali and Niccolò Machiavelli

Jannatul Ferdous Mita*

Abstract: *This article discusses the role of religion in politics of two prominent people of different periods: Al-Ghazali and Niccolai Machiavelli. Both philosophers recognize the critical influence of religion on governance despite differences in time and ideology. This article compares Machiavelli and Al-Ghazali's philosophical perspectives on using religion in statecraft by looking at their foundations. It also emphasizes the rationalizations they offer for applying religious precepts to governance and concentration of political power. Therefore, the paper examines the similarities and differences between their various methods of incorporating religion into the government framework through this comparative examination.*

Keywords: *Religion, State, Secularism, Governance, Theo-democracy*

Introduction

Religion is a crucial dimension in shaping the political structure and the state's sustainability in a political regime. More or less, a political leader gets influenced by the religious entity to hold the power tight. Al-Ghazali and Niccolò Machiavelli, representatives of two eras, use religion differently to make the state's policy. The examination of political philosophy would lose its significance without acknowledging the influential contributions of the great political philosopher Niccolò Machiavelli. While he is often associated with a negative impact on political philosophy, it is essential to recognize the worth of his overall contribution. His critical insights into political thought are encapsulated in his renowned work, "*The Prince*." This classic comprises letters addressed to a prospective ruler of his era. Having experienced political exile due to a conspiracy, Machiavelli leverages his expertise as a seasoned statesman to impart valuable thoughts to the prince. Despite the controversy surrounding his ideas, the depth of his political philosophy cannot be dismissed, and it continues to be a subject of scholarly exploration and debate. On the other hand, more than a religious preacher, Al-Ghazali is a philosopher who has made a profound contribution to Western philosophy. His contribution to Islam gave him the name of 'Hujjatul Islam'.

Most importantly, there are many sectors of philosophy where he surprisingly made a prior contribution to Western philosophical theories as compared to many western philosophers. He refutes neo platonic philosophy, giving an alternative way to it, as he thought platonic teaching principles contradicted Islam. There is a community known under the name Falasifah, who are followers of Islam by religion. However,

* Lecturer, Department of Philosophy, University of Dhaka

as a philosophical thought, they are the followers of the Platonic thought, which ultimately contradicts the principle of Islam. That is the reason Al-Ghazali refutes the thought of the Falasifah community. To refute this community's thoughts, Al-Ghazali wrote the book *Tahafut al Falasifah*, which shows the odd combination of skepticism and ecstatic assurances (Sharif, 1983, p.595). The political thought of Al-Ghazali was found in the book *The Counsel for Kings*, where he used religion's positive connotation to structuralize rulers' political policy. This book is also known under the name of the Mirror for Prince. More precisely, Al-Ghazali has positively used religion; that is to say, he has used it as a guide for the statemen to rule the state. In the state described by Ghazali, a ruler will not be devoid of the principle of the religion; instead, he will rule the state under the principle of the religion itself. In this article, I have shown the two different folds of philosophy of religion used by the philosophers of the two eras based on their books, *The Prince* of Machiavelli and *The Nashiat al Mulk* or *The Counsel For King* of Al Ghazali. Besides that, it has been tried to justify the use of religion in conducting the state's policy by describing concurrent issues in the world.

Machiavelli's view of Statecraft

Machiavelli's personal experiences, notably his exile from the state—significantly influenced his political thoughts. This political turmoil influenced his practical approach to governing and resulted in his well-known work, "*The Prince*." Machiavelli wrote this book in 1513 to guide the prince on maintaining or holding onto power. The book is dedicated to Florence's current king, Lorenzo de Medici, which discusses how to maintain power. This written work is sometimes viewed as an immature attempt to hold the ruler's power for a long time. Five years following Machiavelli's death, the book was released. This book has been divided into 26 chapters that offer advice on the prince's actions and personality and how he plans to increase the sustainability of his power. Machiavelli's political view is based on the idea that the state should come before the subjects' interests. He suggests that leaders should prioritize maintaining the stability and power of the state, which frequently calls for harsh and authoritarian methods. He has a negative view of human nature, believing people are self-centered and self-serving. That is why he chooses fear over affection from the populace as the state's ruler.

Machiavelli says,

"It is much better to be feared than to be loved'. Related to this, a question arises: Would it be better to be loved than feared or feared than loved? ...one should wish to be both, but because it is difficult to unite them in one person, it is much safer to be feared than loved when only one is possible. This is because, in general, men are ungrateful, inconstant, false, cowardly, and greedy." (Machiavelli, 2003, pp. 93-94)

Moreover, philosophers of that era believed that humans were inherently cynical and unreliable. Because of this point of view, Machiavelli recommends that rulers

implement strong governance to avert internal strife and possible plots against their authority. Machiavelli's allegory of animals highlights his suggestions for leaders. Insisting that political shrewdness is crucial for navigating dangers and conspiracies, he exhorts them to be as cunning as foxes. He also emphasizes that leaders must be strong and fearless, like lions, particularly when confronting outside challenges to the state. As human beings are not trustworthy, the ruler should also camouflage them, pretending to be the best human holder of noble qualities.

As Machiavelli says

“So, a Prince needs to take care never to let escape from his lip anything contrary to these five qualities, seeming always to be compassionate, faithful, honest, humane, and religious. Nothing is more important than to seem to be religious. Men judge more by appearances than by deeds. Everyone can see, few people can actually perceive and judge. Everybody can see what you seem to be; few can judge what you actually are....”(Machiavelli, 1964, p.98)

Therefore, he suggests pretending to be religious to sustain the power. However, he keeps religion separate from the state because he believes that if it were, religion would eventually cause social unrest and create catastrophes in the state. However, he stresses that for the state's inhabitants to rule more, they must be more devout and devoted to religion. The idea underlying this way of thinking is that as people get more devout, they also grow used to and submissive to the state, believing that the state's ruler is Allah's repressor and that any resistance against him is simply a rebellion against Allah. His way of thought had a long history in medieval philosophy when nations were ruled by religion and centered by the church. The distinction between the early and Machiavellian schools of thought is that the latter set aside the idea of religion for the state, whereas the former used religion for running the state. For this reason, he is regarded as the founding father of secularism in the modern era.

Ghazali's view of statecraft

Al-Ghazali has been massively influenced by the philosophy of the Sasanian sultanate and the Persian culture; the philosophy has very much shaped the political philosophy. The Sasanian dynasty was an ancient Persian dynasty where kingship was the meditation between heaven and earth. Under Sasanian rule, Iranian nationalism was revived, and Zoroastrianism was established as the state religion, leading to the persecution of other faiths (Encyclopedia Britannica, 2024, para. 3). Ardashir I (180-242 CE), the founder of the Sassanid dynasty, was also known to be the first to establish an alliance of religion and state in Iran before the arrival of Islam. (Farhid, 2015, p.2). In the time Al-Ghazali lived, many religious movements opposed the Islamic world; he witnessed a period marked by the tension between the Sunni and Shia and the practical political tension under the Abbasid dynasty. (Sahri, 2021, pp.3-4). This unrest movement among the religious calamities has also

shaped his political philosophy. Al-Ghazali supports Theo democracy as a political system that combines religion with democracy and emphasizes the preference of the maximum number of people with religious thoughts or ways of life. The book *Counsel for King* reflects his thoughts and ideas. The book *Counsel for the King* is divided into two parts. The first is theological thought. In contrast, the other part is the mirror for the prince advising on wazirs, secretariats, intelligence, and women. While advising the ruler, Al-Ghazali emphasizes the well-being of his subjects and the well-being of the ruler himself.

According to him, the role of the king or the ruler is a gift bestowed upon the ruler by which the king has been assigned to protect his subjects. That is why, in his book *Counsel for King*, while describing the qualities required for the king, he has described several antidotes and aphorisms mentioning the evil consequences of treating the subjects poorly. As a religious person, he believes in the life after death, so from that perspective, he has described the qualities required for the king. Al-Ghazali mentions ten principles of the creed that a king or ruler should follow; among them, the first principle deals with Allah's qualities as the Creator. The first principle is the clear reminder to the ruler that Allah is the world's Creator. "You Should understand, "O King, that You are a creature and that You have a Creator who is the Creator most of the entire universe..." (Al-Ghazali,1964, p.6). The second principle is the declaration of the purity of the Allah. The third to eighth deals with the qualities of Allah, i.e., Omnipotence, Omniscience, and the power of Allah's will. The ninth principle deals with how the world was created, and the tenth deals with the Holy Prophet. After that, Al-Ghazali describes the tree of faith, where he shows that the basis of the tree roots is branches, as the weakened branches might lead the trees to death.

Under the branches of the tree, he mentions several principles a ruler would follow while running the state. According to Ghazali, kingship is a gift from Allah, as he has set the seed of faith in the steadfast heart of the chosen person, which can only be nourished through the process of justice. The trees need nourishment and proper care to grow as the soul does; the nourishment and care for the soul are justice and peace. The first principle is apparent caution for the ruler to use authority correctly, otherwise, it might bring punishment for the ruler. As he states, "In authority, there is great blessing, since, who exercises it righteously obtains unsurpassed happiness, but if any (ruler) fails to do so, he incurs torments surpassed only by the torment for unbelief." (Ghazali,1964, p.14) This is a clear warning to the ruler or Sultan to be just. He further said that on Resurrection Day, the shade would be provided to those who are the followers of truth and, in the first place, remain in the place of the truthful sultan, and the sultan who is a liar also will face punishment by Allah. The second principle deals with how the ruler should deal with the *ulama*. Here, Al-Ghazali mentions that the ruler should surely take their advice, but they should be cautious about their flattery and deceitful behavior. The third principle deals with the fact that a ruler cannot misconduct his staff, servants, and officers.

Here, Al-Ghazali mentions the reference from the *Torah*, which describes an unjust act committed by the official, which the sultan learns, but he remained silent; in that case, he will be held responsible as well. The fourth principle states how the ruler should exercise power over others; here, Ghazali, by mentioning anecdotes, clarifies that the ruler should not dominate others by pride because pride is the arousal of anger, which will involve him in revenge. The fifth principle is the reminder that power or authority leads to the mass people and that the subject is the ruler. The sixth principle deals with the importance of petitioners on the court and clear instructions not to disregard their attendance. The seventh principle deals with inner contentment, emphasizing that justice is impossible without it. The eighth principle deals with how rulers should behave with their subjects; here, there is an explicit instruction not to be harsh and to behave gently with them. The ninth principle is the instruction to keep the subjects pleased with them. Finally, the tenth principle is that no law is beyond Allah's law. Following that, rulers should not contravene the laws of Allah.

To nourish the tree of faith, Al-Ghazali mentioned two springs that water the tree of faith. Here, the spring means knowledge from which trees draw water. The first spring deals with why this world was created and why man came to this world, which is a reminder that this world is not accurate and that man's role in this world is that of a traveler. Al-Ghazali calls this world the lower world, and the happiness of this world lasts for a few days. The Second spring is the knowledge of the last breath; in this case, people are divided into two groups: The first group thinks this world to be the natural world and never thinks about their last breath, and the second group is intelligent things about this truth that this world is real.

Following this, Al-Ghazali describes the qualities required to be king, following the characteristics of the Sasanian king. All the characters required for a king are to be moral; as a ruler, the king should be religious and follow the path of justice. In times of injustice, he should never show his weakness, which is considered an injustice. The king must follow the Quran while ensuring justice, and the forms of justice should be handled with mercy. Overall, focused on ensuring a state where the primary goal of the ruler is to ensure the state is followed by religion and where the subject's welfare is the main issue. Therefore, the state of Al-Ghazali solely depends on the people's support.

Comparison between Machiavelli and Al-Ghazali's view of statecraft

The connection between the two philosophers, Al-Ghazali and Machiavelli, is found in how they interpreted and used religion in politics. Al-Ghazali defines religion as a means of upholding the ruler's authority, creating a story that explains the ruler's power in terms of divine mandate. Likewise, Machiavelli approached religion from the standpoint of the state's welfare within the state, arguing for a peaceful society based on his own defined morality that ensures the stability of the state. The political beliefs of Al-Ghazali and Machiavelli were significantly

impacted by the surroundings in which they were raised. Al-Ghazali defines religion as an instrument to support the monarchy's legitimacy and uphold social order because of his day's rich Islamic history and political climate. Both philosophers questioned women's capacity for successful governance. Still, they understand the importance of honoring and appreciating women in society and that the well-being and prosperity of any state depends upon the integrity of its social fabric.

Rulers, according to Al-Ghazali, need to have other virtues which are based on religious teachings, which include justice, wisdom, and piety, whereas Machiavelli only highlights virtues such as cunningness, decisiveness, and strength, which are the attributes that make a ruler successful. Al-Ghazali considers human nature as naturally corrupted and in need of the powerful moral and ethical leadership of rulers. Machiavelli is also cynical of human nature, believing that people are selfish and changeable, and need a clever and even manipulative leader. Al-Ghazali is of the view that religion plays an essential role in governance and rulers are guided by moral and ethical principles that will help them deliver justice. His method is crude, but Machiavelli believes that religion is a good mechanism to sustain social order and legitimacy. Al-Ghazali underlines practicality of governance as human nature and society are too complicated. Machiavelli supports the idea of a pragmatic approach to politics, according to which a leader is forced to resort to cruel tactics to preserve authority and peace. The major distinction between them is the way they depict religion and morality. Al-Ghazali applies the religious principle to the benefit of the state, and Machiavelli applies it to its continuity and stability. Although these are dissimilar to each other, it emphasizes the role of social and political stability, which is attained by following religious and moral laws. Machiavelli respects stability and order and says that extreme actions can be needed to preserve it, but Al-Ghazali respects religion more.

Relevance of applying the political strategies of Al-Ghazali and Machiavelli in State

Whether the state should be governed by religious principles or whether it should be secular is a complex issue that is dependent upon a specific context. Historical examples give us a variety of results for both strategies. The Machiavellian strategy and the Ghazalian strategy both have drawbacks. Throughout history, there have been examples of both religious and secular states. The pharaoh was considered a God-king in ancient Egypt, and governance was heavily intertwined with religious beliefs and practices. Islamic Caliphates also exemplify religious states, where the Caliph was a political and religious leader, and *Sharia* law, derived from Islamic teachings, governed many aspects of life. Similarly, the catholic church held significant political power in medieval Europe, influencing monarchies and the laws of various kingdoms, which were an absolute monarchy with religion as an ideology.

Mueller says,

“The king was God’s representative on earth, and immediately beneath him were the priests. The capability to read and write was confined to the priests and some scribes, and they ran the state with the help of a fairly large bureaucracy. The role of the masses was to serve Allah, which in effect meant serving the king” (Mueller, 2013, p.2)

In certain states, the separation of church and state is purposeful. In the Constitution’s First Amendment, for example, the prohibition of the creation of a state religion and the protection of religious freedom serve as the foundational principles upon which the United States of America was built. France embraced *laïcité*, a rigorous kind of secularism after the French Revolution, to ensure that the role of religion is kept to a minimum in institutions and public affairs.

Religious state proponents contend that religious values provide a solid moral foundation for moral leadership, uphold social order, and protect cultural legacy. They highlight successful religious governance cases from history. On the other hand, proponents of secular nations argue that by guaranteeing that no one religion is given preference, secularism respects minority rights, fosters social cohesion, and accommodates a range of beliefs. Individual religious freedom is protected by secular governance, founded on reason, science, and evidence and free from political meddling or bias. The secular state is more appropriate for any community that exhibits some degree of ethical and theological diversity, which is why this state presides over a highly religious state. (Laborde, 2013, p.165).

While religion can be a unifying force within societies, its excessive influence on governance and decision-making has sometimes led to negative consequences. In some cases, rulers or governing authorities’ imposition of religious beliefs or practices has sparked division and conflict within societies. Religious institutions and leaders have often been opposed to social reforms and changes that threaten traditional religious teachings or practices. This conservative attitude can have a negative impact on society’s progress and development, as it can perpetuate social inequalities and injustices. Additionally, the intertwining of religious and political authority has sometimes led to corruption and misuse of power by religious leaders or institutions. Revelations of economic mismanagement and social unrest in states where religious leaders have a significant political influence may result in nepotism, cronyism and the instrumentalization of resources for religious use. The primary role religion played at the expense of military defense or diplomatic alliances has exposed states to external threats and invasion. If strategic interests and security considerations are not properly prioritized above religious considerations, military defeat, loss of territory, and ultimate state collapse may ensue. Religious institutions, rituals, and projects can be extremely expensive, and can strain state resources and finances, diverting from crucial services like education, health care, and infrastructural development. This

misallocation of resources can have a negative impact on the state's economy and its long-term stability and prosperity. Also, since states may favor the dominant religion or religious identity, minority religious groups within the same country may be marginalized and thus see resentment, discrimination, and marginalization. This alienation and intolerance may finally have the effect that there will be no longer any social cohesion and that the state will no longer have the right to be obeyed. While religion has been a central factor in the development of history and culture, the undue inroads into administration and decision-making have on occasion led to the disintegration of states. The exclusion of minority religious groups has a weak, but direct, impact on social cohesion and state legitimacy. Religious persecution in the form of the Byzantine iconoclastic controversy and the inquisition led to the division, persecution, and decline of the Empire of Spain. On the other side of the Mediterranean the Muslim conservative religious sects of the Ottomans made aspects of modernization more difficult leading to stagnation. The Catholic influence of the Church was partly a cause of the French Revolution. In the Soviet Union when there was state suppression of religion this led to social unrest and to the downfall of that system. Machiavelli acknowledges that religion is a necessity to government. For this reason, he does not completely separate religion from the state. Instead, Machiavelli views religion as having a vital use in helping rein the behavior of the populace in bounds of loyalty to the ruler and maintaining stability of the state. He thinks citizens would be frightened of retribution from God for disobeying the state and religious law and therefore be less willing to plot against the state. From a deontological point of view, one could say that his political philosophy can simply be defined by his intention to enforce the state's sovereignty. However, notwithstanding the fact that the misery arising from ignorance of religion and its misuse for personal or political motives is a serious issue. In present-day society, the use of religious sentiments for the consolidation of power in order to create problems of a conflictual nature with humanitarian consequences has been carried out on a large scale. For instance, the current hostility between Palestine and Israel has religious differences at the bottom, leading to much violence and loss of life. This case is an example of a traditional way that can have a deadly result when religion is abused, and human values are emotionally destroyed and damaged. For this reason, Machiavelli has separated religion from the state. According to him, the state should be free from religion, as a state, there should not be a fixed religion. While religion can provide moral and ethical guidance, its role in governance should be carefully considered and applied to promote the welfare of the state and its citizens. The challenge lies in ensuring that religious principles are not exploited for power but are used to uphold justice, peace, and the common good.

However, Al-Ghazali not only offers religion to the mass people but also controls the ruler's behavior, which ultimately helps to keep the balance between the discipline of the state. His act is best characterized in deontological terms; he desires the happiness of the state according to the faith of Islam. The most important law for

this purpose is the fear of the Almighty, which produces within the human the controlled or more refined version of his behavior. This is a means of keeping balance and discipline in the state. The teachings of al-Ghazali are based on the instillation of fear of the Almighty as a policy. This is the rule that encourages more restrained and civilized conduct between citizens and rulers. Feeling that they have a responsibility for greater authority, people are better inclined to behave in an ethical and fair manner, which leads to a more stable and peaceful state. Bhutan is a Himalayan kingdom and a Vajrayana Buddhist country, the Buddhist teachings of compassion, non-violence and mindfulness have come to be incorporated in the governance of Bhutan in the present times. Bhutan has become known worldwide as a progressive state because of its adoption of Gross National Happiness (GNH), a model of development that focuses on well-being and spiritual values rather than material wealth. This example demonstrates how practicing religion with tolerance, compassion, and wisdom can positively influence governance, fostering social harmony, justice, and prosperity.

However, critics claim that Al-Ghazali has compromised religious principles when ruling the state. That is not the case, if so then he will not provide principles for the king to follow. The principle that Machiavelli portrayed in *The Prince* is not devoid of criticism either; his morality is far away from traditional morality, and anything that ensures the stability of the state is justified. In support of Machiavelli, Norman Wilde (1928) claims that politics is a rude business, not a nursery of Christian values and the reason Machiavelli was a tyrant is that he was realistic about politics. (p.225)

Conclusion

In exploring the political philosophies of Al-Ghazali and Niccolò Machiavelli, this article has illuminated the intricate ways in which both thinkers integrated religion into their conceptions of governance. Al-Ghazali, deeply embedded in Islamic tradition, perceived religion as a fundamental element for achieving just and moral governance. He argues that rulers should base their authority and ethical standards on religious principles, ensuring their actions are in harmony with divine will. For Al-Ghazali, religion was not merely a tool for political stability but a guiding moral compass, directing rulers towards justice, piety, and a higher sense of ethical responsibility. Machiavelli on the other hand is more pragmatic in his approach to religion. He was fine with the subjective faith of rulers; however, he emphasized greatly the strategic use of religious symbols and organizations as the method of legitimizing and solidifying power. Machiavellian secularism focused on the role played by religion in connecting the people together and in providing a veneer of spiritual legitimacy of a people's actions at the cost of the spiritual and the moral dimension of the problem. While Al-Ghazali and Machiavelli have lived at different times and are ideologically different, they were both keenly conscious of the importance of religion to statecraft. Al-Ghazali's penchant was for moral and religious piety and brought the state closer to God through his sanctification.

Machiavelli was a rational and secular thinker who also used religion for political purposes. The design difference philosophically as well as practically is reflected in their differing methodologies and ultimately contributes to valuable learning over time. But their one-sided embracing of either religious absolutism or secular manipulation suggests the limitations of embracing either approach. A more balanced approach which never marginalizes religion rather than uses the ethical framework can only make a just society possible.

References

- Britannica, T. Editors of Encyclopedia. (2024, April 5). Sāsān. Encyclopedia Britannica. <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Sasan>
- Farhid, T. (2015). *Sasanian Empire - Alliance of religion and politics*. Utoronto. Retrieved from https://www.academia.edu/9989315/Sasanian_Empire_Alliance_of_Religion_and_Politics
- Ghazzālī. (1964). *Ghazzālī's book of counsel for kings (Naṣīḥat al-Mulūk)* (F. R. C. Bagley, Trans.). Naṣīḥat al-Mulūk. With an introduction, notes, and a biographical index.
- Laborde, C. (2013). Justificatory secularism. In G. D'Costa, M. Evans, T. Modood, & J. Rivers (Eds.), *Religion in a liberal state* (pp. 164–186). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Machiavelli, N. (2003). *The prince* (B. Martinez, Ed.; R. et al.). Boston: Dante University Press.
- Mueller, D. C. (2013). The state and religion. *Review of Social Economy*, 71(1), 1–19. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/42705089>
- Sahri, S. (2021). Political thought of Al-Ghazali on Imamah: Debate between theocracy and democracy. *HTS Teologiese Studies / Theological Studies*, 77(3). <https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v77i3.6338>
- Sharif, M. M. (1983). *A History of Muslim philosophy*. Lahore, Pakistan: Philosophical Congress.
- Wilde, N. (1928). Machiavelli. *Ethics*, 38(2), 10. <https://doi.org/10.1086/207>