

## An Analytical Study of The Theory of Separation between Religion and Politics

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**Abstract:** Whether religion provides instructions and plans for people's social, political, and corporal requirements, or it is only accountable for their spiritual and individual needs? This is a contested issue regarding that there is a significant gap between Western and Islamic thought. Islamic teachings consist upon political, communal, and societal guidance, laws and rules. While according to Western approach, the religion has been reduced to the idea that it is just the term for the individual's relationship with God and is unrelated to any political, social order.

Many Muslim intellectuals are also convinced that politics is not the subject to religion and divine guidance, rather like other numerous matters, political affairs depend on one's own consideration and understanding of the conditions of society. This research paper deals with the critical analysis of these rational and logical arguments of both sides and illuminates further angles of the research.

**Keywords:** Religion, Politics, Islam, Rational arguments, Government.

### Introduction

Religion and politics have existed since the dawn of time. They have both remained significant parts of human history in some shape or another. As a result, the ruling elite had unique theological impacts in ancient times. At times, the monarch

referred to himself as God, and at other times, idolatry was regarded a divine decree. Allah Almighty, on the other hand, entrusted his prophets (a.s) with the task of promulgating His divine constitution for implementation in communities. Until the western renaissance, all political issues were carried out under the supervision of the church. But unfortunately the distorted teachings of Christianity and the unjust actions of the clergy gave the people the opportunity to separate religion from political and collective affairs. Religion was restricted to man's personal life, thus a large religious class turned to monasticism .

But Islam claims that it has instructions on all matters of life, individual and collective. There is close relation between religion and politics in Islam. In the context of research, it will be known that the ideology and slogan of separation of religion and politics has become popular in Western countries. It can be said that one of the few ideologies that Western societies consider final and certain is that there is no connection between religion and politics. This conception leads them to Islamophobia as well. As the very conception is associated with Islamism or political Islam and ultimately with *Jihad*.

### **What is Religion?**

Religion (*Arabic: Dīn*) literally means reward, obedience and following a path, as it is narrated by Ibn-e-Manzūr.<sup>1</sup> Metaphorically it is also applied to '*Shari'ah*'.<sup>2</sup> The word *Religion* has also been used in Quran in all these meanings. But there is a big difference between Muslim and non-Muslim scholars regarding the interpretation and terminology of religion. Religion has a broader meaning as a complete code of life according to Muslim scholars. Imam Jehni says that religion means to submit to the One and Only God, and to worship Him in accordance with the *Shari'ah* which Allah Almighty has given through the Prophets regarding beliefs, rules, manners and economic matters.<sup>3</sup> Islam covers all the individual and social matters as it is consisted of principles and branches of human life.<sup>4</sup> In Islamic context the 'religion' as a whole

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can be defined as the collection of disciplines and teachings that have been revealed by God for the guidance of man and it consists of beliefs, ethics and individual and collective rules. On the other hand when we come across the definition of religion by Non-Muslim scholars we find the collective and social affairs out of its domain. Sir E B Taylor wrote: "Religion means the belief in spiritual beings."<sup>5</sup> The famous Western thinker Immanuel Kant writes that it is religion to consider every duty as a divine command.<sup>6</sup> While Arthur Schopenhauer writes that religion is associated with the concept of death.<sup>7</sup> In these definitions, the concept of religion is presented as if religion is the name of a man's belief in God and metaphysics and establishing a relationship with them. In other words, religion is merely the name of a connection between man and God.

### **What is Politics?**

In Arabic, the word *Siyāsah* (politics) is generally used to mean reform, the best strategies, and the execution of good deeds. Specifically, it means to lead, correct, and mentor people's affairs. Ismail bin Hammad Jauhari writes that a man's politics on the affairs of people means that he is the owner and patron of their affairs.<sup>8</sup> Describing the same meaning a hadith is narrated by the Holy Prophet (PBUH) that the Prophets (peace be upon them) were the guardians of the affairs of the *Banu Israel*.<sup>9</sup> In counseling and correction of people's affairs the notion of hereafter is also considered in Islamic perspective. As Imām Ghazālī writes that politics is about seeking the reformation of the creatures and guiding them towards a path that will lead to salvation in this world and the hereafter.<sup>10</sup> Politics has also a specific meaning i.e. the peculiar step taken by a ruler for the welfare of his people.<sup>11</sup>

Parallel to the Arabic word *Siyāsah*, the English word *politics* is used. This term is derived from the Greek word *polis*, which was used for the city-state in ancient Greece. For this Aristotle chose it for the title of his book, followed by this the word *politics* began to be used for the science of state and government. According to the

*B. B. C English Dictionary* politics are the actions or activities which people use to achieve power in country, society or organization. Your politics are your beliefs about how a country should be governed. Politics is the study of the ways in which a country is governed.<sup>12</sup> So we can conclude that in western societies politics is mere the art of governing the state. In other words, it is the knowledge of the basic principles on which governments are based and which determine the boundaries of government-citizen relations and relations with foreign states.<sup>13</sup>

In short we can say that in Islamic concept politics deals with the worldly and hereafter life of people while in western concept it deals with only the worldly affairs of people. In this context, we better can examine the logical and rational arguments regarding the rejection and acceptance of the connection between religion and politics.

### **Rational arguments for separation of religion and politics**

A large number of intellectuals are convinced that there is not any logical and rational link between religion and politics. They think that these are the separate and opposite domains with their particular objectives and approaches. Their rational arguments in this regard can be condensed in four major claims or beliefs:

#### **1. Dichotomy of Religion and Politics by Essence**

It is widely argued that the religion and politics are naturally different domains. Politics deals with the fundamental human issues like justice, freedom and rights where no interference is acceptable by religion or *shari'ah* in any case. According to Professor Mujtahid Shabastari,<sup>14</sup> God and man have a vertical relationship that is regulated by a faith and obedience system. In this system, all people are subject to the same regulations (Shari'ah duties). A man has a horizontal (of equal level) relationship with another man that is controlled by a legal and moral framework. This system's most essential problems include justice, freedom, and rights. As a result, concerns of justice and rights can be discussed in the political realm, as they are not *Shariah*-related issues.<sup>15</sup>

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Professor Abd al- karim sarosh <sup>16</sup> writes that politics is one of the human rights and many rights particularly political ones are related to human beings (i.e. they are part of the human nature; religion has nothing to do with it). They are not subject to formation, given or taken. (They do not need to be granted or revoked by any authority.) So politics (in a religious society) can be religious in nature, but political rights cannot be religious by nature. Being religious is an attribute of the government, not its essence.<sup>17</sup>

Shabestri believes that rulers and religious scholars have their own separate duties that should not be amalgamated with politics. He writes that Religious scholars can discuss and explain the problems of *Shari'ah*, but it is a religious language that the rulers cannot and should not use. The rulers cannot tell the people that your *Shari'ah* duties are so-and-so. Because in that case both religion and politics will become corrupt. Religion may be a revealed political act, but it should not be a weapon of politicians and rulers.<sup>18</sup>

It is as if determining or depriving a person of his political rights is not the work of religion as it has no role in this context. Therefore, there is no justification for religion to interfere in politics.

## **2. Dichotomy of Religion and Politics by Objectivity**

Politics is the struggle to achieve or protect distinct regional and temporal interests, while religion is universal and comprehensive. An Egyptian thinker Sa'īd A'shmāwī writes that the religion has universal and comprehensive attributes. Politics, on the other hand, is fractional and limited to space and time. Therefore, restricting religion to politics is like restricting it to a certain sphere. Religion will be confined to a limited time and space. The job of religion is to take man to the highest levels and politics fulfills the nethermost goals of the man. Moreover, politics in the name of religion means that religion involves its followers in endless battles and conflicts.<sup>19</sup>

## **3. Dichotomy of Religion and Politics by Compatibility**

Today a religious government is not compatible with the modern societies. The establishment of a single religious government is not only impossible but also a poison for the national interests. A

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Lebanon scholar Nāsīf Nasār says that a religious government shatters the unity of a diverse community because political unity in a diverse community cannot be based on religious unity.<sup>20</sup>

Another renowned Egyptian scholar Ali Abd al-Razaq writes that modern states are formed on the basis of domestic and national interests; not on the basis of religious interests. Islam, on the other hand, is a universal religion and invites people to its principle beliefs so that they may believe in it. But if the religion of Islam is such that politics is also a part of its principle beliefs, then there will be a contradiction in its universality and worldliness since no divine text states that the universality of Islam requires that all the people of the world come under one political unity.<sup>21</sup>

Moreover, religion has to do with spirituality and politics has to deal with material rights. But in today's societies, it is detrimental for the two to go hand in hand. Shabstari says that the complexity of modern and semi-modern societies today is that they seek to harm spirituality by merging spiritual matters and the system of rights; and in the same way, they harm politics, rights, justice and freedom.<sup>22</sup>

It is another difficulty that speaking out against a religious government falls into the category of blasphemy, it cannot be criticized. Due to which the element of totalitarianism is included in it. An Egyptian writer Muhammad Khalid (1920-1996) says that a religious government tends to be dictatorial because it is in accordance with dignity of a common man to legally oppose and criticize a non-religious government but it will not be easy or possible against a religious government.<sup>23</sup> It is as if the religious government will quiet and quash the voices raised by serious criticism and condemnation within the society and thus it will lead to dictatorship.

Another argument is given that if religion is associated with politics, religion itself transcends the realm of religion and spirituality and becomes a political religion. In this case, religion does not remain in its spiritual status, but it falls into political, i.e. material needs. Expressing this argument Muhammad Said Ashmawi write that It should be noted that the political process is the work of human

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beings who are neither holy nor innocent, and consequently the choice of government is made by human beings and not by God. And this difference can help in the evolution of Islam and prevent the exploitation of Islam for political purposes.<sup>24</sup>

#### **4. Dichotomy of Religion and Politics by Flexibility of Laws**

Another important rational argument is that the political system changes according to the circumstances and the requirements of the time, of which human history is a witness. On the contrary, the principles and laws of Islam are enduring and unchangeable. Therefore, keeping religion and politics together means nothing more than the violation of the laws of religion. As Faraj Fauwdah<sup>25</sup> highlights this point that the laws of religion are fixed and the laws of life are variable (so it is not possible to put them together). In this case we have two choices; either the fixed rules should be changed or the variables should be made fixed. But since it is impossible to turn the variable affairs of life into fixed rules, the unchangeable religious rules must be made variables.<sup>26</sup>

These are some of the important rational arguments that recommend intensively the separation of religion and politics.

#### **Analysis of the Arguments**

Here we present the critical analysis of these arguments:

##### **1. The definite collective status of religion**

It is certain that any of the divine religions in its genuine form possesses an individual and collective status. This is not merely governed by the system of faith and obedience as claimed by Shabastri. In contemporary era, from Abdul Wahab and Khairuddin Tunisi to Imam Khomeini of Iran and Allama Maududi of Pakistan, all reformers have pointed out that Islam has rules in individual as well as collective matters like politics and human rights. These reformers also put this idea into practice. The holy Quran clearly depicts: "(O' Muhammad!) We sent down the Book to you that makes everything clear." (16:89). The holy Qur'an commands its followers of individual matters like prayer and fasting, it also commands certain matters which are related to collective, judicial and administrative issues. As

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Allah Almighty says in Quran: "O Believers, the law of retribution has been prescribed for you in cases of murder; if a free man commits a murder, the free man shall be punished for it and a slave for a slave: likewise if a woman is guilty of murder the same shall be accountable for it.." (2: 178). In the same chapter it is commanded:

"It has been prescribed for you that when death approaches one of you and he is leaving some property behind him, he should bequeath it equitably for his parents and relatives: it is an obligation on those who fear Allah." (2: 180) In another verse of the same chapter it is ordered: "You have been enjoined to go to war, and you dislike it; it may be that you dislike a thing and the same is good for you, and you love a thing and the same is bad for you: Allah knows but you do not." (2:216).

The command in each verse starts with the same phrase denoting obligation. In the first verse the 'penalty' (*Qisās*) is one of the criminal laws, in second the 'will' is one of the personal laws, while in third the 'fighting' is related to international relations. These are all *Shari'ah* obligations addressing the collective system or institution of Muslims not the individuals. The fulfillment of these orders may lead the community of believers to hope for the pleasure of God and peace of society.

Secularists are unable to understand this because when they define religion, they limit it to the relationship between God and man; and they expel religion in collective affairs. A renowned scholar of Iran Taqī Misbāḥ Yazdī writes that those who separate religion from government (politics), when defined religion, defined it in a way that was in line with the doctrine of secularism. For example, they defined religion as an individual relationship of God and man or they went one step ahead considered the religion an entity that caters to the humans' needs of hereafter.<sup>27</sup>

It is clear that if religion is defined in this way, then it is very easy to say that religion has nothing to do with politics. What is the relationship between God and man in relation to politics? Politics only describes the connection between human beings, and politics

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is separate from religion, politics is related to man's worldly life and has no connection with the hereafter etc.

One aspect of this argument is that politics is concerned with personal and group interests, while religion is concerned beyond the personal and group interests. Considering this, it is also wrong because religion, especially Islam, where it trains man in collective affairs, also provides guidance in individual matters. A Muslim's worldly deeds such as eating, drinking, sleeping, working, exercising, etc. are counted worship by *Shari'ah* when they are performed in the name of Allah, and on the basis of piety. It is narrated in a Hadith that some of the companions inquired from the Prophet (PBUH) that the wealthy took more rewards because they also pray and fast like us and also give alms out of their surplus wealth. The holy Prophet (PBUH) replied: Has not Allah rewarded you for your charity? Indeed, every *tasbīh* is a charity, every *takbīr* is a charity, praise of Allah is a charity, enjoining good and forbidding evil is charity.<sup>28</sup>

Therefore, if one reads the books of jurisprudence of any school of thought, he finds that they are full of all aspects of life, from the rules of purification to the rules of family and community life and the laws and duties of the state and government. Moreover, Islam itself denies that its rules and duties are partial or fragmentary. That is, Islam does not accept that some of its commands should be followed and some others should be suspended. That is why Allah rebuked *Banu Isael* in Quran:

“Do you then believe in one part of the Scriptures and disbelieve in the other? What other punishment do such people from among you deserve except an ignominious life in this world and the most grievous doom on the Day of Resurrection?” (2: 85).

In this context Allah addresses his holy Prophet (PBUH) by saying:

“(O Muhammad!) Therefore, judge between them by what Allah has revealed and do not follow their desires, and beware lest they tempt you away from anything of what Allah has revealed to you. And if they turn away, then know well that Allah has indeed

decided to afflict them for some of their sins. For surely many of them are transgressors. (5: 49).

Just as Islam does not accept that some of its commandments should be obeyed and some should be abandoned, so too the life of man itself demands that all its aspects, whether individual or collective, be reformed and trained. It is not possible that the spiritual aspect of the man be reformed by religion but his material and intellectual aspect by any other power like the secular state.

## **2. The Diversity and Comprehensiveness of Religious Objectives**

Religion cannot be confined to a limited time and space as it has diversity and comprehensiveness in its goals. Religion puts lights on all aspects of human life. It is noteworthy that any religion, philosophy, ideology or historical revolution in the world declares that it has a complete code of life within it. Thus, the well-known Arab communist writer Manif al-Razaz writes that it is a misunderstanding to consider communism as just an economic system. It is a great mistake to consider the economy as the basis of this system, to ignore its other foundations, and to ignore its goals and expectations. So communism is a religion of life, not a religion of economics. It is a religion that encompasses all aspects of economics, politics, education, social issues, health, ethics, literature, science, history and all aspects of life. The author then emphasizes that this view is not limited to communism but is also the basis of other communal religions.<sup>29</sup>

So is the human life. It is not something that has a part of it called economy and it is separate from the community, and the other thing is politics. Rather, life is a complete and connected thing, just as Islam is a complete code of life, no part of which can be separated from another.

Secular thinkers have categorically rejected the connection between politics and religion, and the saying has become popular that neither politics has anything to do with religion nor religion has anything to do with politics. This statement means that you cannot follow religious rules and regulations in politics. Rather, politics is

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subject to any temporal, mean and worldly benefit whether it is material benefit or war or national benefit. While the religion has universal and comprehensive attributes which not fractional and limited to space and time.

In fact, this concept is the ideology of the Western thinker Nicolo Machiavelli (1469-1527) (2) who considered politics to be immoral. He considered any immoral act, lie, betrayal, deception and any ugly act lawful in politics. He is known as the pioneer of modern political theory; this philosopher presents the idea of an independent monarchy devoid of religion and morality. In his book, *The Prince*, he writes: An authoritarian king who uses evil to suppress evil, does not adhere to any morals or religion, and devises all kinds of deceit and conspiracy. The best ruler is the one who maintains his power in the right way by any means.<sup>30</sup>

But is this the politics that is the aspiration of the civilized man and which is necessary for the welfare of man? The reformation of the man can be done only by a politics which is based on the moral rules and regulations, which is based on the standards of good and evil and the balance of truth and falsehood. Yusuf Al-Qaradawi writes when politics is linked to religion, it means justice, equality, the help of the oppressed, and the accomplishment of the basic human rights. When religion interferes in the politics, it becomes a source of good, a guide to the right path, a revealer of the truth, and a protector from disgrace and fault.<sup>31</sup>

Islam declares the word of truth as jihad in the presence of an oppressive ruler. A man asked the Prophet (PBUH) which jihad is better? He replied: Raising the word of truth in front of tyrant ruler.<sup>32</sup>

### **3. Religion's Capacity to Deal with Current Issues**

Secularists claim that religion has nothing to do with people's politics in current scenario. Because religion does not solve people's collective problems, nor does it offer any solution to their economic and social problems and relations. But it proves absolutely wrong. As there are guidelines for such matters in all the religions of the world, but some of them are less detailed and some more detailed.

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In this respect, Islam is the last and the most guided religion. There are various texts in the Qur'an and Hadith regarding these collective matters. Ali Abdul Razzaq mentioned in his book that the world is so mean in the sight of Allah Almighty that He cannot send down texts from revelation to plan it.<sup>33</sup>

But on the contrary, Allah Almighty has revealed in the Qur'an, along with many verses, the longest verse of the Qur'an about worldly affairs, which is called (*Ayat-ul-Madainah*) that is verse 282 of *Al-Baqarah*. There are clear rules of judgment and sovereignty in Islam. The person who denies this is the one who has never studied the Qur'an and Sunnah in depth and has not understood the biographies of the Righteous Caliphs who used to judge the events of the time on the scale of *Shari'ah* and in case of disagreement, they used to seek help from Qur'an and Sunnah. The Qur'an states: "Therefore, judge between them (O Muhammad!) by what Allah has revealed and do not follow their desires, and beware lest they tempt you away from anything of what Allah has revealed to you." (5:49). In this verse, the command to make decisions according to the Book of God has been issued. At the same time, it has been warned that those whose hearts are not full of faith are in the hope that the ruler will make the rules according to their wishes. The ruler has been warned not to disregard the commands of Allah Almighty for the sake of their desires. Rather, Quran says about such a ruler:

"Those who do not judge by what Allah has revealed are indeed the *unbelievers*." (5: 44).

"Those who do not judge by what Allah has revealed are indeed the *wrong-doers*." (5: 45)

"Those who do not judge by what Allah has revealed are the *transgressors*." (5: 47).

Secularists believe that politicizing of a religion means making the religion corrupt and unethical. In this way, the specific purpose of religion, i.e. the acquisition of spirituality and piety, will lose. Therefore, it is important to keep religion away from politics. Such

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argument appears in the writings of Ashmāwī and Shabastarī. But with a little forethought, this is not the case at all. It is true that according to the majority of scholars, the Qur'an did not establish a text on any government or caliphate. But the Qur'an made a very subtle point that religion cannot be political but politics can be made religious. Therefore, guidance on politics and related matters has been provided in various places in the Qur'an and Hadith.

In this context how one can say that religion cannot cope with the affairs of a modern state while numerous verses in the Qur'an deal with matters other than beliefs and acts of worship, such as the rules of sale and purchase, usury, mortgage, testimony, rules of marriage and divorce, guardianship, wills, inheritance, penalties, criminal laws, legal punishments and rulings on war, peace, government affairs and treaties, etc. All these affairs are related to the political system and the government.

#### **4. Flexibility of Religious Rules**

Regarding the relationship between religion and politics, it is also stated that religion and its rules are absolute, unchanging, and fixed, while collective life and politics are variable and there is relativity in various deeds. The nature of religion is stability and stagnation. So inserting a change or something new in religion is an innovation and misguidance. Therefore, it is impossible for the two to go hand in hand.

This erroneous opinion creates confusing and does not conform to the facts, definite rulings and teachings of Islam. Islam emphasize on Ijtihad to review the social issues according to the time and place. Therefore, Islamic scholars consider Ijtihad an obligation. The Prophet (PBUH) also said: "Indeed, at the end of every century, Allah sends for this Ummah a person who renews his religion for the Ummah." <sup>34</sup>

*Ijtihad* offers solutions to contemporary social or collective problems. However, changes and alterations that are forbidden in the religion are the commands that are related to worship and the definitive texts, available to prove them. As is the command of the

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Almighty: “Do they have any associates (of Allah) who have laid down for them a way pertaining to faith which Allah did not sanction? But for the fact that a decree had already been made, the matter between them would have been decided once and for all. Surely a grievous chastisement awaits the wrong-doers.” (42:21).

In this context the holy Prophet (PBUH) says: “Whoever does something that is not our command (text), that action is rejected.”<sup>35</sup>

In Islamic jurisprudence, necessities alter prohibitions into permissible i.e. in case of compulsion, everything is permissible which is not permissible in normal state. There is no concept of damaging self or others property. There is no difficulty, nor is there any compulsion in Islam. These and other similar rules of Islamic jurisprudence are features of Islamic *Shari'ah* that have been formulated to achieve general goals and objectives of *Shari'ah*. The interests and objectives of Islamic laws, unlike Western and secular thoughts, are not limited to material and worldly interests or expediencies, but their scope includes the world and the hereafter, materialism and spirituality.

On the other side, as there are inflexible rules in religion, there are also flexible and variable rules. Just as in politics, there are things that change; there are also things that cannot be changed. For example, the unchanging and fixed matters of religion include the attributes and names of Allah Almighty, the rules of marriage and divorce, the rules of inheritance, the rules of prayer, fasting and Hajj, etc. And the changeable rules of religion include the rules that appeal to social needs in order to introduce economic, social, educational and technical changes and other contemporary matters, and they are derived from the established principle through *Ijtihad*. For this purpose the knowledge of the principles of jurisprudence has been formed. Politics, on the other hand, treats and protects unchangeable issues, such as the rights of citizens, their lives, property and unity; and develops a strategy. At the same times, politics also deals with variables in which perspectives continue to change over the time, such as international relations,

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economic policies, changes in judicial law, and the performance of other collective and educational matters.

### **Conclusion**

Discussing the relation between religion and politics the confusion arises from misconceptions, confusions and unfamiliarity with the essence of religion, *Shari'ah* and politics. The religion of Islam offers a solid solution to every problem. In order to overcome such misinterpretations and confusions, it is necessary to acquire the knowledge of religion through religious means i.e. religion has to be understood from religious sources. For example, if one wants to comprehend Islam in a true sense, he should first recognize Islam through the Qur'an and Hadith. Therefore, if the meaning of religion is driven from Qur'an, then religion, in addition to worship and personal ethics, includes social and political issues, civil and criminal laws, international and domestic laws; and the laws of marriage, education, business, trade etc. So what remains outside the sphere of religion? If one recognizes Islam through the Qur'an, then how can he say what Islam has to do with collective issues, including politics? Even if one looks at the Qur'an, it becomes clear that the religion that exists in the Qur'an, while the Qur'an is the real source of religion, it is not possible the political and collective issues have been left in this religion and this set of laws have been emptied from political and social problems

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