

THEOCRACY

The term *theocracy* signifies belief in governance by divine guidance, a form of regime in which religion or faith plays the dominant role. It denotes thus a political unit governed by a deity or by officials thought to be divinely guided. The word *theocracy* originates from the Greek *theokratia*. The components of the word are *theos*, “god,” and *kratein*, “to rule,” hence “rule by god” or “government by god.”

The concept of theocracy was first coined by the Jewish historian Flavius Josephus (37 CE–c. 100 CE). Attempting to explain to Gentile readers the organization and political system of the Jewish commonwealth of his time, Josephus contrasted theocracy with other forms of government, such as monarchy, oligarchy, and republics: “Our legislator [Moses] had no regard to any of these forms, but he ordained our government to be what, by a strained expression, may be termed a theocracy [*theokratia*], by ascribing the authority and power to God, and by persuading all the people to have a regard to him, as the author of all good things” (Josephus 1737).

Few concepts have changed more radically over time than the concept of theocracy. According to its oldest meaning, as used by Josephus, the implication is not that ministers assumed political power. However, according to the more modern definition in the *The Shorter Oxford English Dictionary on Historical Principles*, *theocracy* is “a system of government by sacerdotal order, claiming divine commission” (*The Shorter Oxford English Dictionary on Historical Principles*, vol. 2, 1939, p. 2166), a state in which priests exercise political power, or, more precisely, a state ruled by ministers. In this entry, both meanings will be used.

Theocratic forms of government have existed throughout history. Theocracies were known among ancient people, as in Egypt and Tibet, where kings represented and even incarnated the deity. (In pharaonic Egypt, the king was considered a divine or semidivine figure who ruled largely through priests.) This was the case also with early American civilizations, such as the Mayas, Toltecs, Aztecs, and Natchez.

In Islam, the community established by the prophet Muhammad (c. 570–632) in Medina (622–632) was a theocracy in which Muhammad served as both temporal and spiritual leader. The communities established by Muhammad’s father-in-law and successor, Abu Bakr (c. 573–634), the first caliph, were also based on theocratic government. The largest and best-known theocracies in history were the Umayyad caliphate (the first Islamic dynasty, 661–750) and the early Abbasid caliphate (the second major Muslim dynasty, 750–1258), in which state and religion were closely intertwined; the Byzantine Empire (fourth–fifteenth centuries), in which the

emperor was the head of the church; and the Papal States (Stati Pontificii) during the Middle Ages, in which the pope was the ruler in a civil as well as a spiritual sense.

In Christianity during the early modern period in Europe, the republic of Florence under the rule (1494–1497) of Girolamo Savonarola (1452–1498) became a theocracy in which God was the sole sovereign and the Gospel constituted the law. After the Protestant Reformation of the sixteenth century, there were many attempts to establish theocracy. The most famous is the theocratic regime that John Calvin (1509–1564) established in Geneva when he was at the height of his power (1555–1564); Geneva’s civil life was based upon total obedience to God, whose moral order is declared in the scriptures. According to Calvin, a well-ordered Christian community results from a synthesis of rule, cooperation, and order emanating from the divine laws of God; such a community is unified, organized, and structured upon the idea of advancing the glory of God in the world. The same view is evidenced in the theocratic government that Huldrych Zwingli (1484–1531) established in Zurich from 1525 to 1531. In Zurich, the city council was the lawful government of a Christian state (both church and canton) and administered the divine commands from the Bible. For interpretation of these commands the council sought and acted on the advice of Christian ministers.

With the Puritan migration to New England during the 1630s, theocratic governments were established in what became Massachusetts and Connecticut. For the New England Puritans, theocracy was considered the best form of government in a Christian commonwealth because only this type of government acknowledged Christ as a sole ruler over the people. Spiritually saving grace was the prerequisite for admission to freemanship or citizenship in the Puritan theocracy. The Puritans’ goal was not to invest ministers with political power, but rather to appoint civil magistrates who would govern according to God’s word and will. Only “visible saints,” or those who were able to prove the power of saving grace in their hearts, were allowed to vote, while “the ungodly,” or profane people, were excluded from political power. In England too, during the Puritan Revolution (1640–1660), especially after the execution of King Charles I in 1649, many zealous Puritans strove to establish a theocratic government by introducing a “Sanhedrin of saints,” or a dictatorship of the godly.

In the contemporary world, the regime that Ayatollah Ruholla Khomeini (1900–1989) established in Iran in 1979 is considered a theocracy because political power and authority is held in the hands of the imams or religious leaders. The purpose of such a fundamentalist regime is to organize society exclusively under Islamic religious law, the *shari’a*. The Taliban state in Afghanistan

(1996–2001) was similar. In the first decade of the twenty-first century, various fundamentalist Muslim groups are striving to establish theocratic forms of government in Algeria, Pakistan, Egypt, Sudan, Turkey, and other Islamic countries. There are also various fundamentalist Christian groups in the United States, Canada, and Australia who advocate aspects of theocratic government. In Israel, too, several ultra-Orthodox factions advocate restoring the theocracy of ancient times.

SEE ALSO *Government; Religion; Vatican, The*

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THEOLOGY, LIBERATION

SEE *Liberation Theology*.

THEORY

The notion of a theory is controversial in social science. A single and simple conception of theory is unlikely to apply across all fields, from mathematical economics to cultural

anthropology. Still, construing *theory* broadly as any attempt to systematize and explain certain phenomena, it is clear that theories play a central role in social science. Many social-science pioneers, for example, Karl Marx, Émile Durkheim, Talcott Parsons, Sigmund Freud, Clark Hull, and Paul Samuelson, developed ambitious theories intended to explain a wide range of social phenomena. Today the tendency is toward more modest theories with narrower scope.

Philosophers of science have also adopted a more flexible and eclectic account of theorizing. For much of the twentieth-century, philosophers (and many social scientists) accepted the logical-positivist view that a theory is an axiomatized deductive system consisting of a few basic principles or laws (e.g., Newton's laws of motion constitute his theory of universal gravitation). These principles contain a theoretical vocabulary describing entities that are often unobservable (e.g., electron, utility, social role), and also bridge laws that link the theoretical vocabulary with observable things. Such theories are tested by deriving predictions from basic principles, bridge laws, and statements describing the test situation, and then determining whether those predictions come true.

By the 1960s, every aspect of the positivist view was under attack, and today few philosophers accept it. The notion of laws has come to play a smaller role in philosophical discussion and that of models a larger one. But there remains no consensus about the nature of theories in the social sciences. Some are still expressed in formal, mathematical terms, with basic principles (axioms) from which predictions are deduced. But many are less formal, with a looser connection between theory, on the one hand, and explanation and prediction, on the other. However, even relatively modest theories can be illuminating. To the extent that a theory allows one to make predictions, it provides some measure of control over the social world. Moreover, some theoretical assumptions are needed to guide exploratory research, or even mere observation, since otherwise there are potentially an infinite number of things that might be relevant.

GOALS OF SOCIAL SCIENCE

Views about the nature of theories in social science go hand in hand with views about the nature of social science itself. Naturalists (e.g., in cognitive psychology) see the social and natural sciences as continuous in their goals and methods. They aim to explain human behavior by uncovering its causal mechanisms. As objects of study, however, people are distinctive because they think about, and so guide, their own actions. Given this sort of agency, some social scientists (e.g., in cultural anthropology) hold that mechanistic theories are inappropriate for studying humans. The point of social-scientific theories is, on this