

## **Religion in the Public Sphere**

Fall 2018

2 credits

Instructor: Brett Wilson, PhD

Office: Nador 11, #311

### **General description:**

Over the past three decades, religion has made an impressive return to the public sphere, playing a prominent role in local, national, and international politics around the globe. Despite the decline of traditional forms of organized religiosity observed in many places, religious organizations continue to shape public values and debates to an extent that would have been difficult to imagine fifty years ago. Around the world, policy makers are increasingly confronted with the activities and demands of religious groups. These new challenges require a new knowledge about the organizational form, conduct, and the convictions of religious actors, their attitudes toward public authorities and their political conduct. This course will discuss the significance of these developments and examine relevant religious groups.

### **Objectives & Learning Outcome:**

The students will learn about the varieties of ways in which religious groups enter the public arena and force policy makers to react. They will gain in-depth knowledge about the history, organization, and beliefs of major actors and become familiar with their claims and activities. In this context, students will practice analyzing the contents, claims, validity, and limits of case studies.

### **Assessment/grading:**

The final grade is composed of:

- A final paper of 2000-3000 words that explores a topic of interest in greater depth (50%)
- Class presentations: (25 %)
- Attendance and participation in class discussions: (25 %)

## **Week 1: Secularization and the Public Sphere**

Up to early 1990s a dominant paradigm in the social sciences spoke about the secularization of the world, meaning a gradual withering away of religion as a social and political factor. A number of events have decisively changed the perspective: the role of Catholic papacy in the fall of communism, the flourishing of evangelical Christianity on several continents, the new importance of political Islam, the rise of religiously motivated terrorism with 9/11 as a key event, and so forth. However, the question remains whether the change of perspective is due to an actual resurgence of religion around the world, due to a migration of religiosity from the private to the public sphere, or merely due to an increased interest of media and academia in religious topics. This session will introduce classical and recent paradigms on the public role of religion and discuss their validity.

Reading:

- Peter L. Berger, "[The Desecularization of the World: A Global Overview](#)," in *The Desecularization of the World. Resurgent Religion and World Politics*, ed. Peter L. Berger, Washington D.C.: Ethics and Public Policy Center, 1999, pp. 1-18.

## **Week 2: The Resurgence of Religion**

Reading:

- Jürgen Habermas, "[A 'post-secular' society – what does that mean?](#)", in *ResetDoc*, 16 (2008).

## **Week 3: Religious Peace in Violent Times: Sikhs, Hindus and Muslims in North India**

While news of religious violence tends to dominate the media and academic studies, there are many instances in which religious communities play a key role in keeping the peace. This session explores one such case in northern India following the partition of India and Pakistan in 1947 and examines the relationships among religious communities until the present.

Reading:

- Anna Bigelow, "[Saved by the Saint: Refusing and Reversing Partition in Muslim North India](#)" *The Journal of Asian Studies* 68, no. 2 (2009), pp. 435-464.

## **Week 4: Dilemmas of Religion in a Secular State I: The United States**

Reading:

- Sullivan, Winnifred Fallers. *The Impossibility of Religious Freedom*. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2005 (Introduction, Ch. 2)

## **Week 5: Dilemmas of Religion in a Secular State II: *Laïcité* and Islam in France**

Reading:

- Joan Wallach Scott, "The Politics of the Veil" - Introduction and Chapter 1.

## **Week 6: Kill the Buddha: Buddhism, Authoritarianism, and Violence**

Reading:

- Michael Jerryson. *If You Meet the Buddha on the Road: Buddhism, Politics, and Violence*. Oxford University Press, [Intro, pp. 1-10](#) + [Ch. 3](#).

## **Week 7: Dilemmas of Religion and Politics III: The evolution of political Islam**

Reading:

- Osama Bin Laden, "Messages to the World" - Introduction, Ch. 2 and Ch. 4.
- *The Trail of Political Islam* by Gilles Kepel, Ch. 1 and 2.

## **Week 8: Religion and Economy**

According to Max Weber's famous thesis, the spirit of capitalism originates in Protestant ethics and beliefs. Even after a hundred years of debate and controversy the thesis has lost nothing of its fascination.

Reading:

- Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (London: Routledge, 2001), pp.TBA.
- Timur Kuran, "[The Economic Roots of Political Underdevelopment in the Middle East: A Historical Perspective](#)," *Southern Economic Journal*, 78 (2012), pp. 1086-95.

## **Week 9: Apocalypse and Violence in Waco**

On April 19, 1993 the FBI's raid on the heavily armed Branch Davidians in Waco/Texas ended in a disaster. 76 members of the sect died, including men, women, children and the sect's messianic leader David Koresh. The incident may be seen as a worst-case example for the interaction of public authorities and religious radicals. Several observers argued that lives could have been saved if the authorities had been better informed about the apocalyptic convictions of the group, which kept them from surrendering. We will watch and discuss an award-winning but controversial documentary film on the beliefs of the group, the policies and measures carried out by the US federal authorities against the sect, and the findings of subsequent investigations and trials.

Required viewing (before class):

- WACO: The Rules of Engagement, directed by William Gazecki (1997).

Optional reading:

- Kenneth G. C. Newport, *The Branch Davidians of Waco: The History and Beliefs of an Apocalyptic Sect* (Oxford University Press, 2006).
- James D. Tabor: "Patterns of the End: Textual Weaving from Qumran to Waco," in *Toward the millenium: messianic expectations from the Bible to Waco*, ed. P. Schäfer and M. Cohen (Leiden: Brill, 1998), pp.409-430.

## **Week 10: Human Rights as Secular Religion, Religious Values as Human Rights**

The question of what universal human rights are and how these rights relate to religious values and practices is at the center of a number of policy and academic debates, which we explore in this session.

Reading:

- Michael Ignatieff, "Human Rights as Idolatry," Tanner Lectures on Human Values, pp. 320-349.
- UN Statement on Female Genital Mutilation
- Recommended: Ebrahim Moosa, 2001. "The Dilemma of Islamic Rights Schemes". *Journal of Law and Religion*. 15, pp.185-216.

## **Week 11: Dilemmas of Religion in a Secular State IV - Religious Politics in India**

Reading:

- Adcock, C. S. "[Sacred cows and secular history: Cow protection debates in colonial North India](#)." *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East* 30, no. 2 (2010): 297-311.
- Martha Nussbaum, *The Clash Within: Democracy, Religious Violence, and India's Future* (Harvard University Press), TBA.

## **Week 12: Final discussion and course evaluation**