

Religion in the Public Sphere

Winter 2024

2 credits

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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, state institutions and 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 in particular as they relate to controversies over issues like education, law, religious freedom, human rights, inter-communal violence, and gender.

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 %)

Course Schedule

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.

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

Week 2: The Resurgence of Religion

This session explores the debate on “public religions” that forms the backbone many arguments for global religious resurgence.

Reading:

- Jose Casanova, *Public Religions in the Modern World*. Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 2011, Ch. 1-3.

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.
- Bigelow, *Sharing the Sacred: Practicing Pluralism in Muslim North India*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2010, Ch. 3, 4.

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

This session discusses the concept of religious freedom. What does religious freedom mean? Who has the authority to regulate this freedom? Students will explore a case study of a particular US court case that involved limitations on religious freedom with an eye toward broader questions and problematics of this right which guaranteed in many constitutions around the world.

Reading:

- Sullivan, Winnifred Fallers. *The Impossibility of Religious Freedom*. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2005 (Introduction, Ch.1, 2, 3)

Week 5: Dilemmas of Religion in a Secular State II: *Laïcité*

This session explores varieties of secularism. Emphasis is placed on the historical understanding and practice of *laïcité* in France and the laws regarding religious clothing and symbols in the public sphere.

Reading:

- Joan Wallach Scott, "The Politics of the Veil" – Introduction, Ch. 1,2.
- Roy, Olivier. *Secularism Confronts Islam*. Berkley, Columbia University Press: 2009, Ch. 1.

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

This session explores the links between religious tenets and state institutions of power in the case of Theravada Buddhism in Southeast Asia.

Reading:

- Michael Jerryson. *If You Meet the Buddha on the Road: Buddhism, Politics, and Violence*. Oxford University Press, Intro, pp. 1-10 + Ch. 3, 4.

Week 7: Dilemmas of Religion and Politics: Political Islam

Perhaps no movement exemplifies the renewal of religion in the public sphere in the late twentieth century to the same extent as that of Islamism. This session examines the evolution and failures/successes of Islamic political parties in the recent past.

Reading:

- *The Trail of Political Islam* by Gilles Kepel, Ch. 1, 2, 3.
- Osama Bin Laden, "Messages to the World" - Ch. 2.

Week 8: Marriage and the Family

This session explores how the institutions of marriage and the family are regulated in religious nation-states and the various dilemmas that the presence of religious law in certain areas maintains the legal power of particular religious authorities.

Ben-Porat, Guy. *Between State and Synagogue: The Secularization of Contemporary Israel*. Cambridge ; New York : Cambridge University Press, 2013, Ch. 1, 2, 3.

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 (pdf on e-learning)
- 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

South Asia forms one of the primary cases for discussion of religious violence and religious nationalism. This session explores how religious politics was shaped during the colonial period and how recent shifts in law and political structures affected and accentuated the importance of religious identity.

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.
- Peter Veer, *Religious Nationalism: Hindus and Muslims in India*, 2003, Ch. 1 & 2.

Week 12: Final discussion and course evaluation