Religion and Politics

Michaelmas 2020

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Assessment deadline: 4th December 2020

Course Description

Religion and politics are controversial topics, and the nature of their intersection has in recent decades become a hotly debated issue across the social sciences. What is the role of religion in shaping politically relevant ideas, actions, identities, and institutions? This is the overarching empirical question with which the course is concerned. We will explore it in relation to a variety of substantive topics, including regime legitimation, state formation, nation building, violent conflict, public policy making, electoral politics, and political mobilization. The course aims to provide students with conceptual and analytical tools for studying the role of religion in processes of political contestation, cooperation, and change.

The course reflects a commitment to the idea that the study of religion and politics is best informed by a broad interdisciplinary approach. It will therefore introduce students to a diversity of theoretical perspectives, methodological approaches, and an equally varied set of religious, regional, and historical contexts. The course is structured around different ways of conceptualizing religion. We will evaluate the strengths and weaknesses of approaches that treat religion as (1) a byproduct of innate features of human cognition, (2) a social imaginary, (3) an identity marker, (4) a market, (5) discourse, (6) practices; and (7) a social field.

Throughout the term, we will explore the interactions between religious and political life in relation to three central theoretical and conceptual issues. The first concerns the relationship between top-down (elite) and bottom-up (popular) processes to reproduce or manipulate religious communities, discourses, and organizations—and their relationship to the polity. Religions can, like language and culture more broadly, for our purposes be thought of as “spontaneous orders” (Hayek). While rulers, groups, and organizations may try to fashion and refashion such orders, it is ultimately beyond their capacity to create or control them. The question is therefore: To what extent, and how successfully, do the theoretical frameworks we encounter in the readings integrate top-down (intentional) and bottom-up (mostly unintentional) drivers of religio-political change? The second issue is whether it might be possible to reconcile the different approaches and arguments we encounter into an integrated theoretical framework. If so, what might it look like? The third conceptual issue concerns the meaning and use of “religion” in social scientific explanations and arguments. As we will see, agreement on a universal, substantive definition has so far eluded scholars. Some, furthermore, argue that the
idea of religion as a distinct category, in contradistinction to “the secular,” reflects a modern and specifically Western and Protestant Christian understanding which resulted from historical experiences unique to Europe. If so, then it may in other cultural contexts be difficult to separate a religious sphere of activity from politics (and economy, science, etc.). In light of this critique, are social scientists nevertheless justified in using “religion” as a category of analysis? Can they, for instance, treat religion as a causal factor or explanatory variable, that, in conjunction with other factors (economic, social, historical, etc.), influences political behaviour and produces political outcomes?

**Course Organisation and Expectations:**

In the reading list below, readings are divided into three categories. *Required* readings are compulsory. *Recommended* readings may be helpful if you wish to explore a topic further or when you write your assessment essay. *Further* readings are primarily intended to serve as a resource if you are interested in writing a dissertation on some aspect of religion and politics.

Students are expected to participate actively in discussion. As you do the required readings in preparation for the seminar, please keep the following questions in mind:

1) What is the central argument of each reading?
2) What is the weakest point in the argument? Why?
3) To what extent and in what ways do the arguments in different readings diverge with respect to basic assumptions? Basic assumptions may pertain, for example, to (a) the meaning of religion and other key concepts, (b) the direction of the causal arrows, (c) the motivations of actors, and (d) the connection between different levels of analysis (such as individuals and social structures). As the term proceeds, we will also be able to look back and reflect on questions of divergence, and potential reconciliation, in relation to arguments encountered in previous weeks.
4) What questions would you like to bring up in the seminar? For example, was there anything in the readings that you found particularly provocative, creative, or confusing?

For assessment you are asked to write a 3,000-word essay which is due at the end of term.

**Background Reading:**


First Session: The Evolutionary Origins of Religion and Politics

Discussion questions:

In this first seminar, we explore the cognitive basis of human religiousness and the demographic forces that underpin the evolution of religious and political orders. One of the fundamental puzzles in human evolution concerns the emergence of large-scale societies. The human brain is adapted to a manageable group size of around 150 people (Dunbar’s number), but today most of us live in societies where membership is counted in the millions. What enabled us to make the leap from small-scale groups such as family and clan to larger-scale social groups? The answer may, as Norenzayan argues, lie in cognitive features of the human brain that allowed for the emergence of prosocial religions which in turn conferred groups who adopted such religions with a competitive advantage in the struggle for survival. This suggests that belief in a moralizing “big god” is a cultural adaptation that evolved through group selection. If religion played a key role in making large-scale cooperation possible, what is its role today? Can advanced capitalist social orders be sustained if they, as argued by Norris and Inglehart, become more secularized as a consequence of their prosperity? And what are the implications of the continuing demographic advantage of highly religious groups for the future trajectory of political orders?

Required readings:


Recommended:


Maurice Bloch, “Why religion is nothing special but is central,” in In and out of each other’s bodies: Theory of mind, evolution, truth, and the nature of the social (Routledge, 2016), pp. 23-40.

Further readings:


Alex Mesoudi, *Cultural evolution: How Darwinian theory can explain human culture and synthesize the social sciences* (University of Chicago Press, 2011).


Second Session: Religious and Political Imaginaries

Discussion questions:

The readings for this week are concerned with the emergence and transformation of what Taylor refers to as social imaginaries: frames of imagination and interpretation. A clue to the role of religion in relation to the foundations of political order, and the generation of individual preferences, social expectations, and repertoires of collective action, can perhaps be found in the original meaning of hier-archy: sacred rule.

Strathern seeks to provide an answer for the triumph, in the pre-modern world, of sacred kingship linked to what is now conventionally referred to as the world religions. Continuing where Strathern’ narrative stops, Gregory traces the roots of contemporary secular modernity in the West, finding them in medieval Christianity. With Jory we go full circle, exploring how a Buddhist ideal of righteous kingship has been revived in Thailand since the 1960s.

These momentous changes in religio-political imaginaries raise a number of questions. To what extent can the transformations of these ideational constructs, and the social and political consequences that flow from them, be viewed as the result of rational action by powerful social actors in pursuit of well-defined goals? How are the abstract ideas and ideals expressed in religio-political texts, usually written and reproduced by elites, connected to politically relevant beliefs and practices in wider society? Do religiously grounded worldviews make certain political orders and forms of political action effectively unthinkable? How relevant is the religio-political imaginary that dominates in the West to the rest of the world? Are all dominant political imaginaries—including modern and secular ones—in some sense religious? Finally: What can be done when dominant imaginaries are perceived to be failing?

Required readings:


Patrick Jory, Thailand’s theory of monarchy: The Vessantara Jātaka and the idea of the perfect man (SUNY Press, 2016), pp. 1-22, 173-188.
Recommended:


Mirjam Künkler, John Madeley, and Shylashri Shankar (eds.), *A secular age beyond the West: Religion, law and the state in Asia, the Middle East and North Africa* (Cambridge University Press, 2018), pp. 1-32, 342-394.


Further readings:

Jóhann Páll Árnason, Shmuel N. Eisenstadt, and Bjorn Wittrock (eds.), *Axial civilizations and world history* (Brill, 2004).


Ian Harris, “Buddhism and politics in Asia: The textual and historical roots,” in Ian Harris (ed.), Buddhism and politics in twentieth century Asia (Bloomsbury, 2010), pp. 1-25.


Ira Katznelson and Gareth Stedman Jones (eds.), Religion and the political imagination (Cambridge University Press, 2010).


**Third Session: Religious Identity and Politics**

**Discussion questions:**

Religion is a multidimensional phenomenon. In comparative politics and international relations, the greatest attention has probably been paid to religion as a marker of social identity. By some accounts, religion is functionally equivalent to other possible markers of identity, such as language, race, caste, tribe, kinship, region, indigeneity, and nation. The specifically religious aspects of identity can therefore be abstracted from, folded in under the rubric of ethnicity and nation, and given no further analytical attention. The central questions for this week are therefore whether and how religious belonging matters in processes of social and political change, whether and why it may do so in ways that are distinct from other forms of belonging, and how religious belonging interacts with other aspects of religion (such as belief and organization). While reflecting on these questions, keep in mind Brubaker’s distinction between religion as a category of analysis and as a category of practice. What challenges does that doubleness present us with?

**Required readings:**


**Recommended readings:**


Further readings:


Joel S. Fetzer and J. Christopher Soper, Muslims and the state in Britain, France, and Germany (Cambridge University Press, 2005).


Samuel P. Huntington, The clash of civilizations and the remaking of world order (Simon & Schuster, 1997).

Mark Juergensmeyer, Global rebellion: Religious challenges to the secular state, from Christian militias to Al Qaeda (University of California Press, 2008).

David D. Laitin, Hegemony and culture: Politics and religious change among the Yoruba (University of Chicago Press, 1986).


Fourth Session: Religious Markets and Politics

Discussion questions:

Modern economics has for the most part been happy to leave the study of religion to theologians, sociologists, and anthropologists. Since the 1990s, however, a growing number of economists have turned their attention to religion. Many political scientists have also found the economic (or rational choice) approach to religion productive in their quest to better understand how the interactions of religious and political actors generate important political outcomes.

Among the questions we may want to discuss this week are the following: Can the behaviour of religious actors really be explained with reference simply to mundane costs and benefits? Are religious doctrines and ideas best thought of as epiphenomena? In what ways are markets for religious goods different from markets for widgets? What *is* a religious good? Would increased supply and consumption of such religious goods be a good thing, from a societal point of view (analogous to GDP growth or the supply of public goods)?

Required readings:


Recommended readings:


Further readings:


Fifth Session: “Religion” and Politics

Discussion questions:

This week introduces a deconstructionist approach which offers a challenge to social scientists who deploy “religion” and religions (“Islam,” “Buddhism,” etc.) as universal, reified categories. Genealogies which historizise these categories, predominantly tracing their origins to Christian contexts and European colonial endeavours, demonstrate, it is argued, the implausibility and inappropriateness of such a treatment.

One of the questions we may reflect on this week is whether and if so how the scholarship on religion and politics that is influenced by the genealogical turn is internally consistent. If we abandon reified notions of “religion” and associated categories, how do we know what to study? Hurd (2017: 13), referring to precisely this problem, speaks of a “productive paradox.” Does this save religion from the more radical interpretation of the implications of deconstructionist scholarship, which would be that it should be abandoned altogether? In short, can “religion,” “Christianity,” “secular,” etc., be studied and understood in any other way than as discourse?

Required readings:


Recommended:


Further readings:


Richard King, *Orientalism and religion: Post-colonial theory, India, and ‘the mystic East’* (Routledge, 1999).


Tomoko Mazuzawa, *The invention of world religions: Or, how European universalism was preserved in the language of pluralism* (University of Chicago Press, 2005).


John Obert Voll, “Islam as a community of discourse and a world-system,” in Akbar S. Ahmed and Tamara Sonn (eds.), *The SAGE handbook of Islamic studies* (Sage, 2010), pp. 3-16.

Sixth Session: Religious Practices and Politics

Discussion questions:

Religious traditions offer rich menus of practices, such as prayer, pilgrimage, preaching, prostration, possession, procession, and penance. Dissatisfied with the emphasis, in much of the literature, on religion as belief and identity, a growing number of scholars in comparative politics and international relations have turned their attention to the political significance of these and similar religious practices. What happens when people “do” religion and how does it matter for politics?

Hassner argues that everyday religious practices such as prayers and rituals influence how, and how effectively, militaries fight wars. In McClendon and Riedl we return to the second week’s theme: religious ideas and how they influence how people think about and engage in politics. But they take the challenge of establishing causality seriously, studying contemporary Christian sermons in sub-Saharan Africa to establish how and to what extent religious teachings influence citizens’ political attitudes and participation. Chibber, on the other hand, takes religious teachings out of the picture entirely. Focusing on contemporary India, he argues that the performance of rituals, pilgrimages, visits to temples and shrines, and similar, mostly local and communal religious practices in and of themselves have political salience, influencing what citizens think and feel about the political system.

The fundamental methodological challenge for these studies is to connect the “micropolitics” of everyday religious life with macro-level political outcomes. How, and how successfully, do they go about doing that?

Required readings:


Recommended:


Further readings:


**Seventh Session: Political Power and the Religious Field**

**Discussion questions:**

We conclude the course by exploring the religio-political boundary struggles in two superpowers: China and the United States. Goossaert and Palmer frame their study in relation to Bourdieu’s notion of a “religious field.” They provide a sweeping narrative of the political struggles involved first in the creation of such a field in China and secondly the efforts by a militantly anti-religious political party to suppress it and replace it with a cult of the party’s leader. The former as much as the latter involved the Chinese authorities deciding which practices were “religious” and which were not. Lewis, on the other hand, does not frame his argument in relation to the concept of a religious field. But could his argument about the changing political strategies and coalitions of the conservative right in the United States be reconciled with such an approach?

Bourdieu’s notion of social fields plays a central role in Gorski’s outline of an integrated theoretical framework. Does it manage to capture the dynamics described in this week’s readings on China and the United States, as well as those we have encountered in previous weeks? What, if anything, is missing from it?

**Required readings:**


**Recommended readings:**


Further readings:


