Politics and International Relations, 2020-2021

Politics and Religion

Definitive paper guide is on course Moodle

Course organiser
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Lecturers
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Course Outline
Politics and Religion covers a broad range of issues and concerns of interest to the student of Comparative Politics and International Relations: political theology, institutional formation and change, state power and authority, legitimacy and resistance, nationalism, as well as the shifting and productive boundaries between the sacred and the profane, the religious and the secular. The course will introduce students to a variety of different analytic approaches to religion, exploring the tensions between them. These include, but are not limited to, positivist approaches that posit religion as a causal factor, public policy-orientated approaches that view religion as a challenge to and an instrument for governance, and interpretivist and poststructuralist approaches that seek to question religion as a social scientific concept. The second half of the course will address these issues through a comparative exploration of religion and politics in a variety of contexts: Buddhism in Southeast Asia, religion's role in the politics of the EU and USA, and religion as an entry point for questions of environmental politics in the global South.

Teaching & Examination
The course will be taught by a combination of lectures and supervisions, running through Michaelmas and Lent terms, with a revision session in Easter term. In Michaelmas, lectures cover a range of debates and analytic questions in the study of religion and politics. In Lent, students choose 2 out of 4 modules that explore these debates further, through readings and discussions on a thematic case study. During the course students will have 4 supervisions, two each in Michaelmas and Lent. The examination will consist of 16 questions divided into two sections: Section A, which covers themes introduced in Michaelmas term, and Section B, which contains at least two questions per module. Students will choose at least one question each from Section A and B, and answer a third from either section.
Readings
Readings are divided into two groups: essential readings will form the main basis for essays and discussion. Recommended readings are provided as a guide for students who wish to explore topics in further depth. The majority of articles and book chapters can be accessed electronically through the University Library’s electronic resources, including through the LEAN Library (https://www.libraries.cam.ac.uk/eresources/access-full-text-anywhere). The SPS/Seeley library and the UL will assist students with access to readings.
Lecture list
Lectures, readings and supervisions will be finalised shortly before the beginning of each term, and announced on the course Moodle.

**Michaelmas term**

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<th>Date</th>
<th>Topic</th>
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<tr>
<td>12 October</td>
<td>Questioning Religion and Politics: The Context</td>
<td>Dr Hussin</td>
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<td>19 October</td>
<td>Debating secularism and politics</td>
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<td>26 October</td>
<td>Religion and the State</td>
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<td>2 November</td>
<td>Religion and Empire</td>
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<td>9 November</td>
<td>Analytic approaches: Religion and Law</td>
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<td>Analytic approaches: Religion and violence</td>
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<td>30 November</td>
<td>Discussion: What is Religion? What is Politics?</td>
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**Lent term**

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<td>18 January</td>
<td>Module 1: Religion and Politics in Europe</td>
<td>Dr Silvestri</td>
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<td>25 January</td>
<td>Module 1: Religion and Politics in Europe</td>
<td>Dr Silvestri</td>
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<td>1 February</td>
<td>Module 2: Political Ecology and Religion in the Global South</td>
<td>Dr Müller</td>
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<td>8 February</td>
<td>Module 2: Political Ecology and Religion in the Global South</td>
<td>Dr Müller</td>
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<td>15 February</td>
<td>Module 3: Religion and Politics in America</td>
<td>Dr Birdsall</td>
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<td>22 February</td>
<td>Module 3: Religion and U.S. Foreign Policy</td>
<td>Dr Birdsall</td>
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<td>1 March</td>
<td>Module 4: Buddhism and Politics in Southeast Asia</td>
<td>Dr Larsson</td>
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<tr>
<td>8 March</td>
<td>Module 4: Buddhism and Politics in Southeast Asia</td>
<td>Dr Larsson</td>
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Questioning Religion and Politics: The Context

Essential


Foreign Affairs, 'Clash of Civilisations: 20 years,' (articles are separately available through library website):
https://www.foreignaffairs.com/anthologies/2014-08-12/clash-civilizations

The Immanent Frame, 'A Universe of Terms,'
https://tif.ssrc.org/category/a-universe-of-terms/ 'Enchantment, Disenchantment'; 'Belief'; 'Race'

Recommended


https://berkleycenter.georgetown.edu/events/islam-and-western-secular-modernity

Debating secularism and politics

Essential


Shakman-Hurd, E. 2004. ‘The Political Authority of Secularism in International Relations’, European Journal of International Relations, vol 10, no. 2

Recommended


Talal Asad and Abdullahi an-Naim in conversation:

**Religion and the state**

**Essential**


**Recommended**

John Locke, "A Letter Concerning Toleration," (various editions):
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1xILFxFkF3E


Loos, Tamara. 2008.“A History of Sex and the State in Southeast Asia: Class, Intimacy and Invisibility.” *Citizenship Studies* 12, 1.

**Religion and empire**

**Essential**


**Recommended**


Supervision I Essay topics:
Select from the readings and lectures above to prepare an essay, which will be emailed 24h in advance of every supervision.

1. Comparing two definitions of 'secular,' explain: their major differences, the assumptions that underlie these differences, and the kinds of analytic questions raised. What is at stake in these definitions of secular?

2. What is the relationship between secularism (and/or 'the secular') and the power of the state? How does this relationship vary across time and space?

3. In what ways has the category of 'religion' been shaped by empire?

Analytic approaches: Religion and law

Essential

Recommended

**Analytic approaches: Religion and capitalism**

*Essential*


*Recommended*


**Analytic approaches: Religion and violence**

*Essential*


*Recommended*


Hickman, M, Thomas, L, H. Nickels, S. Silvestri 2012. “Social Cohesion and the Notion of ‘Suspect Communities’”, *Critical Terrorism Studies*, 5: 1


Discussion Seminar: What is Religion? What is Politics?

Selected Readings

Supervision 2 Essay topics:
*Select from the readings and lectures above, drawing from MT readings if you wish, to prepare an essay, which will be emailed 24h in advance of every supervision.*

1. Is the law of the state primarily an expression of majority interests, or an instrument for minority protection?

2. To what extent can newer religious movements be understood as a response to global capitalism?

3. How have scholars of religion defined violence in their work, and what is the role of religion in these definitions?
**Lent Term**
Students will choose **2 out of 4 modules**. Each module consists of 2 lectures and one supervision.

**Module options:**
Module 1: Religion and Politics in Europe, Dr Sara Silvestri
Module 2: Religion and Politics in the United States, Dr Judd Birdsall
Module 3: Political Ecology and Religion in the Global South, Dr Tobias Müller
Module 4: Buddhism and Statecraft in Southern Asia, Dr Tomas Larsson

**Lent Lecture List**
*Lecture timings, readings and supervision essays will be confirmed shortly before the beginning of Lent term.*

**Module 1: Religion and Politics in Europe**
Taking stock of the concepts and dynamics analysed earlier in the paper, this module focuses on the region of Europe and specifically onto European Union (EU) member states and EU institutions in order to examine how religion as a concept as well as faith communities are addressed through laws and policies by European governments and institutions. Such exercise will also require identifying key political, social and religious actors, and unpacking ideas at the heart of the European integration project. Awareness of the past and recent history of Europe will be necessary in order to understand the present. A case study about Muslim communities in Europe will examine the dilemmas that European democracies, religious minorities, and individual people of faith are facing while seeking to simultaneously maintain peace, security, and protect individual freedoms in societies that are increasingly multicultural and diverse.

**Lecture 1: How the relationships between EU member states and EU institutions determines which laws and policies exist and which actors have competence over religious matters**

**Essential**

And one of these:


**Recommended**


Silvestri, Sara (2009), “Islam and Religion in the EU Political System”, *West European Politics*, vol.32, no.6


**Lecture 2: The position of Religious Minorities in Europe: a case study of Muslim communities**

**Essential**


**Recommended**


**Supervision Essays:**

Should the governments of European democracies step up their involvement in the management of religion?

The EU has been a vocal actor in condemning religious discrimination and in promoting intercultural relations. How useful and effective do you think this effort has been?

To what extent can the public display of religious symbols threaten democratic freedoms in Europe?

What could be considered the key factors affecting the emancipation of Muslim communities in Europe?
Module 2: Religion in American Politics and Foreign Policy

Lecture 1: Religion and American Politics

Essential


The Review of Faith & International Affairs, 10:2 (Summer 2012)


Recommended

Lecture 2: Religion and U.S. Foreign Policy

Essential

Recommended


Birdsall, Judd, Jane Lindsay, Emma Tomalin, eds. *Toward Religion-Attentive Foreign Policy: A Report on an Anglo-American Dialogue*.

http://www.leeds.ac.uk/arts/download/2511/toward_religion-attentive_foreign_policy


**Supervision Essays:**

Is “Judeo-Christian” a term of inclusion or exclusion?

How far can the overwhelming support for Donald Trump among white evangelicals be explained by their feelings of cultural and demographic marginalization?

Have Western government efforts to “engage Muslims” exacerbated the perception of a “clash of civilizations”?
Module 3: Political Ecology and Religion in the Global South
This module will introduce students to the relationship between politics, religion and the environment. We will seek to understand how the transformation, exploitation and destruction of the planet’s natural environment relates to religion and secular modernity, focussing on the Global South. We will take the current debate on the terminology for the current epoch, as Anthropocene, Capitalocene, Plantationocene, Chthulucene etc. as starting point to explore different perspectives of interpreting the current ecological crisis and its historical entanglements with colonialism, secularism, enlightenment rationality and religious hierarchies. The first lecture, “Political ecology and cosmology in the Anthropocene”, addresses the question why human reason—secular and religious—is struggling to adequately address the epochal challenge of climate change. We will do so by exploring different perspectives that offer alternative languages and visions for politics in the Anthropocene. We will discuss to what extent the climate crisis is a crisis of the imagination, the agency of non-human entities in political thought and the eco-feminist critique of mainstream political ecology.

The second lecture, “Political ecology, religion and decoloniality: Struggles and alliances” discusses concrete examples of re-conceptualising the relation between politics, religion and the environment. It seeks to unpack the central role of Euro-American knowledge/power formations in the ways in which environmental and human exploitation is justified and exercised. Perspectives we will discuss include Amerindian understandings of Earth-Beings and the neo-liberal commodification of the Inka heritage in the Andes, Islamic thought that criticises modern industrial environmental degradation based on holy scriptures, the ontological dimension of the Zapatista uprising in Mexico, and Marxist feminist critiques on capitalism’s new enclosures and practices of resistance in West Africa. The module will provide students with the analytical toolset to critically assess the way in which religion and politics are enmeshed in the exploitation of the natural environment and its multi-faceted intersections with race, class and gender.

Contextual material:

People without faces: A documentary on the Zapatista uprising forms of self-organisation and relationship to religion; Russian-Mexican production, (featured on the website of the Zapatistas); https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NqIZOa7DMiU

Lecture 1: Religion and political visions in the Anthropocene

Core readings:


Recommended:


Lecture 2: Political ecology, religion and decoloniality: Struggles and alliances

Core readings:


Hulme, Mike (2017), Climate Change and the Significance of Religion. Economic and Political Weekly, LII(28): 14-17.


Recommended:


**Possible supervision essay questions:**

· What is the political relationship between religion and nature?
· How does the distinction between nature/culture relate to the distinction between religion/secular?
· Domination of nature cannot be understood without taking into account domination of people based on race, class, gender and religion. Discuss.
· Is the Anthropocene secular?
· How do cosmologies affect politics?
· Why does climate change represent such a profound challenge to politics and religion?
In the classical states of Buddhist Southern Asia, political authority was heavily Buddhized. Rulers and the ruled shared a political culture in which Buddhist idioms, symbols, and rituals played a central, legitimating role. Before the advent of European colonialism, rulers in the territories that we today refer to as Myanmar, Thailand, Cambodia, Laos, and Sri Lanka typically styled themselves as dhammaraja (righteous Buddhist ruler). The relationship between political authority and religious authority, the latter resting with the sangha (Buddhist monkhood), has been characterized as one of antagonistic symbiosis.

In this module, we will explore the continuing significance of this historical legacy, as a frame for political interpretation and imagination, and repertoire of statecraft. We will do so with a focus on two of the challenges inherent in Weber’s conception of the state as a “human community that (successfully) claims the monopoly of the legitimate use of physical force within a given territory.” In light of the common, and also Weberian, understanding of Buddhism as a uniquely non-political and tolerant religion, the teachings of the Buddha would seem to be particularly ill suited for sanctioning (a) political order and (b) political violence. Rulers (and rebels) in modern South and Southeast Asia have nevertheless often sought to legitimize the centralization of power and exercise of violent coercion by appealing to the Buddhist tradition.

Contextual Materials

- **In Our Time**, “Ashoka the Great”: https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b0511tm1.
- Burma’s lost royals: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BWFOr47_dao.
- An unholy alliance: Monks and the military in Myanmar https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mF1GZ0O94qk.
- Thailand’s tainted robes https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=382VkLGpDaI.
- Thailand: In the footsteps of the king https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fEdvgpoCPkc.

Lecture 1: Righteous Rule? Buddhist Kingship in Theory and Practice

A spectre is haunting Theravada Asia—the spectre of Buddhist kingship. Nineteenth and twentieth century efforts by imperialists, radicals, and republicans to exorcise this spectre have, arguably, failed. While imperial intervention and domestic revolutions have relegated the absolute monarchies of the dhammarajas to history, collective memories of them have continued to exercise a profound influence on modern politics. Indeed, following the perceived failures of military, democratic and communist regimes, elites and publics across
South and Southeast Asia have sought to revive the ideals and symbols of righteous Buddhist rule.

The readings this week introduce the pre-modern religious and textual sources of political culture centered around utopian Buddhist visions of political authority (Collins, Goh), and explore their modern transformations and contemporary manifestations.

Required Readings


Recommended Readings


Tomas Larsson, “Royal succession and the politics of religious purification in contemporary Thailand” *Journal of Contemporary Asia* (forthcoming).


Irene Stengs, *Worshipping the great moderniser: King Chulalongkorn, patron saint of the Thai middle class* (NUS Press, 2009), chapter 5.


Lecture 2: Just Violence? Buddhism and Bloodshed

In the comparative study of religion and politics, Buddhism is often rather good to think with. It provides a productive contrast with the monotheistic Abrahamic religions. Buddhist teachings do not deny the existence of gods. On the contrary: in Buddhist cosmology we find a panoply of deities (alongside a tapestry of demi-gods, fairies, nagas, hungry ghosts, and hell beings). But Buddha’s teachings are thought to apply to gods and humans alike. Buddhism therefore lacks much of the powerful drive, inherent in monotheistic traditions, to destroy rival gods and convert their followers. The willingness to accept, at a certain level, religious pluralism is one reason Buddhism often has been portrayed as a “peaceful” religion. However, the differences should not be exaggerated. In the pre-colonial era, the cakkavatti ideal of universal Buddhist kingship served as an ideological spur to self-aggrandizing and if need be violent expansion of the polity. Furthermore, it is incumbent on the righteous ruler to preserve and defend the satsana (teachings). Claiming that Buddhism is “under threat” has therefore often served as a justification for violence against the perceived enemies of the “triple gem” (Buddha, dhamma, sangha) — including but not limited to European colonial powers. This discourse was mobilized during the Cold War and, in more recent years, it has reappeared in Myanmar, Thailand, and Sri Lanka, especially, in relation to Muslim and other minorities who are perceived as threats to the “Buddhist” identity of state and society.

Required Readings

- Eugene Ford, Cold War monks: Buddhism and America’s secret strategy in Southeast Asia (Yale University Press, 2017), pp. TBA.

Recommended Readings


Supervision Questions

(1) How have ideas regarding Buddhist kingship informed strategies of political legitimation in Southern Asia?
(2) Should we pay attention to Buddhism when trying to understand violent conflict in Southern Asia?
Mock exam questions

*16 questions: Answer three questions: a question from each of Section A and Section B, and a third question from either section.*

**Section A: Answer at least one question from this section**

To what extent is the state's definition of 'religion' the only definition that matters?

How, and to what extent, is global capitalism a threat to religious institutions?

To what extent, and under what circumstances, does the law serve the interests of the minority?

How does the concept of religious freedom function in the international arena, and to whose benefit?

What is the role of violence in the relationship between religion and the state?

Why, and to what extent, does secularism vary between states?

To what extent have imperial definitions of religion persisted into the modern nation state?

Is religion a threat to democracy, or essential to its practice?

**Section B: Answer at least one question from this section**

To what extent can religion facilitate or hinder the project of European integration?

What factors determine the ways in which European countries and institutions engage with religious issues and faith communities?

To what extent are religious exceptionalism and national exceptionalism mutually reinforcing? Does one necessarily depend on or lead to the other?

Is the current wave of anti-Semitic and anti-Muslim sentiment in Europe and the United States primarily caused by secularization or resurgent Christian identity?

How can the perspective of political ecology help us to understand the relation between religion and politics and what are the limits of this approach?

How do theorists of the Anthropocene challenge conventional notions of human agency in relation to the non-human?

How has the collective memory of dhammarajas been cultivated in contemporary politics in Southern Asia?
What does it mean to say that some warfare is "Buddhist"?