Politics and International Relations 2024

**POL17: Politics and Religion**

*Definitive paper guide is on course Moodle*

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**Course organiser**
Dr Iza Hussin

**Lecturers**
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- Dr Tomas Larsson  thl33@cam.ac.uk
- Dr Sara Silvestri  ss384@cam.ac.uk

**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.

**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 indicate their preferences and take 2 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.*

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<th>Michaelmas term</th>
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**Lent term**

*Note that lecture times may be amended based on student module selections*

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<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Topic</th>
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<tr>
<td>tba</td>
<td>Comparative Approaches to Religion and Politics <em>Lecture</em></td>
<td>Dr Hussin</td>
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<tr>
<td>28 January</td>
<td>Module 1: Religion and Politics in Europe, <em>Lecture</em></td>
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<td>4 February</td>
<td>Module 1: Religion and Politics in Europe, <em>Lecture</em></td>
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<td>11 February</td>
<td>Module 2: Islam and Gender Activism <em>Seminar,</em></td>
<td>Dr Hussin</td>
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<td>18 February</td>
<td>Module 2: Islam and Gender Activism <em>Seminar,</em></td>
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<td>25 February</td>
<td>Module 3: Religion in the Courts <em>Seminar,</em></td>
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<td>4 Mar</td>
<td>Module 3: Religion in the Courts <em>Seminar,</em></td>
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<td>11 March</td>
<td>Module 4: Buddhism and Politics in Southeast Asia, <em>Lecture</em></td>
<td>Dr Larsson</td>
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<td>18 March</td>
<td>Module 4: Buddhism and Politics in Southeast Asia, <em>Lecture</em></td>
<td>Dr Larsson</td>
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<td>tba</td>
<td>Concluding Lecture and Exam discussion</td>
<td>Dr Hussin</td>
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Questioning Religion and Politics: The Context

Essential

Recommended

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 must be emailed to the supervisor at least 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
https://canopyforum.org/2020/07/16/from-breath-to-voices/

Recommended
https://divinity.uchicago.edu/sightings/how-not-understand-isis-alireza-doostdar

Discussion Seminar
Selected Readings
Supervision 2 Essay topics:
Select from the readings and lectures above, drawing from MT readings, to prepare an essay, which must be emailed to the supervisor at least 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 indicate preferences for **2 out of 4 modules** in early MT, and will be assigned to modules in mid-MT.

**Modules 1 and 4** consist of 2 lectures and one supervision.

**Modules 2 and 3** offer 2 discussion based seminars of 1.5h each, with a supervision essay to be submitted before the first seminar.

**Lent Lecture List**

*Lecture timings, readings and supervision essays will be confirmed shortly before the beginning of Lent term. Please contact each module leader if you have questions about readings, lectures, or supervisions.*

**Comparative Approaches to Religion and Politics**

**Essential**


**Recommended**


*The Immanent Frame,* 'A Universe of Terms,'

https://tif.ssrc.org/category/a-universe-of-terms/

'Enchantment, Disenchantment'; 'Belief'; 'Race'
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

Thomas, Scott (2005), The Global Resurgence of Religion and the Transformation of International Relations. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan

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

Essential


March, Andrew (2006), ”Liberal Citizenship and the Search for Overlapping Consensus: The Case of Muslim Minorities”, Philosophy & Public Affairs, 34: 4, pp. 373-421,

Recommended


Patterns of Prejudice (2014), special issue on Islamophobia, 48: 5.


**Supervision Essays:**

1. Should the governments of European democracies step up their involvement in the management of religion?
2. 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?
3. To what extent can the public display of religious symbols threaten democratic freedoms in Europe?
4. What could be considered the key factors affecting the emancipation of Muslim communities in Europe?
Module 2: Religion and Gender Activism (Seminar)
This module considers contemporary movements for gender equality and the role played by religious institutions, ideas, and histories, both in support and opposition to the goals of activist movements. It begins with readings which support the writing of independent seminar essays on the claims and strategies of women’s movements in Muslim contexts, and how Islam figures into their activism. These form the basis of discussion in Seminar 1. Seminar 2 broadens the focus to consider gender activism with and against religion, in a range of contexts.

Seminar essays are due by email before the seminars meet, in order to facilitate discussion. They are supervision length essays based on the essential readings, and students will be expected to discuss their seminar essays during sessions, during which feedback will be provided. In order to write these essays, it is recommended that students begin with Leila Ahmed’s Women and Gender in Islam (and consult the 2021 version for Ali’s Foreword) for background, and then read Abu-Lughod 2002 and Mahmood 2001, followed by the Mir-Hosseini lecture.

Seminar 1: Women’s Movements and Strategies
Seminar Essay Questions: choose one, submit by email 48h before Seminar 1
1. To what extent is 'equality' the goal of women's movements in Muslim contexts?
2. How have sacred texts been used for and against women’s rights?
3. Has Western feminism been an asset or a liability for gender activism in Muslim-majority contexts?

Essential Readings
Lecture: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tMqb4gOj7kw

Seminar 2: Case Studies, with linked readings
Malaysia: https://rpl.hds.harvard.edu/religion-context/case-studies/gender/malaysias-sisters-islam
Egypt: https://tif.ssrc.org/2022/02/18/religious-publicity-and-transnational-minority-politics/
Module 3: Religion in the Courts (Seminar)

This module provides deeper exploration of the entanglements between religious texts, institutions, and ideas, and the working of national courts and regimes of law. It begins with readings that support the writing of independent seminar essays on how these entanglements work: through institutional and colonial history, the making of the nation state, democratic institutions and constitutions, nationalism, ethnicity, and distributions of political resources. These form the basis of discussion in Seminar 1; Seminar 2 further elaborates these through case studies.

Seminar essays are due by email before the seminars meet, in order to facilitate discussion. They are supervision length essays, and students will be expected to discuss their seminar essays during sessions, during which feedback will be provided. In order to write these essays, it is recommended that students begin with the Introduction to Hefner 2011 for background, choose one or two chapters from the rest of the book, and then read Quraishi-Landes 2013, followed by Mikdashi and Moustafa (choose one to skim and one to read more closely).

Seminar 1: Courts and the Problem of Religion

Seminar Essay Questions: choose one, submit by email 48h before Seminar 1
1. What difficulties do courts encounter when they arbitrate 'religious' questions?
2. Why do 'secular' courts arbitrate religious questions?
3. To what extent are courts and judges independent decision-makers in matters of religion?

Essential Readings


Seminar 2: Case Studies, with linked readings

https://sites.northwestern.edu/lawreligion/project/egyptian-law-and-human-rights/
https://sites.northwestern.edu/lawreligion/project/religion-sexuality-value/
https://sites.northwestern.edu/lawreligion/project/legal-title-to-sacred-places/
https://sites.northwestern.edu/lawreligion/project/jews-free-school/


Module 4: Buddhism and Statecraft in Southern Asia

In the classical states of Buddhist Southern Asia, political authority was heavily Buddhisized. 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](https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b0511tm1).
- *Burma’s lost royals*: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BWFOr47.dao](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BWFOr47.dao).
- *An unholy alliance: Monks and the military in Myanmar* [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mF1GZ0O94qk](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mF1GZ0O94qk).
- *Thailand’s tainted robes* [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=382VkJLgDqA](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=382VkJLgDqA).
- *Thailand: In the footsteps of the king* [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fEdvgpoCPkc](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


Michael Jerryson, If you meet the Buddha on the road: Buddhism, politics, and violence (Oxford University Press, 2018).


Matthew J. Walton and Susan Hayward, Contesting Buddhist narratives: Democratization, nationalism, and communal violence in Myanmar (East-West Center, 2014).

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?

How have women’s movements in Muslim contexts used Islam to their benefit?

Have global human rights movements helped or hindered gender equality in Muslim-majority states?

To what extent are national courts independent arbiters of religion? Compare and contrast two courts in your response.

Under what circumstances, and for what reasons, do secular courts interfere in matters of religion? Compare and contrast two courts in your response.
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"?