

Religion and Politics in the (Post) Modern Imagination

MALS 0002
Spring 2006
Wednesday, 6:00 – 9:00 p.m.
Office hours: by appointment

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Course Description:

This course is a systematic investigation into the interplay between politics and religion in contemporary cultures. As a frame of reference for the course, we will examine the roots of American democracy in the context of the European Enlightenment, particularly in the political philosophies influenced by the Reformation in Geneva and Edinburgh. This background provides a helpful framework for understanding church-state separation in the American experience, as well as efforts by Christian fundamentalists to diminish those distinctions by exerting their influence in the political and moral arena. We will also examine efforts by secular groups who hope to maintain church-state separation and keep religion out of politics and civic life. Some of the writers we will study tend to see this struggle as a manifestation of the underlying tension between modern secular liberalism and tradition. Many see the rise of fundamentalism as a reaction against the uncertainties of the post-modern age, in which traditional values are eroded by moral relativism, cultural pluralism, and a scientific worldview that is hostile toward religion.

In addition to studying the U.S. experience, we will explore the rise of radical orthodoxies and their influence on political and social structures in Islamic, Jewish, and Hindu societies. Broadening our study allows us to develop an appreciation for similar dynamics in the uneasy tension between politics and religion in cultural settings very different than our own. In so doing, we stand a better chance of understanding the polarizing effects of these tensions in our own society.

Learning Objectives:

At the conclusion of this course the student will be able to:

1. Understand the cultural and intellectual origins of Christian fundamentalism in the United States and its growth as a political movement as a reaction against liberal secular ideology.

2. Identify the tensions between secularization and religious conservatism that have led to polarization and conflict in other cultural settings.
3. Evaluate the significance of the social and political complexities in conflicts between radical orthodoxies and secular modernism in Hindu, Jewish, and Arab cultures.
4. Analyze perspectives of major writers from a variety of academic disciplines and cultural perspectives who investigate the interplay between religion and politics around the world.
5. Recognize that individual predisposition and cultural bias reinforce misunderstandings and restrict our options in working through conflict in religion and politics.

Required Readings (books available UNCG bookstore):

Karen Armstrong. *The Struggle for God: A History of Fundamentalism*. New York: Random House, 2000.

Peter Berger. *The Desecularization of the World: Resurgent Religion and World Politics*. Washington, D.C.: Ethics and Public Policy Institute, 1999.

N.J. Demerath. *Crossing the Gods: World Religions and Worldly Politics, 2001*.

Ted Jelen and Clyde Wilcox (eds). *Religion and Politics in Comparative Perspective: The One, The Few, and the Many*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2002.

Latifa. *My Forbidden Face: Growing Up under the Taliban: A Young Woman's Story*. New York: Hyperion, 2001.

Pippa Norris and James Inglehart (eds.). *Sacred and Secular: Religion and Politics Worldwide (Cambridge Studies in Social Theory, Religion, and Politics)*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004.

Suzanne Rudolph and James Piscatori (eds). *Transnational Religion and Fading States*. Boulder: Westview Press, 1997.

Schedule of Readings and Seminars:

Week 1, Introduction: Political, Economic, and Social Functions of Religion
Week 2, Understanding Secularization and the Decline of Mainline Religion
Week 3, Secularism vs. Fundamentalism – The U.S. Experience, 1800-1899
Week 4, Secularism vs. Fundamentalism – The U.S. Experience, 1900-1999
Week 5, Secularism and Fundamentalism – The Islamic World (Iran)
Week 6, Secularism and Fundamentalism – The Islamic World (Egypt)
Week 6, Islamism in Contemporary Arab Politics (Afghanistan, Iraq, Saudi Arabia)
Week 8, Fundamentalism in Hindu Society
Week 9, Politics and Orthodoxy in Israel
Week 10, Catholicism in Iberia and Latin America
Week 11, Catholicism in Poland and Ireland
Week 12, Fundamentalism in contemporary U.S. Politics
Week 12, Fundamentalism vs. Evolution in U.S. Educational Policy
Week 13, Pluralism and Diversity as Vanishing Values?
Weeks 14 & 15, Seminar Reports

(Supplemental articles, films, novels, and plays will be included later in the syllabus).

Requirements:

Strong class participation makes or breaks a seminar. Students will be expected to keep up with the readings and make informed contributions to class discussion. Critical essays on early readings will be used early in the course to evaluate students' grasp of issues raised by the authors. In addition, students will be expected to write three brief papers (5 pages each). Grades will be determined by the following percentages: Class Participation 25%, Papers 25% each.