Religion and World Affairs

For much of the last century the conventional wisdom in the West was that religion was on the way out. Because of science, reason, technology, economic progress, and new forms of human emancipation, such "childish beliefs" were no longer needed. There was only one problem with this story: it was fantastically incorrect. This course explores the reasons for, and impact of, religion in world affairs. It begins by examining why scholars believed that religion would lose ground in a modern age, and why they were wrong. The remainder of the course examines the ambiguous and polyvalent relationship between religion and world affairs in a number of areas: transnational activism; development; conflict and peacebuilding; and U.S. foreign policy toward the Middle East. Our goal in this section of the course is not to identify an immediate and direct relationship between religion and these areas of international life, but rather to consider the different ways that religion might be related – and always considering the very real possibility that religion’s impact is more hype than reality.

Readings. There is a lot of reading – and it must be done before you come to class. The evening prior to each class session you must email me 2-3 observations/comments/or questions provoked by the reading. All chapters, essay, and articles will be available on blackboard. The following books have been ordered and are available for purchase at the bookstore.


Disclaimer: This is a survey course on the relationship between religion and global politics – it is not a survey course of the history, culture, and theology of individual religions. General background on different faith traditions are available at the Oxford series “Very Short Introductions,” which are highly accessible briefs on the history, beliefs, and practices of different religions and their primary texts. For more general background reading see: John Esposito, Darrell Fasching, and Todd Lewis, eds., Religion and Globalization (Oxford University Press, 2008); and Mark Juergenmeyer, ed., The Oxford Handbook of Global Religion (Oxford 2006); and Ted Jalen and Clyde Wilcox, Religion and Politics in Comparative Perspective (Cambridge, 2002).
Requirements. There are four written assignments in this course: a short paper; a take-home mid-course essay; two and a research paper; and a final exam. The short paper is due September 27th (see entry below for details). The mid-course essay, approximately ten pages, will ask that you grapple with the first section of the course on how we might conceive of religion in world affairs; the research paper will ask you to examine a particular event in international life with the specific task of teasing out whether and how religion contributed to the outcome. The final exam will be either take home or in-class (we will see).

Office Hours. I have office hours on Tuesdays, from 10-12, at ESIA 501J. I also am available by appointment. Email is the best way to reach me: barnett@gwu.edu. My telephone number is 202-994-9301.

Rules on Technology. The expectation is that you come to class prepared to discuss the materials. I no longer allow any technology with an “on/off” button. The one exception is if you have downloaded your readings to a computer and would like to refresh yourself with the readings and refer to them during class. However, all other uses, i.e. emailing, facebook, gaming, are strictly prohibited.

CALENDAR

August 30 Introduction

Section I:
Is There A Higher Authority than the Sovereign State?

September 1  Is There a Religious Resurgence?

When folks assert that there is a “religious resurgence,” what do they mean? What is the evidence? Is this a private or public phenomenon? Are there some regions that are experiencing an upswing?


Exercise: Go to the Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life and identify five factors that suggest that there is a religious resurgence and five factors that suggest that the world is just as religious/secular as it ever has been.

September 6  What is Religion?

What do we mean by religion? How do different scholars understand religion? What defines religion? What makes it different than other forms of belief? Does religion require the belief in a deity?

September 8  What is Religion? II

How should we think about religion in relationship to other factors that are hypothesized to have a significant impact on global life? Some say that economics drives religious, a position made most famous by Marx’s derision that religion is the opium of the masses. Does it all come down to economics? Realists might argue that religion is mere ideology, subservient to power politics. Is religion little more than a tool used by political actors?


*God’s Century*: Chap. 2

September 13 Secularization

Most of the grand social theorists of the past century believed that modernization would slowly eat away at religion, and that peoples and societies would abandon religion in favor of science, rationality, and modernity. What were they seeing? What were they imagining?


September 15 The Rise and Fall of a Secularized World?

Just when secularization seemed here to stay, religion, by all appearances, made a comeback (see our second meeting as a reminder). What were the signs? What sorts of grand historical forces were creating this global wave?


*God’s Century*, chap. 3.
September 20 Is the World Religious?

The Treaty of Westphalia is widely rumored to have put religious authority, discourse, and beliefs, in its place. But was that really the end of the story? Was Westphalia itself produced by religious forces? And, to what extent does Westphalia, the very organization of international politics, and international authority more generally have a religious basis?


September 22 Religion and American Foreign Policy, I

To what extent is American foreign policy, the foreign policy of a superpower, shaped by religious discourse and commitment? In this first meeting we will read one of the classic statements of Christian realism on American foreign policy, and in the second meeting consider whether and how religious actors shape American foreign policy – and perhaps in ways that either define or distort the American national interest.


September 27 Religion and American Foreign Policy, II


September 29 Is Religion Too Hot for IR Theory to Handle?

International relations theory has a difficult time seeing religion in world affairs. Why is this? Something about international relations theory? Is it something about how international
relations treats all deeply-held beliefs, norms, and commitments? Or is religion special? Does it even matter if the world is becoming more religious?


Section II: Religion, Violence, and Peace

October 4 Is Religion the Root of Violence? Part I


October 6 Is Religion the Root of Violence? Part II


October 11 Religion and Civil War

God’s Century, Chap. 6.

October 13 Sacred Spaces


October 18 Terrorism

Atram: Chapter 6-13
God’s Century, Chap. 5
October 20  Suicide Bombers

Atram: chapters 2, 17-20

October 25  Religion and Just War, I


October 27 Religion and Just War, II

Read Chapters 3-6.

November 1  Humanitarian Intervention


November 3  Faith-Based Humanitarianism

November 8  Religion and Conflict Resolution

Hassner, *War on Sacred Grounds*, Part Two

November 10 Religion and Peacebuilding

*God’s Century*, Chap. 7.

November 15 Religion and Democracy

*God’s Century*, chap. 4.

**Section III:**
Religion and American Foreign Policy Toward the Middle East

November 17 American Jews and Israel, I


November 22 American Jews and Israel, II


November 24 Thanksgiving Vacation

November 29 American Evangelicals and the Middle East


**December 1 U.S. Foreign Policy and Islam, I**


**December 6 U.S. Foreign Policy and Islam, II**


**December 8 Conclusion**

*God’s Century*, chap. 8.
Atram: Chap. 21.