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Religion: The One, the Few, and the Many

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Fifty years ago, many social scientists assumed that “religion in the modern world was declining and would likely to continue to decline until its eventual disappearance” (Casanova 1994, p. 25). In Western Europe levels of public religiosity had declined to low levels, and many assumed this to be the likely path of most societies. Predictions that secularism would soon sweep the United States and the rest of the world were commonplace; by the end of the millennium religion was expected to be confined primarily to less developed societies. At the very least, governments and politics were expected to be freed of the influence of religious elites and citizens.

In 2000, religion is resurgent. George Weigel (1991) argues “the unsecularization of the world is one of the dominant social facts in the late twentieth century.” Samuel Huntington (1996) argues “In the modern world, religion is a central, perhaps the central, force that motivates and mobilizes people” (p. 66). Huntington sees a religious revival underway at the end of the twentieth century based partially on recruitment but even more on the reinvigoration of religious traditions. This reinvigoration means that religion is today a source of political mobilization in many nations, and also the source of policy disputes over the relationship between church and state.

Religion is the source of some of the most remarkable political mobilizations of our times. In Iran, Islamic activists led a powerful popular revolution that brought millions of Iranians into the street in a successful effort to overthrow the Shah. Religious leaders then outmaneuvered their secular allies to establish an Islamic state headed by the Ayatollah Khomeini. Today Iran debates limits on the power of religious authorities, while at the same time activists in other countries seek to copy the Iranian revolution, or to pressure their government to pass laws more in accord with the Koran.
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In India in 1990, a Hindu nationalist leader donned a saffron-colored robe, climbed into an epic chariot, and started out to lead perhaps a million Hindu on a ten-thousand-kilometer journey. Many of those who followed wore saffron robes, and some wore costumes to resemble the monkey head of Hanuman. Each of them carried a brick, with which they would rebuild Rama’s temple on what they believed was its historic site. This was controversial, because the site was already occupied by a Muslim mosque built in the sixteenth century. Although government officials halted the march, the mosque was destroyed soon after.

In the United States, the 2000 presidential election witnessed considerable religious mobilization in a country known around the world for its separation of church and state. Republican Presidential nominee George W. Bush identified Jesus as the philosopher having the greatest influence on his life, and the Bible as his favorite book. While serving as governor of Texas after locking up the GOP nomination, Bush signed a proclamation declaring June 10, 2000 to be “Jesus Day” in Texas (Goodstein 2000). Democratic Presidential nominee Al Gore stated repeatedly that, before making important decisions, he asks himself, “What would Jesus do?” Gore named Senator Joseph Lieberman, an Orthodox Jew, as his running mate. Lieberman explicitly drew attention to his faith early in the campaign, refused to campaign on the Sabbath, and repeatedly endorsed the role of religious and spiritual values in politics (Pooley 2000), and was criticized by some Jewish leaders for injecting religion into politics.

In many nations across the world, religion is the source of important political conflicts. In Chile, the Catholic Church sought the passage of laws that would outlaw street preaching and the registration of small churches, and would limit noise levels outside of religious buildings (Gill 1998). Such measures are transparently designed to harass and restrain the growth and influence of Pentecostal churches in a nation that had previously been virtually entirely Catholic.

In Israel, a political conflict arose over the Torah-mandated practice of shmita, which ostensibly requires that the land of Israel lie fallow every seven years. In contemporary Israeli politics, Orthodox rabbis have condemned a variety of methods by which this biblical mandate has traditionally been circumvented (by selling the land to a non-Jew, or asserting that the cultivation of land during the sabbatical year is necessary for national survival). The controversy, occasioned by the proposal that shmita regulations be tightened, has exacerbated an already severe cleavage between religious traditionalists and modernists in the world’s only Jewish-majority state (Sontag 2000).

Religion can also be the source of resistance to the state. In the United States, the Supreme Court upheld a ban on the practice of publicly broad-
cast prayer at high school football games. In response, some school districts have elected to defy the Court's ruling in *Santa Fe Independent School District v. Doe* (2000), while citizens in other school districts in the American South have elected to conduct public prayers without the use of the public address system, or without the sanction of the school district (Duggan 2000).

Religion is also a source of international politics. Huntington foresees a future clash of civilizations that are defined primarily by religion and language, and thus places religion as a central force in international relations in the twenty-first century. Clearly the revitalization of religious traditions crosses international boundaries, and creates currents of world politics. Across the globe, many Islamic adherents are demanding that their government and laws adhere to religious teachings, and many national and local movements draw their inspiration from the successes of Islamic activists in Iran. Regimes in countries as diverse as Morocco, Jordan, Indonesia, Algeria, and Bangladesh have responded in different ways to this pressure.

Christian evangelists from Europe and the United States continue to spread their traditions abroad. Catholic and Presbyterian churches are winning converts from Buddhism in South Korea. Pentecostal churches are springing up throughout Central America and South America and in parts of Africa, in competition with established Catholic and other denominations. Although Pentecostals remain a minority in Central and South America, in some countries they constitute a majority of those who worship regularly. In Korea and in Latin America, these religious changes have become intertwined with politics, with the new religious traditions providing support, infrastructure, and resources for certain political forces. Baptists are making inroads in Russia, and have provoked a reaction among the Orthodox leadership. Other religious trends are confined to particular countries but have international effects: The surge in Hindu nationalism is confined to India, but its affect on tensions with Pakistan cannot be ignored.

Clearly religion has not withered away, but remains an increasingly vital force in society and politics across the globe. Yet the role of religion in political life, the conflicts between religious groups, and the issue of church and state all differ among countries.

**RELIGION AND POLITICS IN COMPARATIVE PERSPECTIVE**

The nexus between religion and politics provides an important focus for studies of comparative politics. First, certain religious traditions may provide a source of cross-national identity and identification, which may well facilitate the task of comparative political analysis. For example,
Liberation theologians in Latin America and former members of the anti-
Communist resistance in Poland profess adherence to the same Catholic
tradition, making comparisons between the politics of Brazil and Poland
potentially useful. The role of the Church in resisting democratization in
Spain and in some parts of South America also permits interesting com-
parisons, whereas these two pairs of cases make interesting contrasts in
the role of the Church in promoting democratization.

Similarly, the wide scope of Islam makes it possible to compare the
role of religion in politics in nations in which Muslims constitute a large
majority of citizens (Iran, Algeria) with areas in which Muslims are
a consequential political minority (India, Western Europe). Moreover,
regimes across the globe and across religious traditions today confront
similar challenges: how to conceive of the proper place for religious
authority in the state, how to deal with the demands of orthodox activists
of religious majorities, and how to deal with demands of religious
minorities.

Yet the sheer diversity of religious traditions, political regimes, and
their intersections poses a daunting challenge to scholars seeking to
develop cross-national generalizations about religion and politics. Reli-
gions differ in their core beliefs and theology. They even differ in the
number and nature of their gods, ranging from polytheistic religions,
such as Hinduism, to monotheistic religions, such as Christianity,
Judaism, and Islam, to arguably nontheistic religions, such as Confu-
cianism, Taoism, Shinto, and Buddhism. They differ in the attention they
devote to converting others to the faith, and to secular matters, such as
politics. Even within religious traditions there is considerable variation:
evangelical Protestants in the United States and Latin America differ theo-
logically with Protestants who dominate northern Europe.

Political regimes differ in the nature of the state, and the openness of
the state to input from various aspects of society. Democratic, authori-
tarian, totalitarian, post-totalitarian, and sultanistic regimes may estab-
lish quite different relationships with dominant and minority religious
traditions. They differ in the nature and type of authority and legitimacy,
the degree of elite and mass pluralism, in their control of important
resources, such as media and military, and in countless other dimensions.
All of these can affect the relationship between the regime and religious
groups, their openness to demands of religious majorities and minorities,
their support for secular or religious goals.

Most comparative studies of religion and politics have attempted to
manage this enormous potential diversity by focusing on one aspect of
the relationship between religion and politics. Jose Casanova’s elegant
work, Public Religions in the Modern World (1994), locates the politi-
cal context of religion in a struggle against modernity and secularism.
Casanova’s theoretical analyses provide a much needed elaboration and refinement of the concept of “secularization,” and his case studies demonstrate the various ways in which religious elites can contest or accommodate the forces of modernity. Casanova limits his analysis to the Christian West, and focused entirely on the clash between religion and secularism. This work is indispensable for anyone seeking to understand the relationship between the political and the sacred; it is less useful in helping us to understand the sources of conflict between adherents of different religious traditions.

Matthew Moen and Lowell S. Gustafson’s edited volume *The Religious Challenge to the State* (1992) is organized around the theme of religion as a source of regime opposition. The essays in that volume show the importance of the prophetic role of religion as a moral critic of the state, and of religious resources and infrastructure in helping resistance movements. Of course, in many countries religion serves to reinforce the regime and traditional sources of economic and social power in the face of such opposition. Religion clearly can serve a public purpose as a source of social cohesion and political legitimacy, as well as being a source of regime opposition.

In *The Fundamentalism Project*, Martin Marty and R. Scott Appleby attempt to examine religion and politics in a variety of contexts, using the concept “fundamentalism” (Marty and Appleby 1991). This ambitious project includes a variety of nations including the United States, most of the Islamic world, and India (Gold 1991). Yet the project also revealed the limits of imposing a single concept across a range of religions, for several of the contributors devoted substantial space to explaining why “fundamentalism” was not an adequate description of their countries or areas. Marty and Appleby suggest that the diverse movements considered “fundamentalist” in *The Fundamentalism Project* may share a Wittgensteinian “family resemblance,” and this collection tests the usefulness and limits of a theoretically tight, but possibly anachronistic, set of comparisons.

Lester Kurtz’s *Gods in the Global Village* is a sophisticated attempt to describe and explain the political roles of religion in a “modern” world, in which technology and international economic activity have rendered religious homogeneity impossible. Kurtz uses three factors to account for the existence of religious conflict. First, Kurtz suggests that the content of particular religious traditions matter. He argues that the great Western

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monotheistic traditions of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam are more fertile sources of political conflict than most Eastern traditions because monotheism renders Western religions less amenable to compromise or syncretism. This tendency is exacerbated by the existence of a written, authoritative text, from which the tradition can be renewed and from which competing interpreters of religious authenticity can draw. Second, the similarity of competing protagonists in religious conflicts may matter a great deal. For example, Kurz suggests that “heresy,” defined as theological conflict between different interpreters of the same tradition, is qualitatively different from “culture wars” conflicts, in which the plausibility of the very idea of religious dogma (as opposed to competing versions of the same dogmatic tradition) is contested. Third, the history shared by adherents of different religious traditions may render some forms of religious conflict more or less legitimate. For example, there appears to exist no Buddhist or Confucian equivalent of the Judaic stories of bondage and Egypt, or religiously legitimate warfare to secure the “Promised Land”; nor do Eastern traditions contain ideas similar to the Muslim concept of Jihad. Thus, Kurz provides some intriguing categories within which religious conflict or cooperation can usefully be compared. Kurz generates some generalizations that can be explored with the cases that follow. Kurz does not, in the final analysis, produce a genuinely propositional theory as much as a list of priority variables, which may serve future theoretical efforts in this area.

The Gustavo Benavides and M. W. Daly volume, Religion and Political Power, has a very wide theoretical and geographical scope, and contains some superlative case studies. The editors and contributors are quite sensitive to the nuances involved in conceptualizing and describing such abstract concepts as “power” and “religion.” Moreover, the case studies exhibit an impressive cultural diversity, as they range across the Sudan, Sri Lanka, the United States, Peru, Iran, the former Soviet Union, and the People’s Republic of China. The focus of these essays is somewhat narrow (for example, women’s roles in Iran, the political thought of Caesar Chavez), and the individual studies are left uninterpreted.

Taken together, these works show us that the comparative study of religion and politics is important, and that single theories such as secularization, single foci, such as regime opposition, or single concepts, such as fundamentalism, can provide us with a rich understanding of some facets of this relationship. Yet thus far no single theory, focus, or concept has proven useful in understanding the interaction of the sacred and the secular in all countries.

In this book, we have invited a number of experts to describe religious politics in the countries or regions of their specialization. We have asked the contributors to describe the religious composition of the
country or region, the political regime(s), and their interaction. We have
not imposed any single theory, focus, or concept on these cases, but have
invited instead the authors to concentrate on the most important ele-
ments of religion and politics in each country or region. These cases can
provide data to help develop theories and refine concepts that might be
useful in cross-national research on religion and politics.

One of our goals in this volume is to provide a preliminary set of
categories through which religious politics in different settings can be
compared and contrasted, while remaining faithful to the particular cir-
cumstances, history, and institutions in particular nations and regions.
In this introductory chapter, we offer a general description of what might
be termed the “dependent variable”: the nature of religious politics in
particular settings. We seek to understand where, whether, and how reli-
gion can serve as a source of political cohesion or conflict, as well as the
differing forms religious conflict may take.

We also offer here a preliminary description of the “independent
variables” that may affect the nature of religious politics in diverse cir-
cumstances. We suggest at the outset that the “style” of interaction (or
noninteraction) between the sacred and the secular public sphere is likely
to be a function of two general variables: the structure of religious
markets, and the content and application of different religious belief
systems.

THE NATURE OF RELIGIOUS CONTROVERSY
AND CONSENSUS

Our first task in this comparative enterprise is to suggest a set of dimen-
sions along which religious politics can vary across national settings, and
to provide a general description of the types of issues that animate reli-
gious politics in different nations and cultures. As a conceptual starting
point, we divide political roles of religion into two general categories:
\textit{priestly} religious politics, in which church and state may stand in a mutu-
ally supportive relationship to one another, and \textit{prophetic} religious
politics, in which political and religious authority may assume opposed
or independent roles (Lege 1993).\footnote{In U.S. politics, this distinction

\cite{Lege:1993}.}

Priestly religions may enhance or legitimate political authority in a
variety of ways. National or subnational regimes may support particu-
lar religions (or may support religious values more generally) in a variety
of ways. At one extreme, governments may establish official national
religions, such as Islam in Iran, Catholicism in Spain and Ireland,
Lutheranism in Sweden, or Anglicanism in England. These national

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\footnote{In U.S. politics, this distinction corresponds approximately to the “establishment” and “free exercise” clauses of the First Amendment to the U.S. Constitution.}
churches may serve as the source of national identity or regime legitimacy. The national identities of Ireland, Spain, Poland, and many South American countries are tied up with Catholicism; Islam is the very basis of the Iranian state. Judaism is the basis of Israel as well, although it is not an official state religion. Under certain circumstances (perhaps most frequently in situations of regime change, or as a component of independence movements) it may indeed be difficult to distinguish identification with a particular religious tradition (or, to use a Christian anachronism, “discipleship”) from citizenship in a state or nation. In the case of Iran, Islam is not only the source of national identity, but a fundamental basis of politics. Sussan Siavoshi notes in her chapter, religious authorities are granted enormous power in the Iranian constitution, but other provisions of that document have opened up a lively debate over authoritarian and democratic impulses.

Some nations have not endorsed a national religion, but provide financial subsidies to religious bodies, such as public funding for religious schools. These subsidies may exist only for the dominant religion in the state, for some but not all religions, or for all religions. In the United States, the current controversy over government-funded “vouchers” for private schools has been embroiled in a controversy over whether such indirect government assistance to private schools (most of which are religious) violates the establishment clause of the U.S. Constitution (Jelen and Wilcox 1995; Jelen 2000). However, Monsma and Soper (1999) have shown that the United States is an outlier in this regard, and that many multiparty democracies in fact provide direct or indirect support for religious education. More generally, many Western-style regimes provide a publicly supported space within which members of particular religions can enjoy a certain level of autonomy. Thus even in Lutheran Sweden, Catholics are free to practice their religion, and may establish Catholic schools and charities.

The studies in this book suggest that there are important consequences when religion becomes an important part of regime and national identity. First, a commitment to a shared set of religious symbols or doctrines may be an extremely valuable political resource in times of political upheaval. It seems unlikely that phenomena as diverse as Indian independence in the late 1940s, the fall of the Shah of Iran in 1979, or the demise of Polish communism in the 1990s could have occurred without the leadership provided by elites who invoked specifically religious values. While there are obviously important differences between Mahatma Ghandi, Ayatollah Khomieni, and Pope John Paul II, all three of these religious leaders stand as strong testaments to the power of religion to transform important parts of the world.
Religion: The One, the Few, and the Many

Second, some of the chapters that follow suggest that religious identity is often a more potent source of change than of stability. The cases of Poland, Iran, and India suggest that religiously based regimes are subject to competition from both religious and secular sources of opposition. Moreover, in certain settings, such as Spain, Portugal, Chile, and Argentina, a religious tradition (in these cases, Catholicism) may be associated with a discredited former regime. Such associations may undermine both the Church’s authority in matters religious, as well as the ability of religion to serve as a source of political legitimacy.

By contrast, the prophetic role of religion assumes that religion can assert a certain level of autonomy and independence from political authority. The apparent simplicity of the biblical admonition to “render unto Caesar that which is Caesar’s, and to God that which is God’s” may not take into account the fact that jurisdiction over some matters (such as education, marriage, and charity) is often contested between the two realms. In many countries in which more than one religion is practiced, disputes over the autonomy of religious belief and practice are quite common. In the United States the Supreme Court has ruled on a wide array of issues, including the rights of religious groups to avoid military service, to refuse to salute the flag in public schools, to be exempt from laws governing the use of peyote, and to practice animal sacrifice. In 1994, a number of Muslim schoolgirls were expelled from French public schools for wearing head scarves mandated by their religion (Bader 2000). A number of European countries have restricted the religious liberty of so-called cults (such as the Church of Scientology) on the basis of the theory that such religious bodies engage in “brainwashing” (Richardson and Introvigne 2001).

Issues involving individual religious freedom, or the autonomy of minority religious traditions, pose a number of interesting questions. Religious liberty is never absolute, and although there are some prohibitions common to all nations (human sacrifice, for example) the range of limitations on religious freedom is large. In some cases, actual religious worship is prohibited, and members of particular faiths are persecuted. In China, the religious movement Falun Gong has been banned

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3 This refers to the Supreme Court’s decision in Employment Division v. Smith, in which the Court upheld the application of a controlled substances statute to Native Americans who used peyote for sacramental purposes. Since Smith, Congress has permitted the use of peyote for religious purposes in all fifty states. However, such a ruling does not affect the decision in Smith, which specifically contemplates legislative discretion in this area. However, the enactment by Congress of an exemption falls well short of the assertion of a constitutional right, which presumably would lie beyond the reach of popularly elected legislatures.
by the state and is actively harassed. The Iranian government persecuted Baha’ais, sending many to prison. In other cases, religious groups face barriers to organization and worship, but no clear bans. In Latin America some regulations make it difficult for Pentecostal churches to organize.

Other limitations are on the ability to practice religion publicly, or to display religious identification in visible symbols. In France, religious attire in schools is forbidden in an effort to build a national identity. In the United States, Orthodox Jews were once prohibited from wearing headgear under their helmets because of alleged threats to military discipline. In some nations public rallies of religious groups are banned, but not the private practice of that faith.

Many religious minorities are denied exemption from secular laws even if those laws clash with particular faiths, or make religious activity more difficult. Recently, the U.S. Supreme Court rejected a plea by a Catholic Church to expand the seating capacity of its sanctuary in a violation of zoning ordinances, and local county officials in a suburban county near Washington, D.C. denied Muslim groups exemptions from certain land use requirements to build a mosque.

In other cases, however, religious groups are permitted to disobey certain secular laws that conflict with their faith. The most striking example in this volume is that of India, where national laws on marriage, divorce, alimony, and custody do not apply to Muslims, who instead are governed by their own family law. In this case, the rights of Indian women differ by religious tradition, a source of great conflict in the country. In the United States, members of some religious faiths are exempt from mandatory military service, as are Ultraorthodox Jews engaged in fulltime religious study in Israel.

Another question posed by the matter of religious liberty is whether the denial of a governmental benefit to a religious body counts as a restriction on religious freedom. In the United States, the persistent question of private school vouchers poses the tension between religious establishment and free exercise rather starkly. Would the granting of such vouchers to the parents of children attending private schools (most of which are religious) constitute an unlawful “establishment” of religion, or does withholding such assistance inhibit the “free exercise” of religion? (See Jelen 2000 for a more detailed analysis of this question). Monsma and Soper (1997) argue for the latter position, and compare

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4 In 1988, Congress permitted the wearing of religious symbols in military uniform, thus overruling the Supreme Court’s decision in Goldman v. Weinberger. As was observed with respect to the issue of sacramental use of hallucinogenic drugs, there remains an important distinction between a an act of legislative discretion and the assertion of a fundamental constitutional right.