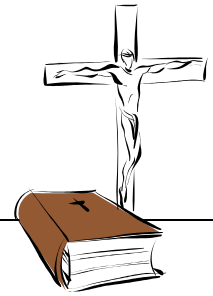


Religion in Politics



Religion and politics have long intertwined, and the relationship has often been mutually beneficial for religion and state. Religions and their institutions have sometimes needed state protection to survive and grow. Equally, states have needed religion to guide and justify their actions and sometimes morally endorse their policies.

Eastern Religions and Politics

Many religions have been born in the East, most notably Hinduism, Confucianism, and Buddhism. Since their rise in Asia, the influence of all three religions has spread worldwide through missionaries and scholars and, in recent decades, through increased immigration.

Hinduism, the oldest of major world religions, originated in India around 1500 BCE. The Persian word “Hindu” originally described people who lived in the Indus River valley of northwest India. Later, the word was used to describe a belief system. Hinduism has no founder but has many roots and branches. It has influenced and been influenced by other religions. Between 300 and 1200 CE, Hinduism introduced temples, rituals, and vernacular (commonly spoken) languages for worship.

Hindus believe in a single divinity that is present in everything, and in successive reincarnations of the soul. Ultimate reality, or *brahman*, is the life force of the universe: gods and humans, plants and animals, all share in its essence. Through reincarnation, at death a soul passes from one body to another—for example, from a human body to the body of an insect or animal. Good actions in this life lead to a better situation in the next incarnation, while bad actions lead to a worse situation or a lower incarnation. Hinduism lays out individual rights and duties and rules governing diet, family, **caste** (hereditary social class), and politics. Because the cosmic order is mirrored in the smallest details of daily life, all decisions—including political ones—are considered religious decisions in some sense. For example, since *brahman* is present in all life, all living creatures are sacred and must not be harmed. The doctrine of non-violence, or *ahimsa*, was the basis for Mahatma Gandhi’s use of **civil disobedience** against British rule before India gained independence in 1947. Some Hindus opposed Gandhi, particularly his efforts to abolish the “untouchability” of the lowest caste.

Confucianism is named for the Chinese philosopher and political theorist Confucius (551–449 BCE), who evolved a system of “right living” known as *ren*, or humaneness because he was distressed by the upheaval and political oppression of his times. Confucius taught rulers in various states, advising them to act humanely toward their subjects. An inhumane ruler ran the risk of losing the mandate of heaven and thus the right to rule. As preserved by his disciples in the *Analects*, the sayings of Confucius became a guide for wise government, emphasizing ritual behaviour, family loyalty, and *ren*.

Confucianism became part of the Chinese way of life. There were no priests; instead, parents, teachers, and government officials were the guardians of this **civic religion**. For Confucius, social courtesies and etiquette were important rituals. All human relationships involved defined roles and mutual obligations. In the social hierarchy, men took precedence over women, elders over youth, and fathers over sons. Some Chinese governments gave awards based on Confucian precepts. Thus, obedient sons and wives were honoured. The Confucian emphasis on parental respect contributed to a strong family unit, a basic component of stable governments. With its emphasis on ritual and family, Confucianism preserved the status quo. During the Han dynasty (206 BCE–220 CE), Confucianism became a state ideology and contributed to the stability of this longest-reigning dynasty.

The Confucian concept of *ren*, or humaneness, required that personal conscience and character be cultivated through education and reflection. Respect and honour were expected of all members of society. *Ren* charged ritual with ethical content, giving it meaning. Confucianism encouraged followers to strive for perfection. Emperor Tang Taizong (629–649 CE) introduced a civil service examination system that was based on Confucian principles. The Chinese bureaucracy comprised the most accomplished and ethical Confucian scholars.

During the Tang Dynasty (618–907 CE), Confucianism encouraged **egalitarianism** (the promotion of equality). An underlying principle of Confucianism was that a person acquires nobility not by birth but through lifelong education and the development of *ren*. Confucianism coexisted with other religions that entered China after the collapse of the Han dynasty (206 BCE–220 CE). Buddhism came to China from India, and its emphasis on harmonizing human desires contributed to the internal stability and peace of the Tang and Song (960–1279 CE) dynasties.

Taoism, a religion that emphasizes spontaneity and individual freedom, complemented Confucian concerns about moral duties and governmental responsibilities. The three creeds combined to allow the development of a dynamic government structure that was grounded in personal responsibility and social harmony. Confucianism remained the intellectual and ethical backbone of Chinese governments for centuries, until the victory of rebel leader **Mao Zedong** and the Communist Party in 1949, when the state outlawed all religions.

Buddhism has a single founder: Siddhartha Gautama (ca. 563–483 BCE). Siddhartha was born a prince in what is now Nepal. On a spiritual quest through India, he came to believe that enlightenment was to be found in the Middle Way, the path that lies between indulgence and asceticism (rigid self-discipline). Siddhartha adopted many Hindu teachings, such as the practice of meditation to still the mind and the doctrine of *ahimsa*, non-violence. As Gautama Buddha, the “enlightened one,” he preached compassion and kindness toward all beings. Siddhartha’s initial teachings are known as Hinayana Buddhism, the “lesser vehicle,” which emphasizes individual attainment. The Mahayana (“greater vehicle”) school, which arose around 100 CE, practises Buddhist teachings to benefit all beings. It emphasizes forgoing one’s personal enlightenment in favour of helping others attain it. In the 7th century CE, the Vajrayana (“diamond vehicle”) school blended Mahayana teachings with ancient Hindu practices in which all daily activities are dedicated to universal enlightenment.

A “buddha” is someone who has awakened to the true nature of universal cause and effect, and whose awareness transcends birth, suffering, and death. In the Buddhist tradition, anyone may attain this enlightenment through Buddhist practice and teachings.

The Emperor Ashoka (ca. 273–232 BCE) united India by conquest but then accepted Buddhism and its **pacifist** philosophy of non-violence. Buddhism became the **state religion** and grew with government support and protection. Ashoka built monasteries and sent missionaries throughout India and to Egypt, Greece, and Syria. This raised Buddhism from a simple Indian sect to a world religion. After Ashoka’s death, Buddhism declined in India but remained influential elsewhere.

In the 1st century CE, missionaries carried Buddhism to China. Mahayana Buddhism appealed to the Confucian worldview by placing new emphasis on texts that stressed family loyalty. It also taught that individual enlightenment contributed to the common good. In this way, Buddhism was recognized and adopted by several emperors. From about the 3rd century CE, Buddhism spread further beyond India and was adapted to suit local cultures.

Today, Hinayana Buddhism is found in Sri Lanka, Thailand, Myanmar, and Cambodia; Mahayana in China, Japan, Vietnam, and Korea; and Vajrayana in Tibet, Mongolia, and Japan. In 1959, persecution by the Chinese government led the leader of Tibetan Buddhism, the Dalai Lama, and thousands of his followers to flee the country. The resulting **diaspora** (forced abandonment of a homeland by an ethnic group and its dispersal among other countries) has spread Tibetan Buddhism around the world.

Western Religion and Politics

Of the many religions to arise in the West, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam have the greatest number of adherents and have had the greatest political impact. All three religions believe in a single, all-powerful God who created the universe and gave human beings souls. The Qur’an, the holy book of Islam, acknowledges the kinship among the three traditions by designating Jews, Christians, and Muslims *ahl ul-kitab*, or “People of the Book.”

Judaism is the religion whose followers are generally members of an ethnic group that originally lived in the area known today as Israel. The government of the Jewish people was destroyed by Roman conquest in 70 CE, when the Romans demolished the Temple of Jerusalem. As a consequence, Jewish people dispersed throughout the world in what became known as the Diaspora. Because they had no territorial homeland for almost two centuries after the Roman conquest, Jewish communities developed their own informal political structures. Often these were rooted in religion. For example, a court of rabbis (Jewish religious leaders) settled community disputes. Religion also shaped educational and charitable institutions. Many Jews maintained a strong sense of cultural identity despite the Diaspora. Rabbis continued to teach that Jerusalem was the centre of the world and that the Jews would someday return to their homeland.

Rabbinical interpretations of the Torah, or “God’s Law,” helped maintain the social structure and rituals of Jewish communities. Scattered across North Africa, Europe, and Asia, Jewish people achieved success and prominence in such professions as medicine, astronomy, trade, and banking. Many host countries viewed Jewish people as transients and restricted the right of Jews to own land. As a result, the traditional Jewish connection to agriculture was weakened.

Anti-Semitism

In some parts of the world, particularly Muslim countries, Jews historically enjoyed relative political and religious freedom. In most countries, however, they were viewed as outsiders and often treated with hostility. Although Jews and Arabs are both Semitic peoples, the term “anti-Semitic” has come to mean hatred of the Jewish people. The term first appeared in 1880s Germany, but such prejudice and persecution had existed for more than 2,000 years. As early as the Greco-Roman period (332 BCE–395 CE), Jewish people were often perceived as rejecting assimilation into the dominant culture.

After the Roman conquest (70 CE), Jews were unwelcome in some host countries and socially and politically isolated. Not only were Jews prohibited from owning land in many countries; work choices were also restricted. As a result, Jews entered such unpopular professions as tax collecting and money lending. Over time, the animosity directed toward these professions became focused on the Jewish people. Sometimes people of different faiths saw Judaism as a rival religion. For a time, Christianity held the Jewish people responsible for the death of Jesus Christ. In the Middle Ages (5th–15th centuries CE), the Catholic Church condemned usury (the charging of interest on loans) as sinful; Judaism had no such prohibition. When Jewish bankers charged interest on loans, all Jewish people suffered from the resulting prejudice. Many European Jews migrated to Poland to escape persecution during the Middle Ages. But after Russia seized control of a portion of Poland in the late 18th century, it viewed the large Jewish population as a threat to its power. The Russian government organized pogroms (violent attacks against a minority group), portraying the Jews as enemies and inciting nationalistic and religious fanaticism.

The worst expression of anti-Semitism occurred during the **Holocaust** (1933–45), when the German Nazi regime killed 6 million Jewish people. Adolf **Hitler** exploited anti-Semitism in his rise to power and later called for a “final solution to the Jewish question.” Jews in Germany and in the countries that fell to the Nazis had their possessions seized by the state. They were forced to wear yellow stars, rounded up, and finally imprisoned and systematically killed in concentration and extermination camps. The Holocaust obliterated Jewish secular and religious life in Europe.

Catholicism and the Roman Catholic Church is led by the pope (from the Latin word for “father”), who is seen as the successor to Saint Peter as Christ’s representative on Earth. This claim is accepted only by Roman Catholics. Papal authority was established in the West during the first five centuries of the Common Era. The refusal of the Eastern churches to accept the authority of the Roman pope resulted in the Great Schism of 1054.

The Western Church

During the Middle Ages, the authority of the Roman Catholic pope was as great as or greater than the power of secular monarchs. The power of excommunication – excluding a person from the sacraments of the Church – was the most powerful step a pope could take. To a believer, it meant eternal damnation. In Spain and France, governments used Catholicism to their political advantage. In the late 15th century, for example, the Spanish Inquisition rooted out heretics (dissenters), often Jewish and Muslim citizens who were found guilty of practicing their own religions after being forced by the state to convert to Catholicism. King Ferdinand's treasury was filled with the property of heretics who fled the country or who were imprisoned or executed.

The Roman Catholic Church continued to influence social and political life through its leadership and teachings. It established denominational schools and discouraged divorce and abortion. In the late 19th century during a period of deep social unrest, the Church encouraged trade unions and issued encyclicals (papal letters to bishops) directing governments to provide for working people and the poor. At the same time, it spoke out against the dangers of socialism.

A century later, in 1981, and then in 1991, Pope John Paul II criticized the inadequacies and injustices of both **capitalism** and **communism**. He spoke out against the imposition of martial law in communist Poland, his homeland, in 1981 and quietly used Church resources to support the banned pro-democracy Solidarity movement. Many historians and political analysts suggest that these acts contributed to the collapse of communism and the end of the Cold War.

The Eastern Church

When the Christian emperor Constantine moved the capital of the Roman Empire to Constantinople in 330 CE, he created two political and religious centres. The language of the Eastern, or Byzantine, Empire was Greek; the language of the Western Empire, centred in Rome, was Latin. In each sphere the Catholic Church developed different traditions in music, art, architecture, ritual, and government.

With the collapse of the Roman Empire in the 5th century, the pope gained political power in the West. During the 7th and 8th centuries, Muslims conquered much of the Byzantine Empire, which reduced the power of the Catholic patriarchs (leaders) in the East. When the pope tried to exert power over Eastern Catholics from Rome, a schism (division) split the Catholic Church. Rejecting papal superiority, Eastern Christians saw themselves as orthodox, or carriers of the original Church's traditions. The Eastern Church maintained its own doctrines, which differed from those of the West. In 1054, the leaders of Rome and Constantinople excommunicated each other and the Great Schism was complete. Tensions between the two sides increased to the point where the Roman pope sanctioned Crusaders to destroy Constantinople in 1204.

Missionaries from the Eastern Orthodox Church converted many of the Slavic people of Eastern Europe and Russia beginning as early as the 9th century. When the Byzantine Empire fell to the Ottoman Turks in 1453, some believers viewed Russia as the new base for the Eastern Orthodox religion. From 988 to 1917, the Orthodox Church was the state religion of Russia. In recent years, Pope John Paul II travelled to Egypt, Syria, Ukraine, and Kazakhstan and received Patriarch Bartholomew I of Constantinople in Rome. These attempts at reconciliation between the Eastern and Western branches of Catholicism remain inconclusive.

“**Islam**” is an Arabic word that means “submission.” A follower of Islam is called a “Muslim,” which means “one who submits to the will of Allah.” Muhammad (570–632 CE) taught that he was a messenger of Allah (God) and that he recorded the word of Allah, as conveyed to him by the angel Gabriel, in the Qur’an, the holy book of Islam. The introduction of Islam by the prophet Muhammad in the 7th century CE had an immediate impact in the Arab world and helped unite warring tribes. Islam soon spread to other parts of the world.

In Islamic states, religion and government were inseparable. The state was expected to provide an environment for the practice of religion, and people were entitled to depose a leader who failed to do so. Historically, the Qur’an influenced government structure by advocating human dignity, righteous living, moral responsibility, and social justice. For example, while discrimination against Jews was common in medieval Christian lands, it rarely arose in Muslim regions. Muslim governments also did not discriminate on the basis of race or class. With the spread of Islam throughout the Arab world, women were given legal status and protection.

In Islam, the concept of nation was less important than religious belief; thus, by the 8th century, the Muslim Empire, united by religion, stretched from North Africa to Asia. Invaders in the 11th century brought Islam to India. In the early 16th century, the Turkic conqueror Babur created the Mughal (or Mogul) Empire in India. Many of Babur’s subjects, including high-ranking officials, followed Hinduism, but the empire itself was Islamic. The Hindu population and its bureaucracy coexisted with the Muslim elements of the Mughal Empire.

After the Muslim conquest of Palestine, leaders in Christian Europe feared that pilgrimages to the holy sites of Jerusalem, Nazareth, and Bethlehem might be blocked. From the 11th to the 13th centuries, popes sanctioned “holy wars” to regain control of the “holy land” from Muslim governments. These military campaigns were called Crusades, and Christians who participated in them were promised eternal salvation. In the Muslim world, the Crusades were viewed as a savage attack on Islam. Historians agree that the Crusades often degenerated into economic plunder and barbaric attacks on civilian Muslim populations.

Today, many people perceive Islam to be inherently political, allowing for no separation of mosque and state. Other commentators state that militant Muslim groups that advocate political violence contradict Islam’s traditional teachings and fail to carry its message of peace and harmony. For most Muslims, the *jihad* (holy war) described in the Qur’an is the ongoing inner struggle of conscience to be a better Muslim, not an outer struggle against a political or religious enemy.

Islam remains a major political force in the regions of the former Mughal Empire, from Morocco to Indonesia. After Christianity, it has the largest number of adherents of any religion in the world. Islam is also growing faster than any other religion, as immigration helps spread it around the world.

Protestantism is the politics of dissent. In the 16th century, a number of European religious thinkers opposed the power of the Roman Catholic Church and demanded reforms. The movement they led became known as the **Protestant Reformation**, and the Protestant creeds that resulted were often supported by governments. In Germany, Martin **Luther** (1483–1546) translated the Latin Bible into German, which appealed to German **nationalism**. It marked the first time the Bible had been printed in a vernacular language. The new technology of the Gutenberg printing press allowed Luther's reformist writings to be mass-produced, making them widely available to common people. In England, under King Henry VIII, parliament stripped the Roman Catholic pope of his authority through the *Act of Supremacy* (1534). This made the Church of England the **state church**, with the king (or queen) its supreme head.

In both Germany and England, governments encouraged new religious organizations and beliefs. Often, however, this strategy had more to do with gaining political power and Roman Catholic assets—monasteries, art, and lands—than with religious faith. Civil authorities who wanted to stop the flow of taxes to Rome also found wide support in the rising middle classes.

The religious teachings of John **Calvin** (1509–64) appealed to the middle classes as well. Calvinism taught that an elect group of hardworking people would go to heaven and that worldly success was a sign of God's favour. German sociologist Max Weber (1864–1920) later described this philosophy as the "Protestant work ethic." Under John Knox (ca. 1514–72), Calvinism evolved into Presbyterianism and became Scotland's official religion. Calvinism established strong roots in The Netherlands and, for a time, in France. Calvinist beliefs blended well with middle-class ideals of material success, values that the governments of Scotland and the Netherlands were eager to nurture.

The Puritan sect, which evolved from Calvinism, established a **theocracy** (in which religious law is dominant over civil law) in the Massachusetts Bay Colony in the 17th century. The Puritan community elected its officials, but only white, male members of the Puritan Church could vote. It was the duty of elected officials to serve God by supervising the moral and physical improvement of the society. For example, they devised specific punishments for spousal quarrels, adultery, and eventually, witchcraft. Citizens who desired religious freedom were expelled from the colony.

As new Protestant denominations emerged, many became intertwined with political institutions. Anglicanism became the state religion in England. The Lutheran Church became the state church in Norway, Iceland, and Denmark (where it remains so to this day). For a time, the Calvinist Dutch Reformed Church was the state church of The Netherlands. State churches receive special status from government, which may or may not include state financial support and official political functions.

Some Protestant denominations acted as political voices of conscience. The Society of Friends, or Quakers, founded by George Fox in the 17th century, rejected the state power of the Church of England. Fox taught that all people possess the same "inner light," or divine presence. Quaker teachings emphasize equality between sexes and races, and oppose war. Quakers were among the early activists seeking the abolition of slavery, prison reform, female **suffrage**, and world peace.

In general, Protestantism rejected the hierarchical structure of the Roman Catholic Church and the role of priests as intermediaries to God. Protestant reformers viewed every believer as a priest who could read the scriptures and reconcile directly with God through faith. This humanist outlook made Protestantism well suited to the movement toward political **democracy** in the 19th and 20th centuries.

Religious Fundamentalism

"**Fundamentalism**" is a morally charged, emotive term, often used as a term of opprobrium, particularly in combination with other epithets (as in the phrase "Muslim fundamentalists" and "right-wing fundamentalists"). Very often religious fundamentalists, in all religions, are politically aware.

In Christianity, fundamentalists feel that legal and government processes must recognise the way of life they see as prescribed by God and set forth in Scripture. The state must be subservient to God, in their eyes: this, however is a basic belief of most religions, even if their practitioners do not insist upon it.

Most 'Christian' countries went, or are also going through, a similar stage in their development. The governments of many Muslim countries, such as Iran and Saudi Arabia, are Islamic, and include people with fundamentalist beliefs. More secular politicians are often to be found working in opposition movements in these countries. Christian fundamentalism is most prevalent in the politics of northern Ireland.

The degree of state backing of a state religion varies, from mere endorsement and financial support, with freedom for other faiths to practice, to prohibiting any competing church from operating and persecuting the followers of other churches. In Europe, competition between Catholic and Protestant denominations for state sponsorship in the 16th century evolved the principle *cuius regio eius religio* embodied in the text of the treaty that marked the Peace of Augsburg, 1555. This basically means that the religion of the king or other ruler in a particular area would be the religion of the people.

There are numerous countries in the world with official religions, recognizing one of the Roman Catholic, Orthodox, Lutheran, Anglican, Islamic, Buddhist, Hindu, and Jewish religions.

Secularism

In government, **secularism** is a policy of avoiding entanglement between government and religion (ranging from reducing ties to a state church to promoting secularism in society), of non-discrimination among religions (providing they don't deny primacy of civil laws), and of guaranteeing human rights of all citizens, regardless of the creed (and, if conflicting with certain religious rules, by imposing priority of the universal human rights).

Disestablishment is the process of divesting a church of its status as an organ of the state. In Britain there was a campaign by Liberals, dissenters and nonconformists to disestablish the Church of England in the late 19th century; it failed in England, but demands for the measure persist to this day. Those who wish to continue with an established church take a position of **antidisestablishmentarianism** (!). The First Amendment to the US Constitution explicitly bans the federal government from setting up a state church.

Individuals in Politics and Religion

Religious leaders and thinkers have been powerful voices of conscience in the secular world of politics. Many individuals have been guided by religious principles that reject violence and emphasize love of humanity and compassion as a means to create a better society. You may be interested in researching the interplay of politics and religion of one or more of these individuals as part of an independent study:

- Mahatma Gandhi and Indian Nationalism
- Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Anti-Nazism
- Mother Teresa and the Politics of Poverty
- The Dalai Lama and the Defence of Tibet
- Archbishop Desmond Tutu and Apartheid

Religion in Politics Today

Religion plays a significant role in politics in many different parts of the world, and you may wish to explore their connections in one of the following case studies as part of an independent study:

- Ireland and Northern Ireland (UK)
- India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh
- Israel and Palestine
- China
- Iran

Separation of Church and State

An important development in modern politics is the philosophy that organized religion and government should be kept separate. At the constitutional, or structural, level of government, the separation may be clear. Legislative and other governmental bodies, for example, are physically distinct from religious institutions. However, at the everyday level, religious beliefs frequently impinge on political procedures and decision making.

Should a legislative session open with a prayer? Should church property be exempt from taxation? Should religious symbols be allowed in public schools and government offices? Should religious beliefs have precedence over human rights legislation? Many governments have struggled to find answers to questions such as these (e.g. France, Canada, and the United States).

Religion in Politics Questions

1. Explain why in Hinduism every political decision is also a religious decision.
2. In what ways was Confucianism an indispensable component of political stability in China?
3. How was Buddhism adopted and adapted by several Chinese emperors and the governments of various dynasties?
4. How did the Jewish people maintain their cultural identity despite the Diaspora?
5. Why were Jews often isolated socially and politically?
6. Describe the relationship between the Roman Catholic Church and Henry IV of Germany, Ferdinand of Spain, and Louis XIV of France.
7. Why did the Catholic Church split into the Western and Eastern churches?
8. What is the relationship between religion and government in Islam?
9. Why did Calvinism appeal to the middle classes?
10. How did the Protestant Reformation affect the relationship between church and state?