CHAPTER 5

How do religious beliefs affect politics?

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What do we mean when we talk about religion? Scholars have struggled and argued for many years about how to define religion. Some emphasize the idea that religion is concerned primarily with conceptions of God, divinity and the meaning and order of human existence. Others have tended to emphasize the way religion serves to draw distinctions between sacred (that is, transcendent or other-worldly) forms of space and belief and more mundane, or profane, domains of ‘worldly’ human endeavour. Some definitions, such as that of anthropologist Clifford Geertz (1973), focus on the symbolic power of religion and its ability to influence how people understand their place in the world and also to impart...
meaning to the actions they undertake. Other scholars have pointed out that the idea of religion as a distinct category or sphere of human activity reflects a specifically Western worldview and historical tradition. Talal Asad (1993) points out that in other cultural traditions it is not so easy to make a firm separation between religion and other spheres of life such as politics, culture, society and economics. This point will be important later when we discuss the meaning and nature of secularism, the belief that the state and morals should be independent of religion. For now, however, let us assume that when we are talking about religion we are referring to individuals and groups who base their identities and ethics at least in part on a tradition and set of beliefs about the creation of the world and the order within it that locates the source of this creation and order outside purely human or natural agency.

So where do we see religion at work in global politics today? Many people if asked this question right now might think first and foremost of the Islamic world. Particularly since the events of September 11, 2001 – when hijackers associated with the terrorist group Al-Qaeda flew aeroplanes into several targets in New York City and Washington, DC – and subsequent attacks such as the London bombings of 7 July 2005, Islam has been a major subject of discussion. Much of this debate has been around questions of terrorism and support for violence. The United States, for example, declared militant Islamic extremism to be the major target of its new ‘war on terror’. Considerable attention has also been paid to Islamic movements in other countries that have used violence in the pursuit of their political goals, such as HAMAS in the Palestinian territories and Hizbullah in Lebanon. Other examples where Islam or ‘Islamic’ groups have been seen to

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**BOX 5.1 DEFINITIONS OF RELIGION**

For anthropologist Clifford Geertz, religion is ‘(1) a system of symbols which acts to (2) establish powerful, pervasive, and long-lasting moods and motivations in men by (3) formulating conceptions of a general order of existence and (4) clothing these conceptions with such an aura of factuality that (5) the moods and motivations seem uniquely realistic’ (Geertz 1973).

For theologian George Lindbeck, religion is ‘a kind of cultural and/or linguistic framework or medium that . . . makes possible the description of realities, the formulation of beliefs, and the experiencing of inner attitudes, feelings, and sentiments’ (Lindbeck 1984).

Marxist writers such as Louis Althusser tend to emphasize the idea that religion functions as a form of ‘false consciousness’ which socializes us into accepting as normal certain historically and materially contingent relations of social power (Althusser 2001).
play a role in world politics include the period when Afghanistan was under the rule of a highly conservative movement known as the Taliban. Well before the United States accused and eventually overthrew their regime for supporting terrorism, the Taliban had attracted widespread criticism from the world community for violating human rights and for their harsh treatment of women. Finally, countries such as Iran, which regard themselves as Islamic states, are seen by some as a challenge when they assert that they are subject to divine authority. Within Europe, a number of recent incidents such as the Danish cartoon affair have fuelled debates about whether ‘religious’ Muslims and ‘secular’ Europeans can co-exist peacefully.

Despite the current tendency to focus on the Islamic world, there are many other examples where religion seems to play a role in global politics. A number of recent conflicts have had strong religious dimensions. Think, for example, of Northern Ireland, where the divisions between the two conflicting sides broke down along
the Protestant and Catholic denominations of Christianity. For more than twenty years, Sri Lanka has seen a civil war pitting Hindus and Buddhists against each other. In the former Yugoslavia, much of the bloodshed in the 1990s was explained in terms of ethnic rivalries between Catholic and Orthodox Christians as much as between Christians and Muslims. While many of the participants in these conflicts did not define their actions and motivations by direct reference to religion, the religious factor was important because it allowed the leadership of certain parties to raise the stakes by appealing to a greater cause. Religion is also present in world politics in ways far less dramatic and violent. For example, millions of Catholics around the world recognize the spiritual authority of the Pope as the final arbiter, globally, of matters relating to Church doctrine. We can also see today the role of various religious groups in seeking to build new bases of mass popular support, such as the recent upsurge in conversions to Pentecostal Christianity in Africa. The strength of the Christian Evangelical movement in the United States has been a major factor in the political success of that country’s Republican party in recent years. The United States represents a very interesting case in which church and state are formally separated, but where religion features very heavily in political discourse. This has led some, such as the political theorist William Connolly (2005), to see in the United States a new form of theocracy (that is, government by religion) premised on affinities between belief in God and absolute faith in market capitalism. Religious institutions can sometimes also form alliances of the sort traditionally seen in global politics. For example, at the United Nations International Conference on Population and Development in 1994, the Vatican (the authority of the Catholic Pope) sought to make common cause with a number of conservative Muslim states in opposing birth control and abortion.

The situation in Northern Ireland was long considered an intractable conflict but is now more stable. See Chapter 19

Understanding these conflicts requires an exploration of the politics of identity. See Chapter 4

For more on capitalism, see Chapters 12 and 13.

BOX 5.2 THE DANISH CARTOON AFFAIR

In September 2005, the Danish newspaper Jyllands Posten published a series of cartoon depictions of Muhammad, the Prophet of Islam. Most famous among them was an image depicting the turban on Muhammad’s head as a bomb. Several months after the publication of the cartoons, protests broke out in a number of Muslim countries almost simultaneously (an interesting globalization story in itself, involving the internet, satellite TV and transnational activist networks). Angered by what they perceived as an attack on the Prophet and an insult to Islam at a time when global tensions were high in the aftermath of September 11, 2001 and the US invasion of Iraq, rioters attacked Danish embassies and several countries initiated an embargo on Danish goods. In Europe the Danish cartoon affair prompted a debate about how to strike a balance between freedom of speech and respect for cultural difference. It also further fuelled an ongoing debate about whether the values of Europe’s rapidly growing Muslim community were compatible with Western norms.
Globalization has also promoted the emergence of ‘New Religious Movements’ that combine aspects of various faith traditions while addressing concerns relating to environmentalism, social justice and the search for meaning and spirituality in a complex world (Clarke 2006). Some of these groups, such as the Falung Gong movement in China, seek to challenge the political status quo.

ILLUSTRATIVE EXAMPLE

ISLAMIC STATES AND MOVEMENTS

Much of the discussion about religion in global politics today focuses on the Muslim world. This is not only because of the events of September 11, 2001 or the Danish cartoon episode mentioned in Box 5.2 on p. 100. Even for some time before these events, it was not uncommon to find claims being made that Islam was problematic because in its belief system religion and politics could not be separated – meaning that the Muslim world was resistant to secularism and modernization (see pp. 111–13). Those advancing such ideas – many of whom are scholars associated with the Orientalist worldview discussed on p. 116 – seemed to assume that Islam was something quite static and unchanging: a rigid set of beliefs impervious to change or progress. When we look at the evolving relationship between religion and politics throughout Islamic history, however, quite a different perspective emerges. We find not only that Islam has been remarkably dynamic and diverse as a belief system, but also that the motivations and patterns of political behaviour displayed by Muslims are wholly amenable to explanation through conventional themes and theories of political analysis.

History of the Islamic world

From humble beginnings in the western part of present-day Saudi Arabia, the religion of Islam expanded rapidly in the second half of the seventh century and soon encompassed most of the Middle East, Persia and North Africa. In subsequent eras, Islam spread further east to South Asia and eventually to the furthest southeastern reaches of the Asian continent into present-day Malaysia and Indonesia. Various Islamic dynasties rose and fell during the Middle Ages, and at their height these empires represented the apex of human civilization, science and learning.

The most important Muslim power in the early modern period was the Ottoman Empire (c. 1300–1922). The Ottomans were the first Muslim rulers to interact with European powers after the formation of the modern state system in the seventeenth century, and were well integrated into the structures and processes of global politics. In the late nineteenth century an anti-colonial movement...
known as Pan-Islam emerged. The Pan-Islamists argued that Muslims were facing a similar condition of imperial bondage at the hands of European colonial powers. Their solution was to encourage the political unity of Muslims, invoking the centuries-old religious idea of the *umma* – an Arabic term that refers to the world community of Muslim believers. The leaders of this movement did not advocate returning to a conservative, literalist interpretation of Islam, but rather emphasized the compatibility of Islam with modernity and science. For them, the imperative was to reform Islam.

The Ottoman Empire found itself on the losing side of World War I and was dissolved in its aftermath, with Britain and France gaining control of many of the territories that had previously been under its control (such as Syria, Lebanon, Palestine, Iraq, Egypt). This war also effectively marked the beginning of the end for the various European empires, with some of them fragmenting into various new nation-states. On the Anatolian peninsula, heartland of the former Ottoman lands, a new country, the Turkish Republic, was founded in 1922 by Mustapha Kemal. ‘Kemalism’ – the ideology deriving from the major project of sweeping political, economic and cultural reform he initiated – emphasized the ideals of

![Map of Muslim populations](image-url)
Europeanization and secularism as the proper way to ‘be modern’. To this day, Turkey enforces a strict separation between religion and state; this is embodied in laws and policies that restrict the public role of religion more strongly than in many countries we usually think of as secular (not concerned with religion), such as France, the UK or the USA.

After World War II, many of the former Ottoman territories under British and French control became independent states. Many of these were led by governments that embraced various models of national secular politics – chief among them Egypt under Gamal Abdel Nasser (r. 1952–71), who became the iconic leader of a regional Arab Nationalist movement. This secular-nationalist model had quickly trumped the emerging project of Pan-Islamism early in the twentieth century, and as the modernizing drive of these new governments proceeded in countries such as Egypt, some sectors of Egyptian society began to feel that the country risked becoming corrupted by foreign ideologies.

Islamism: Islamic political movements

The early postcolonial period in the Middle East saw the consolidation of a political ideology, commonly referred to as Islamism, that rejected the national-secular model in the name of a vision of social order deriving from the direct application of Islam to the governance of modern states. In its totalizing, systematic approach, Islamism was no different from other contemporary ideological counterparts such as socialism or capitalist democracy. Islamism, hence, needs to be understood as expressing a distinctly modernist approach to politics. Its supporters, known as Islamists – who were generally highly educated members of the Muslim world’s new middle classes (doctors, engineers, etc.) – saw in Islamism a way to embrace new institutions and technologies without having to abandon their values and beliefs – in other words, it was a way to be modern without having to become Western.

The most important social movement embodying this new vision of political Islam was founded in Egypt by a schoolteacher named Hassan al-Banna. In 1928 he established a group known as the Muslim Brotherhood. The Brotherhood sought to ensure a continued role for religion in society and saw itself as an antidote to the Westernizing and secularizing tendencies of the political elite. Many Islamist leaders also argued that the doctrine of modern nationalism was incompatible with the teachings of Islam and the ideal of the umma. While not a political party, the Brotherhood became implicated in the evolving political landscape of Egypt in the 1930s and 1940s. Branches were established throughout the Arab world, and similar groups founded in Pakistan (the Jamaʿat-i Islami) and Turkey (the Refah Party). With its enormous popularity and rapid inroads into the country’s new educated and middle classes, Nasser began to see the
Muslim Brotherhood as a political threat. Banned and driven underground from the 1950s, the movement became radicalized. This phase of its existence is commonly associated with its chief thinker at the time, Sayyid Qutb. Qutb – whose ideas became very influential on successive generations of radical Islamists (including groups such as Al-Qaeda) – had become convinced, like a number of Third World activists, that it had become impossible to work within the existing political system to achieve social justice. Revolutionary politics and armed struggle (jihad – from the Arabic word for ‘strive’), in Qutb’s teaching, were required to achieve social change in the Muslim world.

Qutb’s views appealed only to a fringe minority in the Muslim world and, in the successive generation, to only a small fraction of Islamists. His views on jihad, for example, were generally regarded as a highly unorthodox departure from traditional understandings that emphasized the defensive nature of jihad. In other Muslim-majority countries during this period, Islamist parties had evolved into opposition movements. Banned from formal politics in Egypt, the Muslim Brotherhood instead began to build a strong base of social support at the neighbourhood and municipal levels, establishing social service and charity networks, and gaining control of all leading professional associations and syndicates.

While these may seem to be highly localized developments, an important part of what allowed the Islamists to build up this kind of support within Egypt’s civil societal spaces was what we refer to today as globalization. As Anwar Al Sadat (President of Egypt 1970–81) opened up Egypt’s economy to world markets and the country undertook neoliberal economic reforms at the behest of institutions such as the International Monetary Fund (IMF), the scale of state welfare and employment provision was scaled back significantly. This created ‘gaps’ in the provision of basic services that the Islamists were able to fill, gaining widespread support and popular legitimacy in the process.

**Islamic states**

In 1979, Iran experienced a ‘Islamic Revolution’ led by religious scholars (chief among them the Grand Ayatollah Khomeini) but carried out by a combination of religious and secular social forces, including socialists and urban merchants. In its aftermath, the radical wing of the clergy purged all non-religious political elites to establish a new Islamic Republic of Iran and impose a conservative and literalist interpretation of Islamic law (shari῾ah) on a largely unsuspecting population. Iran thus joined the ranks of the world’s ‘Islamic states’, alongside two other countries, Saudi Arabia and Pakistan. Saudi Arabia was founded between the two World Wars as a theocratic monarchy (that is, one governed by religious leaders) based on a political alliance between a princely family (the Sá‘ud) and a religious establishment seeking to purvey an indigenous form of Islam – highly austere and
puritanical – known as Wahhabism. With the discovery of vast oil wealth under its deserts, Saudi Arabia was catapulted to a position of geopolitical prominence, establishing a close alliance with the United States that has endured for many years. The second Islamic state already in existence was Pakistan, established in 1947 at the time of the postcolonial partition of India. Initially established as a homeland for the Muslims of the Indian subcontinent, the exact nature and meaning of Pakistan’s status as an Islamic state have constituted a chief source of political debate in the country for decades. For some, Pakistan was an Islamic state in the same sense in which Israel is a Jewish state – that is, as a national homeland for the members of a given religion rather than a state whose political and legal systems are derived directly from religion. Others in Pakistan argued that the government of Pakistan should be actively working to extend the remit of shari’ah to all sectors of society.

Radical Islamist groups

The 1980s saw a significant increase in the global visibility of political Islam – the ideology of Islamism and its adherents, known as Islamists – as it became increasingly entwined with Cold War geopolitics. Several events and movements formed during this decade help us understand the contemporary interface between Islam and global politics. After the Soviet Union’s invasion of Afghanistan in 1979, a number of volunteer fighters from the Arab world travelled to Afghanistan to assist in repelling what they interpreted as an atheist incursion into Muslim territories. These ‘Arab-Afghans’ were important insofar as their experience during
these years (1980–8) helped to crystallize the ideological and geopolitical vision that would later define Al-Qaeda. Among this group of supporters from the Middle East was Osama Bin Laden, a member of the wealthiest commercial family in Saudi Arabia who had renounced his family’s business in the name of what he saw as a larger struggle against new forms of global, imperial atheism (disbelief in the existence of God). The eventual withdrawal of Soviet forces from Afghanistan was interpreted by Bin Laden as a victory and as evidence of Islam’s ability to triumph over the world’s superpowers (at that time the USSR and the USA). Out of this experience was born Bin Laden’s vision Al-Qaeda: an effort to globalize the Afghan experience.

FIGURE 5.4
Women demonstrate: at Ramallah’s Al Manara plaza, two schoolgirls take part in a solidarity demonstration of Palestinian women – the wives, mothers and sisters of many killed in the first days of the uprising. Photo: Ingeborg Moa
Two other important Islamist groups active today were also established during this period. Although Hizbullah in Lebanon and HAMAS (an acronym for Harakat al-Muqawwama al-Islamiyya – the Islamic Resistance Movement; the word also means ‘zeal’ in Arabic) in the Palestinian territories have been linked to Al-Qaeda in contemporary discussions because of their militant tactics, such direct connections are inaccurate and mask the fact that Al-Qaeda and groups such as Hizbullah and HAMAS are motivated by and pursuing distinct political agendas. Chief among these differences is the fact that HAMAS and Hizbullah are primarily movements of religious nationalism. Hizbullah was established in the wake of the Israeli invasion of Lebanon in 1982 with an Islamist agenda limited to Lebanon. Likewise HAMAS, which emerged in the context of the first Palestinian intifada (uprising, or ‘shaking off’) in the late 1980s, has always defined its political agenda in terms of Palestinian national liberation from Israeli occupation and, subsequently, the establishment of an Islamic state in its territories.

While their political aims may be geared towards nationalist aspirations, both of these groups have received significant support from neighbouring states and various transnational fundraising networks. Hizbullah, for example, has strong ties to Iran and Syria, while HAMAS – as a branch of the Muslim Brotherhood – has been able to tap into that group’s funding infrastructure in addition to receiving direct support from various states in the Middle East. In recent years, the nature and role of both organizations has become increasingly ambiguous. Hizbullah and HAMAS both have at least three dimensions to their activities:

1. They provide basic social services such as education and healthcare to the disenfranchised (that is, those deprived of the rights of citizenship) populations of Lebanon and the Palestinian territories, ensuring strong measures of grassroots support.
2. They have political bodies that compete in parliamentary elections alongside other parties. Hizbullah has enjoyed strong representation in the Lebanese legislature since the end of the civil war and HAMAS gained control of the Palestinian Authority in 2006.
3. They maintain armed wings that permit them to employ violence when they find it expedient to do so.

While not globally organized like Al-Qaeda, both HAMAS and Hizbullah factor heavily in the global politics surrounding the Israel/Palestine conflict and Lebanon. Hizbullah, for example, taps into the media infrastructure of contemporary globalization via its own satellite television station Al-Manar (‘The Beacon’).

Thus, Al-Qaeda – for many, the group that most readily springs to mind today when speaking of Islam and global politics – needs to be situated within a diverse
and multifaceted ecology of world political Islam. Al-Qaeda was established in Afghanistan by Arab-Afghan fighters following the decision by the Soviet Union to withdraw its troops after a failed occupation effort. Emboldened by this seeming victory, Al-Qaeda sought to export the Afghan model to other countries in which Muslims were understood to be fighting foreign invasions or resisting imposed secularism. The move to establish the group also represented a major shift away from the worldview of earlier radical Islamists such as Qutb and the groups he inspired. For them, the goal was to successfully attack and supplant the ‘near enemy’, that is the leaders of secular-national regimes in the Middle East and other Muslim majority countries who were perceived as the proxies of Western powers. Bin Laden and Al-Qaeda’s new emphasis on the ‘far enemy’, inspired by the Afghan experience, emphasized instead the idea of directly attacking what they understood to be the source of global imperialism and atheism – namely, the United States. Al-Qaeda’s goals are the liberation of Muslim territories from occupying infidel forces and the making of a world that

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**BOX 5.3 SUNNI AND SHI’ITE ISLAM**

The instability and violence experienced by Iraq in the years following the US invasion of 2003, much of which occurred along sectarian lines, prompted discussion about the difference between two major branches of Islam. The distinction between Sunnis and Shi‘ites goes back to the time of the death of the Prophet Muhammad and a debate over who should succeed him as the leader of the Muslim community. One group argued that leadership should stay within the Prophet’s family and rallied around the candidacy of Ali (hence Shi‘i or ‘Partisans’ of Ali), Muhammad’s cousin and son-in-law. Others favoured choosing a leader from among the Prophet’s longest-serving and most trusted companions, and their view prevailed. A distinctive Shi‘i political identity, however, did not emerge until several decades later when Ali’s family were killed by the army of a rival noble clan seeking to consolidate its ruling position. In the ensuing centuries, Shi‘ites developed their own parallel institutions and schools of religious law. Indeed, in its conventional usage the term ‘Sunni’ refers to the orthodox schools of religious jurisprudence. As Shi‘ites faced persecution over the ensuing centuries, their identity came to be defined in part in terms of dispossession and disenfranchisement. That said, Shi‘ite leaders eventually established a number of important empires, notably the Fatimids in Egypt (910–1171) and the Safavids in Persia (1501–1736). There are different denominations within Shi‘ism, the largest group being the ‘Twelvers’ – so named because they recognize a line of twelve leaders in the *imamate*, a religio-political institution unique to Shi‘ite Islam. Shi‘ites today constitute approximately 10–15 per cent of the world’s Muslim population, or 130–195 million. Over half are found in two countries, Iran (90 per cent of the population) and Iraq (around 60 per cent of the population).
is ‘safe for Islam’ – a world in which a social political order based on shari‘ah can be realized. Some within this camp understand this to mean the re-establishment of centralized political authority in the Muslim world via a new Caliphate, an institution that had existed since the seventh century but was abolished by Kemal at the end of the Ottoman Empire.

Al-Qaeda today is better thought of as a discourse of resistance whose material reality is found in a transnational coordinating network highly skilled in forging temporary operational ties with local/regional movements or individuals in order to engage in violent activism. Far from representing a kneejerk reaction to globalization, Al-Qaeda appropriates the logistical and communicative infrastructures of globalization to pursue the fulfilment of a narrative, a ‘story’, internalized by its leadership, about the necessity and inevitability of Islam’s triumph over the infidel (unbelieving) forces of world power – particularly the United States and its allies in Europe and elsewhere. Al-Qaeda as a radical Islamist group is quite unorthodox even within the wider jihadist movement, many of whose members did not agree with Bin Laden’s decision to carry out the September 2001 attacks. While Al-Qaeda’s model of global Islamic politics has attracted only a few thousand of the world’s 1.25 billion Muslims as actual members, some in the Muslim world are drawn to Bin Laden as a symbol of anti-Americanism (even while they usually disagree with the methods he employs). In the wake of the attacks of September 11, 2001 (and subsequent bombings in Europe and elsewhere attributed to Al-Qaeda and its affiliates), we have seen Muslim identity around the world being increasingly regarded as a political question – particularly among Muslim populations in Europe and North America. This has meant that debates around Islam and Muslims have come to take on wider significance beyond the question of terrorism and violence, reinvigorating discussions of whether ‘Islam’ and ‘the West’ are compatible in cultural or civilizational terms. We have seen aspects of this in events such as the 2006 Danish cartoon affair and the controversy surrounding the Pope’s speech later that same year, in which the head of the Catholic Church seemed to imply that Islam was violent by nature and Muslims incapable of exercising reason.

**Moderate Islamic politics**

While much of the public debate and discussion of Islam is focused on Al-Qaeda and the minority of extremist groups in the Muslim world, there are a number of other important trends to recognize. Some scholars have claimed that the global jihad movement has essentially failed and become re-domesticated (Gerges 2005), while others argue that the Islamist movement as a whole has become so thoroughly integrated into the norms and structures of global modernity as to represent the onset of ‘post-Islamism’ (Roy 2004). Other analysts see in this something more akin to the normalization of Islamist politics, meaning that we
are beginning to see signs that the old, rather constraining model of the Muslim Brotherhood no longer holds sway. Certain observers suggest that the inclusion of Islamist parties in the political systems of countries such as Jordan, Yemen and Kuwait has had a moderating effect on the Islamist movement (Schwedler 2006). This trend toward Muslim Democracy, as it has been termed (Nasr 2005), can be seen in the victory of ‘semi’-Islamist parties such as the Justice and Development Party in Turkey (commonly known by its Turkish acronym AKP). This is a new form of conservative politics, comparable to the Christian Democratic parties of Europe, in which religion functions primarily as a reference point for public morality rather than a direct source of legislation. In other words, these are Islamically based political parties which accept the legitimacy of the formally secular state and which are willing to work pragmatically alongside other parties (secular liberals, socialists, etc.) to pursue shared goals. It is too early to know whether or not such a trend is taking hold, but it is certainly noteworthy that ‘new Islamists’ (Baker 2006) of this sort have sprung up in countries as diverse as Morocco, Turkey, Egypt, Jordan, Pakistan and Indonesia in recent years.

It is impossible to provide a single, overall characterization of the role of Islam in global politics. As a community of faith encompassing over a billion people and spanning multiple continents, Islam is itself highly diverse, and so are the ways in which it impacts and interacts with global politics. Multiple streams of Muslim politics are clearly recognizable today, and one cannot easily determine which of them predominates. Indeed, in many cases the ebb and flow of various trends is a function of the prevailing global political climate. What has become clear, however, is that an overview of the recent history of political Islam helps
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to lay bare a set of presumptions about both the relationship between religion and politics (i.e. the question of whether they should be kept separate in a properly ‘modern’ world) and also the extent to which religion helps us to understand the supposed motivation of political players.

RESPONSES
DO RELIGION AND POLITICS MIX?

The idea of the interface or mixing of religion and politics being problematic and potentially dangerous is a byproduct of the rise of secularism, often regarded as one of the hallmarks of modern society. But where did the assumptions and expectations associated with secularism come from, and how have they come to play such an important role in mediating our understanding of how (and whether) religion matters in politics? There is an almost total absence of references to religion in books about global politics prior to the 1990s. It is as if scholars were blind to religion as a force in global affairs, or did not find it to be helpful in explaining international politics.

Secularism

In formal political terms, secularism refers to the idea of a separation between the institutions of church and state. Its origins are to be found in the rise of European modernity and the establishment of the sovereign state. Aspects of the discourse on secularism are, however, to be found throughout the historical record and within the core texts of world religions such as Christianity and Islam. In the Christian tradition, for example, the famous passage of the Bible about ‘rendering unto God what is God’s and unto Caesar that which belongs to Caesar’ is generally regarded as acknowledging a categorical distinction between worldly political power and the transcendental other-worldly mandate of religious authority. In the Islamic tradition, while there is no formal theological division between religion and politics, Islamic history is replete with the rise and fall of empires whose day-to-day affairs seemed to reflect a similar distinction in the minds of rulers.

The modern history of secularism is associated with two important developments in European intellectual and political history: the philosophical Enlightenment and the birth of modern political sovereignty.

The Enlightenment was associated with a shift in how people thought about the origins and status of knowledge. Where truth was previously understood to derive from religion and faith, the Enlightenment – and modernity more generally –
entailed a shift to the idea that truth and knowledge could be determined through the effort of human reason. Furthermore, the human condition was no longer seen as subject to divine providence. Rather, human beings were now understood to possess the capacity to change the world around them. One aspect of secularism, then, is a shift away from relying on religious belief to provide knowledge and understanding of the world, and the rise of a belief in the ability of the autonomous, rational, thinking subject to comprehend the world and to change it for the better.

This new orientation gave rise to the attitudes and methods that underpin the modern natural sciences, many of which were later reproduced in an effort to create social science. Eventually, some scholars began to associate the advent of modernity with an evolutionary model of human development. According to this model, societies that have undergone modernization are further along in terms of developmental progress than those societies characterized by the persistence of traditional beliefs and practices, such as religion (Lerner 1958). Modernization is generally understood as a process whereby societies ‘evolve’ according to the trajectory of the Western political economy from about the sixteenth century – meaning that they adopt capitalism, industrialization and, increasingly today, also political liberalism and democracy.

The political-institutional understanding of secularism is associated with the emergence of modern sovereign states in Europe, a development commonly dated to the Peace of Westphalia in 1648. After the Wars of Religion in the preceding

**BOX 5.4 KEY ENLIGHTENMENT THINKERS**

- **Voltaire** (1694–1778): a leading French critic of organized religion who emphasized the power of human reason and agency in shaping society.
- **David Hume** (1711–76): a Scottish philosopher who argued that knowledge and understanding of the world derive from the human senses – an approach known as empiricism – rather than from divine sources.
- **Immanuel Kant** (1724–1804): one of the leading German philosophers of the Enlightenment, whose work remains highly influential today. Kant exhorted people to ‘dare to know’. He used the Latin phrase for this: *sapere aude*.
- **John Locke** (1632–1704): an English thinker whose ideas on liberty, the individual and property were central to the development of political modernism.
century, it was agreed among rulers that religion should be kept separate from matters of state. This was to ensure that the legitimacy of the sovereign would remain free from attempts by church authorities to interfere in politics, and produced a situation in which many found themselves subject to official state religions. The rise of liberalism in political thought – in large measure a reaction against this idea – soon produced the form of government known as republicanism. In a modern republic, the location of sovereignty and the responsibility to govern are understood to shift from being the preserve of monarchs to being the right of the peoples so governed – hence res (‘concern’) publicus (‘of the people’). In the republican model, public affairs are to be regulated by the rule of law, popularly legislated, rather than by the whim of monarchs or the faith-based ‘irrationality’ of religion. As part of this shift away from official religions of state, religion came to be seen as a private matter – that is, a sphere of activity belonging to realm of the individual and whatever voluntary associations might arise between consenting individuals outside the influence and determination of the state.

In recent years, a number of interventions by scholars coupled with political events in the world have led to a reconsideration of some of the conventional thinking about secularism and the place of religion in the world today. Some sociologists of religion for whom a general trend towards greater secularization in the modern world was once taken for granted have since backed off from that position (Berger 1999). Others have argued that in fact we are seeing a greater public role for religion around the world (Casanova 1994), with some connecting this to an increased search for meaning and purpose in a highly complex, globalizing world (Laidi 1998). Scholars of non-Western societies have also been critical of the secularization thesis, but in a different way. For them, it is not so much that the supposed trend towards secularism has been reversed, but that it was never an appropriate account of the world in the first place. Writers such as Talal Asad (1993) have argued that the very idea of religion and politics as wholly distinct and separate spheres is itself a Eurocentric proposition, reflecting the particular experience of modernity as it evolved in Europe and North America. For him, it is therefore inappropriate to try and apply this schema as a universal explanation of the relationship of religion and politics. Several Indian political theorists have argued along similar lines that the notion of secularism is inappropriate for understanding the relationship between religious communities and national society in that country (Nandy 1995; Chatterjee 1998).

**Religion in the social sciences**

One well-known social science account of international affairs is Samuel Huntington’s ‘Clash of civilizations’ thesis, in which ‘civilizational’ blocs pursue security and interests defined in terms of cultural values. Huntington also provides
us with a rigid understanding of culture with little space to account for the considerable diversity and nuance that exist within and between his civilizations.

Claims about civilizations and religions as the new primary blocs in world politics have been subject to considerable critique (Huntington 1996; Hall and Jackson 2007) in recent years. Likewise the popularity of Huntington’s thesis has ebbed and flowed, with the attacks of September 11, 2001 seeming for some to give credence to the idea of a civilizational struggle between Islam and the West. Numerous criticisms have been levelled against Huntington’s thesis. His concept of civilization is so large and heavily abstracted that it is difficult to map it on to any kind of social reality – in other words, it is difficult to think of civilization in terms of lived experience. The blocs that Huntington identifies as civilizations are, in some cases, so enormously diverse that it becomes nearly impossible to treat them analytically as a single cultural unit. Furthermore, Huntington’s thesis operates with a very static and stultifying conception of culture. In order to make the argument about civilizational difference as a source of conflict, he is forced to reduce highly complex and fluid belief systems to rather stagnant and essentialized ideal-types that, again, bear little resemblance to social reality. It is difficult to see the dynamic and intersubjective qualities that define culture in Huntington’s reified (that is, in a way that makes the abstract concept appear real) civilizations. In terms of our discussion so far, it is important to examine

BOX 5.5 HUNTINGTON’S CLASH OF CIVILIZATIONS

Samuel Huntington’s thesis first appeared in the influential policy journal *Foreign Affairs* in 1993, and several years later in book form as *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order* (1998). Huntington’s book was about the role of culture and religion in world politics. He argues that in the post-Cold War world, cultural blocs – which he labels ‘civilizations’ – will become the major protagonists of global affairs. ‘The fault lines of civilizations’, he says, ‘will be the battle lines of the future’. In Huntington’s view, each civilization expresses a unique worldview and set of values. As contact between these cultural or symbolic systems intensifies in the face of global pressure to integrate economies, political communities and cultures, the incompatibility of different civilizations leads to increased tension and eventually actual conflict between them. What are the civilizations he is talking about? For Huntington, many of the divisions between civilizations are religious in nature. His Western civilization is largely composed of the Protestant and Catholic Christian majority nations (except Latin America, a sort of Western sub-civilization according to Huntington). Others in his list include the Muslim world, the Orthodox Christian world, the Hindu world and the Buddhist world. To these can be added three others, the Sinic world (covering China and areas of Southeast Asia), Japanese civilization and also Sub-Saharan Africa, whose status Huntington leaves unclear.

Huntington paints a picture of the world that seems to provide an easy explanation for recent terrorism and the responses to it. But, as Chapter 2 shows, such pictures do not simply enable us to see what is already there: they make the world we see. They also make invisible what does not fit into the picture.
HOW DO RELIGIOUS BELIEFS AFFECT POLITICS?

Huntington’s argument critically because of the way in which it ends up having to reduce complex, multifaceted human subjects to their religious identities in order to maintain its own logic.

BROADER ISSUES
CULTURE, FUNDAMENTALISM AND RELIGIOUS IDENTITIES

Before Huntington’s analysis of clashing civilizations other scholars of world politics were beginning to stress the importance of cultural and religious forces in world politics, but in considerably more subtle terms (Der Derian and Shapiro 1989). These writers asked us to consider the relevance of wider social theory for understanding some of the central problems in contemporary global politics. They argued, for example, that it is difficult to understand many of today’s problems without recognizing the inherently postcolonial nature of global affairs (Darby 1998; Doty 1996).

Others have argued that culture is the very terrain upon which conceptions and practices of world order and power have played out throughout modern history. For these scholars, culture is crucially important because of its intimate relationship with processes of identity formation and the making of ‘others’ (see Chapter 4). The ideas of Edward Said are particularly relevant in this regard.

FIGURE 5.6
An example of ‘Orientalist’ art in Edward Said’s sense: The Snake Charmer, Jean-Léon Gérôme, 1870. © Sterling and Francine Clark Art Institute, Williamstown, Massachusetts, USA

The importance of colonial history in understanding the postcolonial present is discussed in Chapters 11, 14 and 15.
Edward Said’s landmark text *Orientalism* (1978) made the argument that culture and power are closely related in the historical establishment of particular forms of world order. More specifically, Said delves into various domains of cultural production (literature, art, scholarship) in the European world during the colonial period in order to understand the relationship between *representation* and geopolitical power. His focus on representation was prompted by the fact that in reviewing depictions of various peoples the West seemed to regard as ‘outside’ or Other – particularly in the Islamic (or ‘Oriental’) world – Said found that the stories told about the non-Western world seemed to regularly and systematically associate these cultures with traits that were the opposite of Western values and that carried strongly negative connotations. For example, Muslim peoples were often represented as exotic, overly sensualized, lazy or violent as opposed to rational, orderly and hard-working – all characteristics, supposedly, of Western modernity. Said argues that this is something more than just subjective bias, however. He suggests that this system of cultural representation, which he terms Orientalism, was a core component of the exercise of colonial power. In other words, Said argued that one of the ways in which the West constituted its own identity and legitimized its dominance was to construct the non-Western world – the object of its imperial geopolitics – as its absolute Other. This helped to justify and naturalize the hierarchies of power between various (culturally defined) world regions, and eventually to institutionalize the European sovereign state model as a global system.

For Said, culture is not simply one factor in understanding global politics, but a core terrain upon which it is played out: global politics, on this reading, *is* culture. Some scholars have argued that Said overstates his case and ignores reciprocal processes of Western objectification and representation by non-Western peoples (Buruma and Margalit 2004), while others suggest that Said’s theory continues to hold some merit in terms of understanding not only the underlying logic of Huntington’s neo-Orientalist vision but also the central thrust of US foreign policy in the aftermath of the Cold War (Ó Tuathail 1996).

Writers such as Tariq Ali have engaged this issue through the theme of fundamentalism. It is important for us to consider the term since it is generally associated with religion, and particularly with Islam. A term that originally came into usage to describe certain forms of American Christianity in the nineteenth century, ‘fundamentalism’ emerged as a common designation of danger in reference to various Islamist movements from the 1980s. Some critics have dismissed its utility simply because it does not provide any analytical value (Pieterse 1994). They argue by emphasizing one’s adherence to the ‘fundamentals’ of a given religion does not tell us much about the nature and behaviours associated with a given religious identity. For example, one might easily follow the fundamental beliefs of Islam and never even consider becoming involved with political movements or violent groups. Ali’s (2003) intervention in this debate is interesting because he
seeks to decouple the term ‘fundamentalism’ from an exclusively religious connotation and to associate it instead with any form of thought or ideology that is uncompromising in its worldview and which represents itself as the sole source of truth or the only solution to global problems. Viewed in this way it becomes possible to recognize today the existence in global politics of various kinds of fundamentalism, some of which are not religious in nature. For example, sometimes the assumptions and practices associated with the neoliberal economic policies that underpin organizations such as the International Monetary Fund and the World Trade Organization take on the aura of ‘religion’ when, in the absence of no strong proof of their remedy, global policymakers place considerable faith in these approaches as a route to salvation from global poverty.

Ali’s depiction of fundamentalism takes a different direction, however. He tries to show that in the wake of the attacks of September 11, 2001 there emerged a curious form of parallel fundamentalism that can been seen through a comparison of the discourses and worldviews contained in the rhetoric of US President George W. Bush and the statements of Al-Qaeda leader Osama Bin Laden. Each of these global political actors represented himself as the guardian and purveyor of absolute morality. Bin Laden promised to work to establish a world system based on Islamic law, while the subsequent policy choices of the Bush Administration seemed to suggest that it was driven by a worldview (commonly described as neo-conservative) that sought to remake the world in its image. In this sense, the 2003 war with Iraq can be interpreted as an effort by the United States to transplant its own model of good governance (liberal democratic, capitalist)
to the heart of the Middle East. This way Bush and Bin Laden both revealed themselves to be pursuing projects of absolute and universalizing morality – much in the vein of religion even where religion was not explicitly invoked. Neo-conservatism is an example of ideology – that is, a template of meaning-making with a singular horizon that allows people to understand the world in ways that lead to certain unavoidable conclusions about what must be done in response to the circumstances of the world. Ideology not only mediates how we perceive the world around us, but also prescribes all-encompassing solutions for dealing with the world it hands us (Eagleton 1991). It hence becomes possible to draw strong parallels between religion and ideology, rather than treating religion as something unique.

This point is all the more important to bear in mind due to the tendency on the part of some analysts of global politics to privilege religious affiliations as if they are forms of identity that trump all others. We see this in commonplace practices such as the use of the term ‘Muslim world’ or when writers refer to large categories such as ‘Muslims in Europe.’ While such terminology is often merely trying to be descriptive, it becomes problematic when it begins to ascribe behaviour to religion – that is, when we begin to make assumptions that because a country happens to be part of something called the Muslim world, or because someone happens to be a Muslim, then they will necessarily think or act in a certain way. This is, in essence, a point about the danger of projecting religiousness on to people who hold multiple identities and whose considerations and decisions regarding their political behaviour cannot be reduced to religion. For example, it can be argued that in many cases the views and motivations of people in the so-called Muslim world can just as easily, if not more accurately, be understood in relation to the problems and concerns of Third World or developing world identities – that is, in relation to issues of global inequality in socioeconomic terms, and politically in terms of the asymmetry of power between countries in the global North and the global South. Further complicating the analysis is the fact that even where religious language is deployed to mobilize political identity, the root causes of the antagonism underpinning these claims are sometimes better found in other domains (e.g. the political disenfranchisement of a minority group). Projecting religious identities on to large groups can even mask the true sources of political discontent in some cases. For example, during the Paris riots of 2006, it was not uncommon to find the participants in these riots being described as ‘Muslim protesters’ even though none of their claims was couched in terms of Islam. It would have been more accurate in that case to approach the issue in terms of the mobilized discontent of unemployed immigrants.

Also of great importance is the need to recognize the inevitability of great diversity within the various traditions of world religion. Christianity, Judaism and Islam all contain within them multiple currents, denominations and sects, and all of them vary considerably depending on where in geographical and cultural terms they
are practised. In the Muslim world there is certainly a highly visible yet numerically very small radical fringe prepared to use violence to subvert the current world order. There are many more Muslims, global public opinion surveys suggest (Pew Global Attitudes Project 2005), committed to an interpretation of Islam that is in harmony with values of tolerance, pluralism and democracy. A majority of the world’s Muslims are not affiliated with any kind of political movement; nor do they understand their religion as a system of beliefs that requires them to behave politically in any particular way. This fact strengthens the point made above about the need to look beyond religion to understand the political identities and worldviews of peoples that we often too easily categorize in terms of their religion.

Finally, we need to resist the idea that religious identities or political claims framed in terms of religion are somehow beyond the comprehension of what we otherwise regard as political reason. Conflicting parties in Sri Lanka’s armed dispute whose primary desires can be understood in relation to social stability and personal security, for example, may appeal to aspects of Hinduism and Buddhism that emphasize peace. In countries such as Turkey and Indonesia, parties whose political platform is defined in terms of eliminating government corruption will often speak of Islam as the source of their public morality without having any interest in setting up Islamic states. Furthermore, we can even see evidence today of religious and secular parties forming coalitions in support of shared goals. For example, within the broad Global Justice and ‘alter-mondialisation’ movements today, one can find socialists, environmentalists and religious parties of various denominations trying to achieve social justice (a key value in Islam and certain interpretations of Christianity) and preserve the planet. While their languages may differ – e.g. ‘Mother Earth’ vs the human relationship with the planet as a sacred covenant – all of these people are committed to a common vision of participation and cooperation in world affairs. Viewing religion in this way allows us to identify it as just one among many similar ideational sources at play in global politics. Rather than viewing and treating religion as a space of exception in global politics – as a unique force beyond reason and comprehension – we are better off treating it as one of many terrains and languages through which the global political is engaged. Islam, for example, needs always to be understood in relation to Muslims – that is, to the people who profess its belief and interpret its meaning in terms of their life experience and circumstances. Only by contextualizing religion in this way, in terms of lived experience, can we understand how and where it intersects with the global political.

CONCLUSION

The question of religion in global politics is nothing if not highly complex. In addressing the framing question with which we opened the discussion, ‘Does religion matter in global politics?’, it would seem that we need to answer this in
the affirmative, but with certain very important qualifications. More specifically, three points bear drawing out by way of summary and conclusion: (1) the importance of understanding when and how to grant importance to religion in seeking to understand global politics – in other words, recognizing that religion is present in a given global political situation does not mean that that situation should be read exclusively or even primarily in terms of religion; (2) the importance of recognizing the presence of enormous diversity within world religions and the dangers entailed in treating them as monoliths; and (3) the fact that religious identities and world political claims framed in terms of religion are not necessarily categorically distinct from or unconnected with other kinds of political and ideological claims. Indeed, as several examples today can show, these sorts of claims are often motivated by a desire on the part of both the ‘religious’ and the ‘non-religious’ to achieve similar goals even where the language they use may differ.

FURTHER READING

A survey of key religious trends in all major world regions with an emphasis on the dynamic and increasingly interdependent relationship between them.

An analysis of the phenomenal growth of Pentecostal Christianity in Africa and other parts of the developing world in recent years.

A leading sociologist reflects on the relationship between religion, conflict and nation-states in the global era across a broad range of faith traditions.

Examines the impact of globalization on how people understand the role of religion and the structure of its organization.

A broad overview of the history and evolution of Muslim politics with a particular focus on the interface between globalization and political Islam.

WEBSITES

The leading website on global religions.
A portal for Muslim issues and information. The site is closely associated with Yusuf al-Qaradawi, a leading Islamic scholar-jurist with a global audience. It represents the perspective of mainstream conservative Islamic orthodoxy.

A self-described ‘progressive’ Muslim site, featuring articles dealing with various social issues such as the relationship between Islam and feminism. An interesting contrast to Islam Online.

A forum courtesy of the Institute for the Study of Islam in the Modern World in the Netherlands, this publication frequently features short articles on the Muslim world with a strong global politics focus.

One of the major Islamic portal websites, with a variety of articles on contemporary Muslim issues, search engines for Islamic textual sources and information on Muslim media and local services (mainly in the USA).

REFERENCES


