Religion in the Secular State: Historical Foundations and Contemporary Challenges

Instructor: Christian Joppke
Department: Nationalism Studies
Central European University
Semester/term, year
Course level (MA, PhD)
# Credits (# ECTS Credits)
Pre-requisites (if applicable)
Course e-learning site:
Office hours: days, location

Course Description:

Long deemed to be “privatized” or marginalized in a context of “secularization”, religion has returned to the center of politics, both domestic and internationally, if it ever was out. With a comparative focus on Christianity and Islam in Western Europe and North America, this course looks at religion as foundational, society- and civilization-making force and as contemporary political actor or movement seeking to shape and influence law and public policy. Among the issues to be discussed in this course is the classic comparative-historical sociology of religion by Max Weber; the linkage between “religion” and “politics” as concepts and realities; the meanings and empirical varieties of “secularism” and “secularization”; the relationship between religion and nationalism; and a comparison of the Christian Right in the United States and of Islam in Europe as contemporary challenges to the secular state.

This course follows closely the instructor’s recent book, The Secular State Under Siege: Religion and Politics in Europe and America (Cambridge: Polity 2015). Apart from this book, students will read some of the best writings in the sociology and politics of religion, both recent and classic, which helped the instructor to navigate the field.

Note: The focus of this class is mostly on developments in Western Europe and the United States. This simply reflects the instructor’s competence (or rather, lesser knowledge of other parts of the world). However, students are actively encouraged to draw comparisons with and inputs from their own regions of origin, interest or competence, even in class! The insight (hopefully) gained about “Western” developments may thus help to sharpen the sense for variations and similarities with “Eastern”, “Southern” etc. developments.

Learning Outcomes
By the end of this course, students will be able to:

- Understand the different religion and politics constellations in Europe and America
- Critically discuss competing theories in the sociology and comparative politics of religion
- Understand the historical origins yet universal significance of secularism as prerequisite of liberal democracy
- Compare the different impacts of Islam and Christianity on conflict and political structure in Western societies
- The course uses materials and approaches to the topic from several disciplines, including law, history, political science, sociology, and political theory, which should strengthen students` sense and capacities for arguing across disciplines in a focused and meaningful way.
- The research paper due at the end of the course will enhance students` ability to conduct and implement independent research.

Course Requirements

**Seminar style:** The course centers on in-depth reading and discussion of each session`s assigned literature. Each session should start with one or two students presenting in about 15-20 minutes the assigned reading(s) of the day, plus preparing ca. 5 questions that will allow to start and structure the discussion. **Assignments will be made during the first meeting, on Jan.9, so please be prepared to do this on short notice, beginning on Jan.10 in the morning.** Power-point presentations or handouts are encouraged (but not required). Regular attendance and active student participation is expected, which requires that **all readings should be done beforehand.**

**Research paper:** a paper is expected at the end of the semester (ca.12 pages, double-spaced, bibliography included). You have three options. The first is to further explore one of the topics of this class--such paper should at least include two further substantive sources in a non-tokenist way. A second option is to choose a topic that is not addressed in this class yet that is pertinent to the field of “religion and politics”, broadly understood. Thirdly, you may apply a topic covered in this class (like secularization or religion and nationalism to a country or region not explicitly covered in this class (of which there are plenty, including central and eastern Europe).

**Grading:** 40 percent class participation; 60 percent research paper.

**COURSE SCHEDULE**

**Session 1: Introduction: Religion in Social and Political Theory**
Readings: C.Joppke, *The Secular State Under Siege*, ch.1

**Session 2: Classical Sociology of Religion: Max Weber**

**Session 3: Religion and Politics: Historical and Phenomenological Approaches**

**Session 4: Secularization and Secularism (I): Concept and History**

**Session 5: Secularization and Secularism (II): Varieties**

**Session 6: Secularism and its Discontents in the Muslim World**

**Session 7: Religion and Nationalism**

**Session 8: Challenge to the Secular State (1): The Christian Right in the United States.**

**Session 9: Challenge to the Secular State (2): Islam in Europe**

**Session 10: Religious Symbols in the Public Sphere: Veils and Crucifixes**