

RELIGION AND POLITICS: THE PRESENCE OF SACRED AND SECULAR TRADITIONS IN EUROPE AND THE MIDDLE EAST

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DETAILED COURSE DESCRIPTION

In recent years there has been an increasing interest in the relationship between religion and politics. Not only terrorist attacks and fundamentalist movements, but also the rhetoric of a number of democratic leaders in Europe and the Middle East raised doubts about the solely secular character of modern politics. In the previous decades, it was one of the dominating paradigms in the social sciences that religion is a "traditional remnant" bound to vanish sooner or later. Nowadays the same disciplines speak of a resurgence of religion in modernity.

However, the new interest in the religio-political complex goes along with an often almost complete ignorance of inherent long-term traditions involved in religious discourse. Moreover, the re-emerging religious dimension of politics that social scientists observe in our days can only be understood properly if one considers the persistence of religious symbolization in secular movements, as, for example, the messianic elements in 19th and 20th century ideologies like communism and nationalism. On the other hand, secularization can by no means be conceived as purely modern development, since secular trends can be observed throughout the intellectual history of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. In other words, there is a certain continuity of religious and secular modes of thought which permeate the intellectual development of European and Middle Eastern societies. This persistence of traditions deserves much more scholarly interest than it hitherto has received.

Therefore the course has two general aims: Creating an awareness of

- the presence of religious traditions in the political disposition of European and Middle Eastern societies
- the potentials of secularization and modernization in the pre-modern Jewish, Christian, and Islamic political thought.

By a long-term and comparative perspective on the religio-political traditions of Europe and Middle East the course seeks to contribute to a fuller understanding of one of the most vexing problems of present-day European and Middle Eastern societies: the clash of religious and secular interpretations of political order.

The course will be taught by scholars who are not also renowned experts in the respective fields but also come from the regions covered by the course.

BRIEF OVERVIEW OF THE COURSE CONTENT

The Sacred and the Secular: Pre-modern Foundations

The seminars cover central issues with a long lasting legacy in political theology from late Antiquity to the Renaissance. First, it was the Hellenistic philosophy that offered justifications of monarchy in the context of the theological foundations of the empire.

The second problem emerges against this backdrop. The new Christian concept of the eschatological orientation of the church universal questioned the very analogy between political form and the divine realm, as it can be seen from the martyr acts or Celsus' True discourse.

The third topic is about developments in the Latin West. The focus is on a) the introduction of religious truth (*vera religio*) into political thought and its consequences: the Christian opposition against Roman civil religion and the redefinition of the concept of *religio*. b) the theoretical separation between profane and sacred history in Augustine's *City of God* (early 5th century), the work which was to dominate the political thought of Western Christianity for the following millennium. c) The institutional separation of temporal and spiritual powers in the course of the investiture controversy and its aftermath. d) Apocalyptic and eschatological perceptions of politics e) the emergence of a secular intelligentsia in the 13th and 14th century.

The fourth topic deals with medieval Arab and Jewish philosophy and the secular heritage of Classical Greek antiquity. The readings will include works of Alfarabi, Averroes, Ibn Khaldun, and Maimonides, all of them thinkers who influenced the modern Jewish and Arab discussion about the secularisation of politics.

The Sacred and the Secular: Modern Configurations

Some seminars deal with the persistence of Islamic religious symbolism in Middle Eastern secular movements, first of all Arab Nationalism and, secondly, the recurring references to Medieval Arab philosophy found in the writings of modern secular intellectuals of the Arab world. Third, Zionism will serve as an example how elements of messianic thought persist in supposedly non-religious nationalist movements.

Other seminars will reconsider the theories of Eric Voegelin, Raymond Aron, and Emilio Gentile about the religious character of modern mass movements such as communism and fascism. The famous debate between Carl Schmitt and Eric Peterson about Political Theology, on the other hand, displays the continuity of religio-political debates from late antiquity to the 20th century and thereby shows that the question of the reconcilability of Christian theology and political power remains a permanent problem.

At the example of conflicts in the Middle East the final seminars will show how the knowledge acquired in the course can contribute to the understanding of present-day conflicts. The common narrative of the ethnic and religious conflict in the Middle East describes it as a secular conflict that became religious and parallel to that removed from the realm of rational political negotiations into that of religious fanaticism. However, a closer examination will reveal a rather complicated mixture of secular history and religious language, of national utopianism mixed with messianic expectations.