LONDON METROPOLITAN UNIVERSITY
Faculty of Social Sciences and Humanities
GI6xxx Political secularism and religious difference in Europe, the Middle East and North Africa
Lecture and Seminar Programme, Spring Semester, 2017-18

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Introduction

It was long assumed that one of the main outcomes of a secular political order in plural societies was to encourage both emancipation and political equality for religious minorities. These assumptions are now strongly challenged by recent events in two neighbouring regions. First, coinciding with, but not necessarily caused by the post-2010 'Arab Uprisings' and their aftermath, violence against Christians and other religious minorities has grown in many countries of the Middle East and North Africa (MENA). Some scholars have sought to explain this as either a continuation or re-emergence of deep-rooted primordial conflicts or to Islam's supposed 'inherent intolerance'.

Historically, in the MENA political secularism was often imposed from outside, including by Western colonial rule. Over the last few decades of independence mainly unelected rulers in the region have sought to impose and perpetuate their rule via processes of political secularisation whose ultimate aim was to divide and rule the various religious groups in their polities. Turning to Europe, recent and current events point to growing polarisation in many countries between the non-Muslim majority and Muslim minorities; and, often, growing intolerance and declining ability to live together seems to be the outcome. This issue is seriously exacerbated by the unprecedented – and continuing – refugee crisis emanating from, but not restricted to, the Syrian civil war. In Europe, the overall result is that while religious equality, including between Muslims and non-Muslims, is a cornerstone of the region's democratic foundations and constitutional arrangements, equality between religious groups is rapidly being whittled away.

The purpose of the module is to compare and contrast the impact of 'political secular' governing regimes in the countries of Europe and the MENA and. We will compare the impact of political secularism in both regions, as a key component of inter-religious and cultural discord and contention with significant political ramifications in both the MENA and Europe. We will also examine how religion can be used in the service of political cooperation in both Europe and the MENA. In other words, how might religion be used by governments in Europe and the MENA to enhance citizens' lives in the context of what often appears to be increasing political and societal polarisation?

What is the module about?

The issue of societies' secularisation and associated political implications has long been an important focal point of political science. In Western Europe in particular, constituent countries are notable for the high degree of secularisation that they exhibit, with attendant ramifications for political competition and outcomes. In recent years, however, 'even' Western Europe has experienced increasing involvement of various types of religious or cultural actors in social and/or political settings, including political statement from churches and expressions of desire for equality from immigrant groups, including Muslims. In a neighbouring region, the MENA, the issue of the relationship between political actors, especially political elites, and religious actors has for long been seen as different to that in Western Europe. Whereas the latter region has long shown strong signs of secularisation, the MENA has exhibited a different trajectory in the decades since the formal withdrawal of European colonial and quasi-control in the 1950s and 1960s. Recent events, focused in the Arab Uprisings and their aftermath, have raised anew the issue of the relationship between religion and state in the countries of the MENA. In many countries across the region, including, Egypt, Turkey and Bahrain, religious and cultural minorities have in recent times borne the brunt of increasingly draconian government policies.

It is now widely agreed that secularisation theory is fundamentally flawed because it predicted the demise of religion, when according to many scholars, the opposite is happening. Secularisation theory predicted that as countries developed economically and more generally became 'modernised' they would as a result *necessarily* and *irrevocably* become more and more secular, leading eventually to the demise of religion (Bruce, 2009). What actually happened, however, was different, defying secularisation theory's prediction of the death of religion. 'Even' in Europe, while many countries still exhibit signs of a continuing process of secularisation, the issue is by no means as clear cut as it once appeared (Kratochwil and Dolezal, 2015; Leustean, 2013). In the MENA, on the other hand, the formal political importance of religion, manifested, for example, in the power of associated political parties at the ballot box, is patchy and unclear, although profound in almost all regional countries (Cesari 2014; Hinnebusch, 2015).

Recent research highlights the impossibility of accepting secularisation theory at face value. At the same time, it is erroneous to assume that religion continues to 'return from the dead' exhibiting more and more influence on political outcomes in both Europe and the MENA, leading to a position where it will resume the power it once had in the region's politics. Fox (2015) argues that what we are seeing is not simply the decline of secularisation theory as a powerful explanatory tool for the relationship between religion and politics. What we are witnessing are novel forms of interaction, explicable in the context of 'secular-religious competition perspective.' This is a 'middle way' between, on the one hand, what secularisation theory predicts (the eventual demise of religion as a public force) and the 'return of religion' approach (which claims that religion is a powerful and persuasive political actor which is reassuming a highly significant role in political discourse and completion in many countries, even in those previously thought to be inexorably secularising).

The module will examine and assess the theoretical and empirical power of the 'secular-religious competition perspective' in both Europe and the MENA. The objective is to

compare two different and distinctive regions and see if the theory holds up under scrutiny. The main hypothesis is as follows: While secularisation theory remains a useful starting point to understand religion's role in politics and society in both Europe and the MENA, we cannot accept all aspects of the theory, especially the prediction of religion's public decline. The ramification is, as Fox (2015: 33) notes, that 'secularism competes with religion in the political realm' but does not always come out on top. On the other hand, this assumes that 'religion' is something that is always clear and distinct from the 'secular'. Wilson (2012) argues that it is not always so clear cut, because what 'religion' *is* actually shifts and moves depending both on context and on who is defining and identifying what it is. We anticipate that this issue will be an important one during the course of the module, as it forms a key controversy in the context of the relationship between 'religion' and state.

The foregoing implies that *secularisation theory* should be discarded as an explanatory theory and replaced with a focus on political *secularism* (Fox, 2015: 32). Among others, Hurd (2008), Wilson (2012), and Mavelli (2012) examine the ideological role of 'political secularism'. The term has various meanings from government remaining neutral on the issue of religion to government restricting public expressions of religion, sometimes severely as in France and Turkey (Barras, 2014), in favour of strongly pro-secular state ideological choices. The overall point is that the choice made by a governing regime is a political and ideological choice not an inevitable outcome of an 'invisible hand' process of secularisation. In addition, as Gill (2008) reminds us, a government's policies in relation to religion are to a considerable degree linked to the interests and preferences of politicians, especially those in power. Given that those with power normally wish to hold on to it and those aspiring to replace them seek to acquire it, then the support of a significant or powerful religion can be a key asset which politicians aspire to receive whether in power or challenging it.

Finally, the module will examine the nature of ideological choices related to political secularism in both Europe and the MENA. Participants will identify and examine reasons why governments in these regions choose one form of political secularism and not others and what the political ramifications and outcomes are.

References and further reading

Barras, A. (2014) *Refashioning Secularisms in France and Turkey*, London: Routledge.

Bruce, S. (2009) 'Secularization and politics' in J. Haynes (ed.), *Routledge Handbook of Religion and Politics,* New York: Routledge: 145-158.

Cesari, J. (2014) *The Awakening of Muslim Democracy*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Fox, J. (2015) *Political Secularism, Religion, and the State*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Gill, A. (2008) *The Political Origins of Religious Liberty*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Haynes, J. (ed.) (2010) *Religion and Politics in Europe, the Middle East and North Africa*, London: Routledge.

Hinnebusch, R. (ed.) (2015) 'From Arab Spring to Arab Winter: Explaining the Limits of Post-Uprising Democratisation', Special Issue of *Democratization*, Vol. 22, No. 2. Also published as a book by Routledge in 2016, with the title: *After the Arab Uprisings: Between Democratization, Counter-revolution and State Failure.*

Hurd, E. (2008) *The Politics of Secularism in International Relations*, Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Kratochwil, P. and T. Dolezal (2015) *The European Union and the Catholic Church*, New York: Palgrave Macmillan

Leustean, L. (2013) *Representing Religion in the European Union*, London: Routledge.

Mavelli, L. (2012) *Europe's Encounter with Islam*, London: Routledge.

Wilson, E. K. (2012) *After Secularism. Rethinking religion in global politics*, New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

<u>Other sources of information, primarily for background reading:</u>

Jeffrey Haynes (2007) *Religion and Development: Conflict or Cooperation?*, PalgraveMacmillan.

Jeffrey Haynes (ed.) (2011) *Religion and Democratizations*, Routledge.

Samuel Huntington (1996) *The Clash of Civilisations and the Remaking of the World Order*, Simon and Schuster.

Mark Juergensmeyer (2001) *Terror in the Mind of God: the Global Rise of Religious Violence*, University of California Press.

Pippa Norris and Ronald Inglehart (2004) *Sacred and Secular. Religion and Politics Worldwide*, 2004.

Bassam Tibi (2002) *The Challenge of Fundamentalism. Political Islam and the New World Disorder*, University of California Press.

Essay questions (Choose <u>one</u> essay question. <u>Write about 3,000 words</u>)

1. What is 'secularisation'? How does it affect the relationship between religious actors and politics?

2. Does 9/11 imply that 'Islam' and 'the West' are incompatible?

3. What is religious 'fundamentalism'? Why is it important in some contexts for political outcomes?

4. How do religious actors involve themselves in politics? Illustrate your answer by reference to <u>two</u> named countries.

5. How does globalisation politically affect religious actors?

6. Why are most Western European countries so secular?

7. Can you identify a 'return of religion' in some European countries? If so, what is the evidence?

8. Explain why 'political Islam' is an important factor in many countries in the MENA.

9. How has the relationship between religion and politics altered in <u>two</u> named countries in the MENA after the 'Arab Uprisings'?

Lecture programme

1. How do religion and politics interact?
2. Religious competition and state power
3. Church and State in comparative perspective
4. Religious 'fundamentalism' and politics
5. Religion and globalisation
6. Religion and politics after 9/11
7. Religion and politics in Europe (1)
8. Religion and politics in Europe (2)
9. Religion and politics in the Middle East and North Africa (1)
10. Religion and politics in the Middle East and North Africa (1)
11. Conclusions: Political secularism and religious difference in Europe, the Middle East and North Africa