

“God is Back!” proclaims the title of a 2009 book by the editor-in-chief of *The Economist*. “Democracy is giving the world’s peoples their voice,” asserts a feature in *Foreign Policy* magazine, “and they want to talk about God.” Although many have assumed that modernization would diminish the cultural and political salience of religion, the contemporary world provides little evidence to sustain that belief. Religious difference has been central to some of the most violent conflicts of the past thirty years (the [Balkan Wars](#), the [“Troubles” in Northern Ireland](#), [Israeli-Palestinian border clashes](#), [ethnic cleansing in Burma](#), the [rise of ISIS](#)), even as it is also central to many figures of political resistance (e.g., the Dalai Lama) and a wide range of reformist and humanitarian efforts worldwide. Meanwhile, even in the supposedly more secular West, religion remains a volatile flashpoint on a range of political issues, from immigration and assimilation (the Trump administration’s [“Muslim ban”](#)) to free speech and self-expression (the [Charlie Hebdo affair](#) in France) to the politics of gender and sexuality (the perennial fights over [abortion](#) and [LGBT rights](#)). Without a doubt, religious actors remain a potent and visible presence in the political workings of the contemporary world.

To get a handle on this complex topic, this course is organized around a set of carefully selected case studies that showcase some of the most significant philosophical, legal, and sociopolitical challenges posed by the problem of state governance of religion. In the first Unit, we explore the intellectual foundations of our modern ideas about religion and state power by examining writings by James Madison and Jean-Jacques Rousseau, whose long-term influence on the political traditions of the United States and France should not be underestimated. Using the contrast between their writings, we will begin to understand why, to take just one example, headscarf bans in France are legal and broadly popular, but an obviously unconstitutional, political non-starter in the United States. From there, we move to the present day, where we consider the thorny challenges of attempting to protect “religious freedom,” as many national constitutions and declarations of human rights claim to do. We will take as our starting point the provocative book, *The Impossibility of Religious Freedom* (2004) by Winnifred Sullivan, and evaluate its argument in light of two recent religious freedom court cases: *Navajo Nation v. US Forest Service* (2007), a dispute about Native American sacred land use, and *Masterpiece Cakeshop v. Colorado Civil Rights Commission* (2018), a dispute about whether vendors with religion-based opposition may refuse to provide services for gay weddings. As these texts will show, “religious freedom” has become a particularly vexing ideal for states to litigate effectively and fairly. Finally, the course will turn to a set of global case studies that illustrate how religion has intersected with various political realities, including the fomenting of resistance movements (the Palestinian territories), the forging of power sharing agreements (Nigeria), and the consolidation of state power against internal threats (China).

Throughout the course, then, we will have ample opportunity to reflect on the oddities and perplexities of religion’s place in the modern world. For myself, religion has always been a subject of interest because it is, among the varied repertoire of human behaviors, among the most difficult to explain and comprehend. The claims of religion on other people, perhaps particularly when they entail politics, can seem baffling, irrational, even contemptible. To write about religion thus requires care and compassion, an attentiveness to analytical precision and evenhandedness. Students in the class can expect not only to think carefully about some of the

trickiest and most tendentious political issues of the modern era, but also how to write effectively and persuasively about them. Learning to write about religion, then, is a great preparation for learning to write persuasively about any complex or controversial issue.