

History & Civilization - Global Governance - Tor Vergata

Religion and International Politics

Jacopo Cellini (EUI), 4 May 2026

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I hold an MA in Contemporary History (2009) from the University of Florence (Italy), and a PhD in Contemporary History (2015) jointly awarded by the Scuola Normale Superiore (Pisa, Italy) and KU Leuven (Belgium). Since June 2018, I have worked at the European University Institute, and since 2020 I have taught a module on Religion and Politics at the University of Rome Tor Vergata.

My main research interests lie in the history of European integration, and the impact of religion in post-WWII European societies. I am currently working on projects on [European banks](#) and environmental protection, the [role of social partners](#) in EC/EU policymaking, and risk management and sustainability in archival institutions. I am the author of an intellectual biography of [Alcide De Gasperi](#) (Carocci 2025).

My links

- [Curriculum vitae](#)
- [EUI profile](#)

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Plan of the Lectures

- Lectures 1-2 (**4-5 May**): General introduction to the role of religion in international relations; Overview of religions in the world; Relations between religion and the State; Introduction to Roman Catholicism.
- Seminar 1 (**6 May**): seminar on lectures 1-2.
- Lectures 3-4 (**7-8 May**): zoom on a few case studies (from the first and second half of the century), indicative of how religion and politics may interact, and how their interaction has an impact on societies and on the international system.
- Seminar 2 (**11 May**): seminar on lectures 3-4.
- Final lecture (**12 May**): lecture on Christian roots of Europe + discussion.

Goals:

- Account for the religious factor in international relations
- Investigate the relations between religion and politics from a historical perspective.
- Understand the historical features of Roman Catholicism through the analysis of relevant case studies.

Exam:

- Prepare using reading materials, slideshows and taking notes during the lectures.
- Modalities: 1 question chosen between the 4 addressed at seminars + 1 follow-up question (5 min total).

Religion in IR theories

- 1648, **Peace of Westphalia**: conventional date of birth of the **international system** (system of sovereign States), end of religious wars. What changed:
 - Internally: principle *cuius regio, eius religio* ('the ruler determines the religion of his realm').
 - Externally: the signatories agreed to desist from attempting to change the religion of the population through war.
- Scholars of international relations, until very recently, did not care for religion in IR theory.

Secularization (theory)

- Influence of ‘**secularization theory**’: the transition from the traditional society to the modern society (modernization), entails a **retreat of religion from the public sphere to the private sphere**, and eventually leads to its disappearance.
- **Secularization** (historical process): **disconnection between religion and public life**. This process started with the Enlightenment and the French revolution.
- Scholars have contextualized this process: typical of **Western societies** (which tried to give it universal meaning).
- Is religion just a relic of the past? Secularization theory failed to predict the impact of religion in the international system over the last 50 years.

Accounting for religion in international relations

- What prompted a renewed interest for the impact of religion in international relations: rise of **religious fundamentalism**, especially the kind which employs terrorist violence.
- Fundamentalism:
 - in the **media**, the term is normally used to refer to individuals, movements and organizations judged to be: religiously committed to an ideal moral order and to a related social and political project; intolerant of those who do not share their faith and ideology; willing to impose their vision by force if necessary.
 - Findings of **research on fundamentalism**:
 - A. there is no ideal type of fundamentalism
 - B. we can identify fundamentalist streams in all the major world religions
 - C. there are common organizational features among fundamentalisms (hierarchical, charismatic, authoritarian, patriarchal leadership)
 - D. Fundamentalisms are also a reaction to the process of secularization** (marginalization of religion)

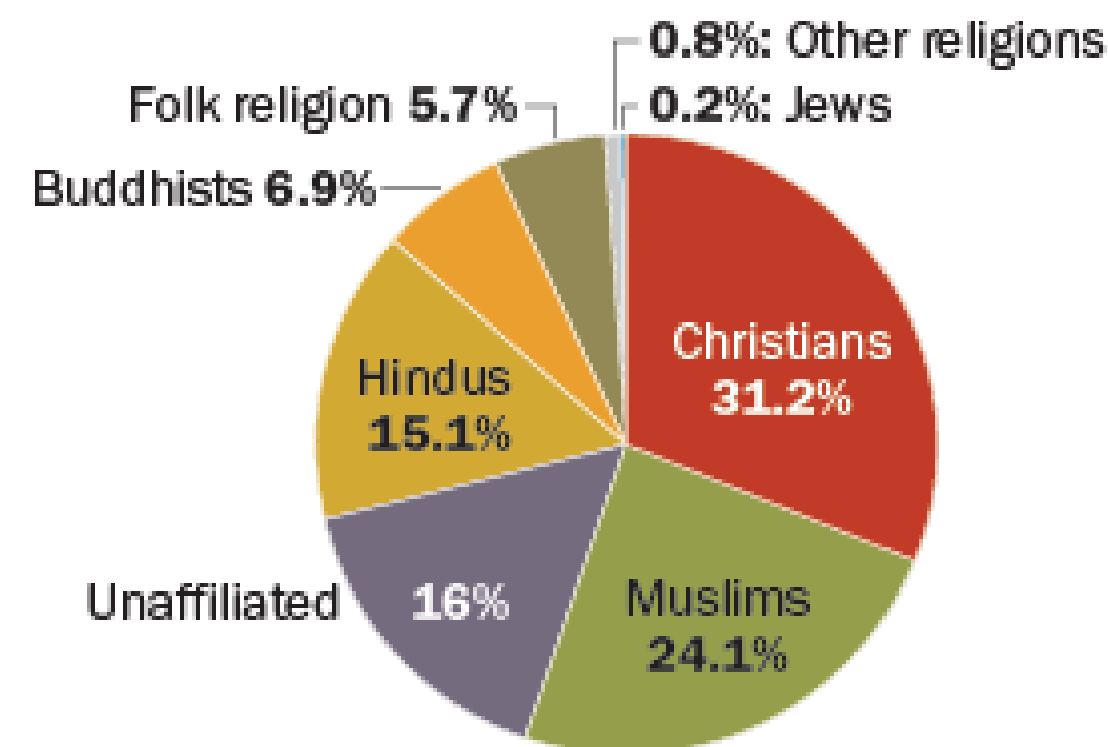
Religions in the world

- Religion (**operational definition**): social and cultural phenomenon that influences aspects of politics, society, and the economy.
- Data on religions in the world: survey of the Pew Research Centre (2010, updated in 2015)
 - [Global religious landscape](#)
 - [Map of prevailing beliefs](#)

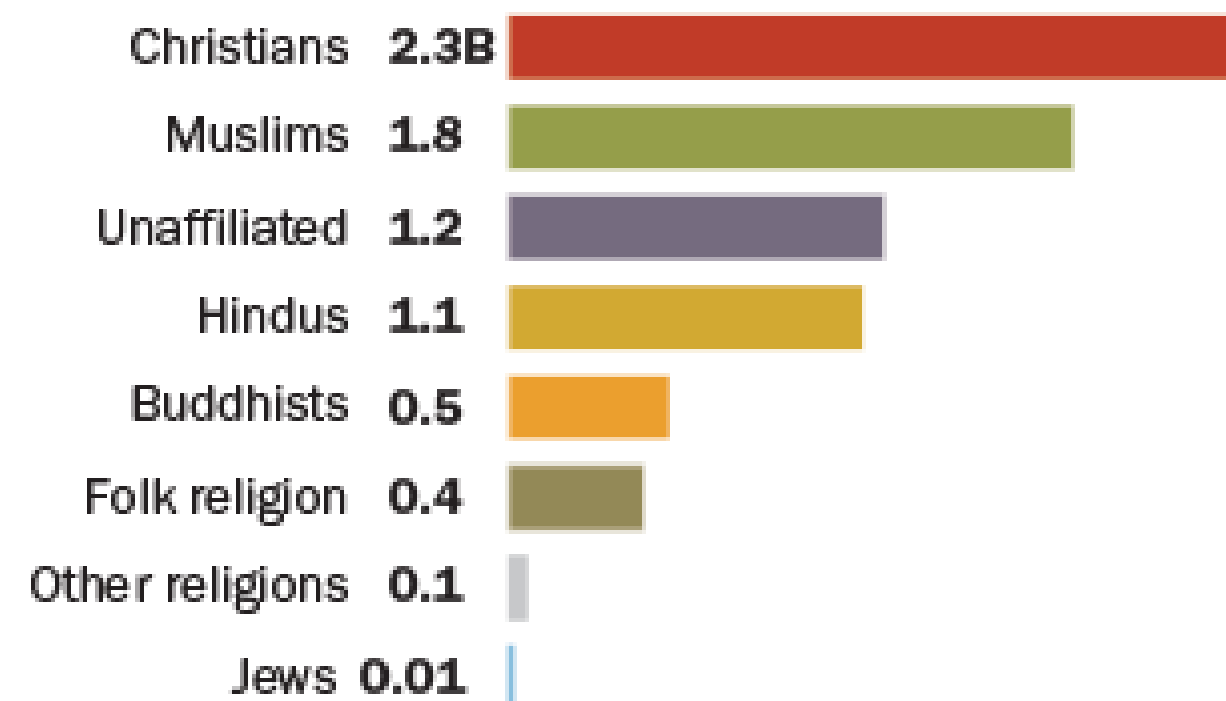
Religions in the world

Christians are the largest religious group in 2015

% of world population



Number of people in 2015, in billions

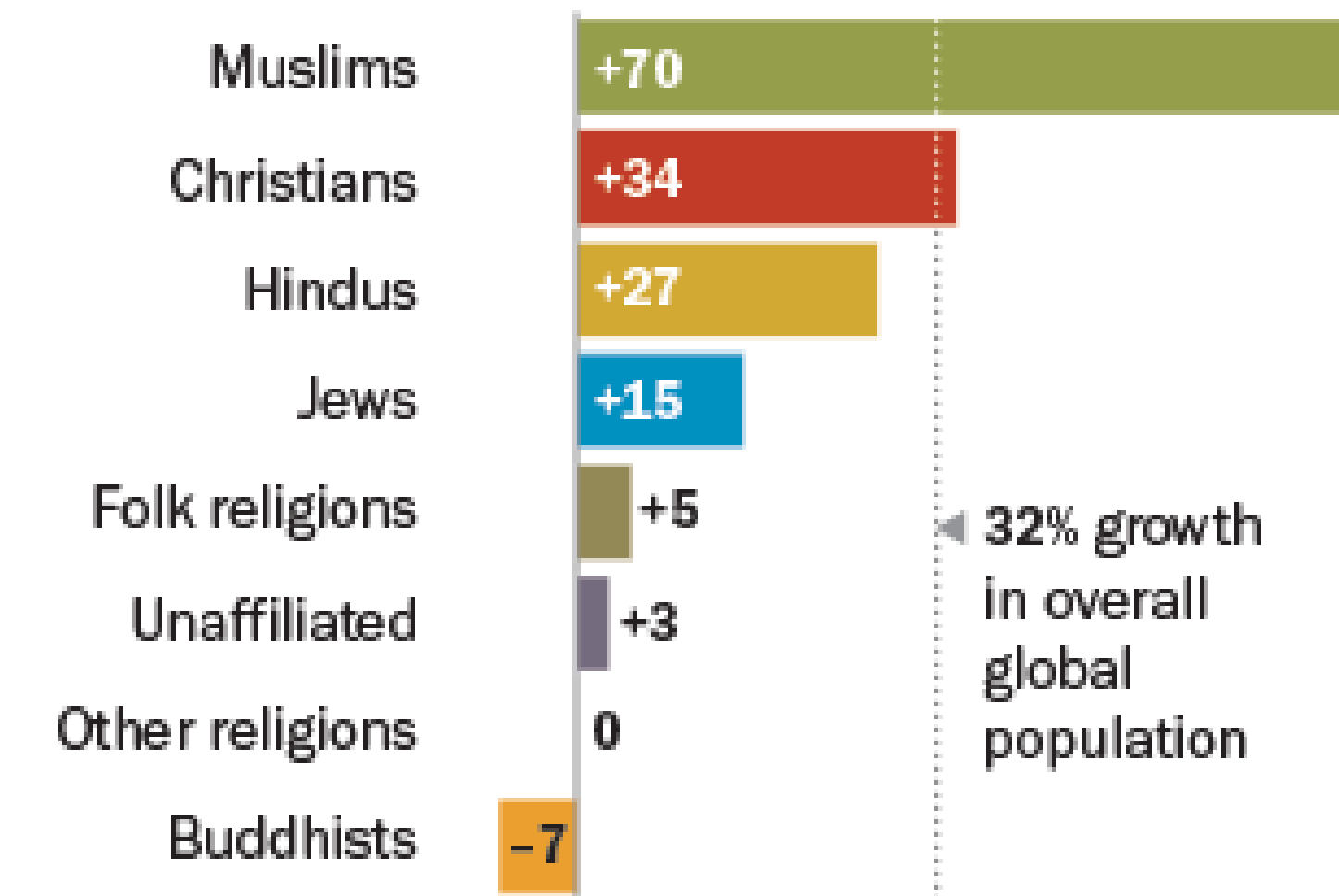


Source: Pew Research Center demographic projections.
See Methodology for details.
"The Changing Global Religious Landscape"

PEW RESEARCH CENTER

Muslims projected to be fastest-growing major religious group

Estimated percent change in population size, 2015-2060



Source: Pew Research Center demographic projections. See Methodology for details.
"The Changing Global Religious Landscape"

PEW RESEARCH CENTER

Religion and the State in comparative perspective

- **Separationist regime (or secular State):** the State is officially neutral in matters of religion (secular State). Role of the French revolution in the end of the «confessional State», where religious affiliation was a condition for citizenship.
- **Church establishment (or semi-secular State):** a Church is recognized by law as the official Church of the nation and is supported by civil authority. System prevailing in Europe until World War II.
- **Theocracy:** government leaders are members of the clergy, and the state's legal system is based on religious law.
- Between the extremes of separationist regimes and theocracies, there are the majority of states in today's world, which favour not religion in general but one or more named particular religions.
- «The liberal democratic option, which claim that religious issues are not business of the state and should be kept off the political agenda as much as possible, has failed to attract general agreement» (Madeley, *Religion and the State*)

Separationist regimes



John Trumbull, Declaration of Independence (1819)



Eugène Delacroix, La Liberté guidant le peuple (1830)

Church establishments

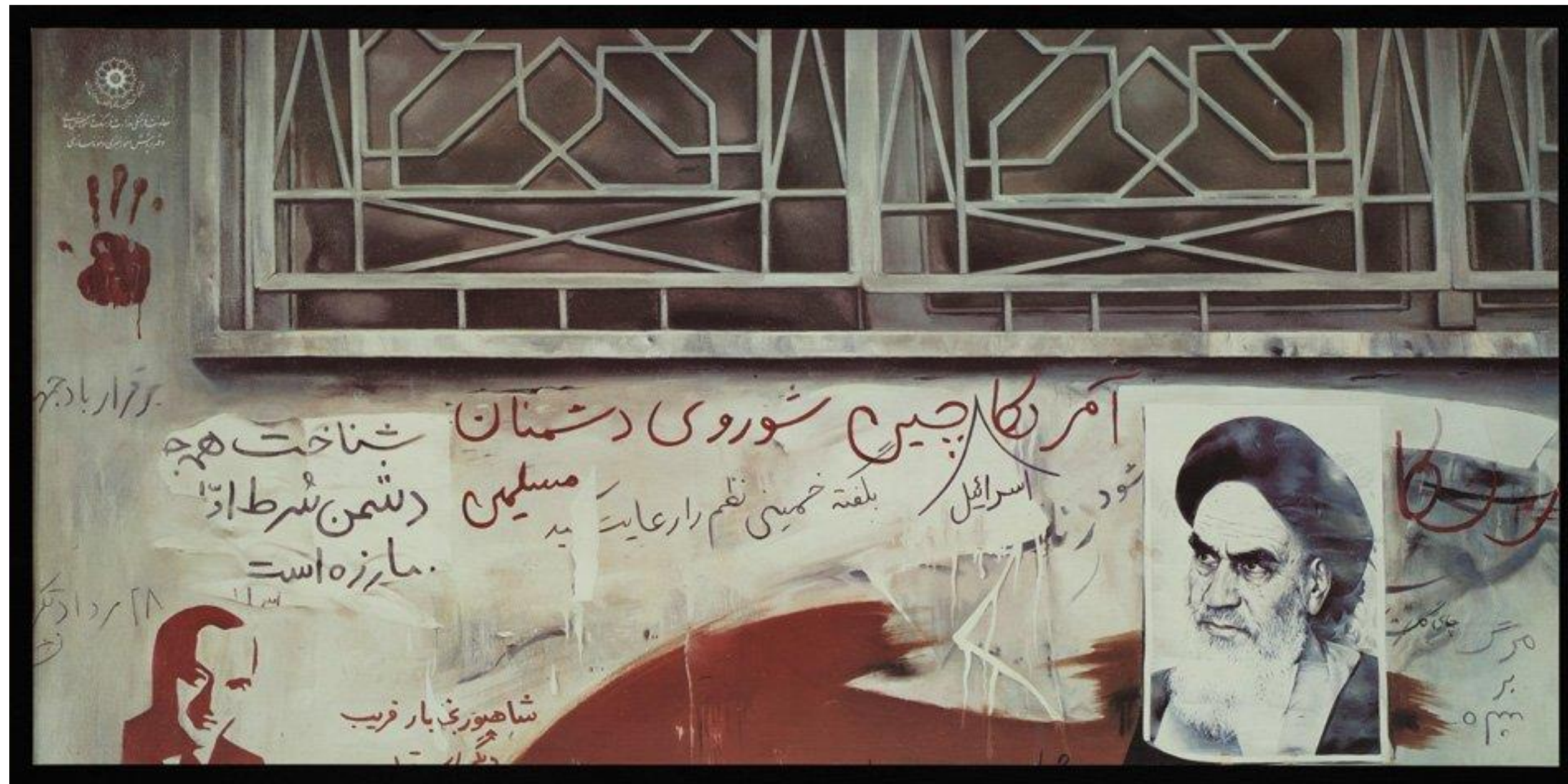


Firma dei Patti Lateranensi, 11 febbraio 1929



Incoronazione di Carlo III, 6 maggio 2023

Theocracies



Graffiti with Ayatolloah Khomeini and 'Ali Shariati, 1981



Taliban spokesman Zabihullah Mujahid speaks to the media at the airport in Kabul on August 31, 2021

A Clash of Civilizations?

- Debate prompted by the book by American political scientist Samuel P. Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order* (Simon & Schuster 1996).
- Thesis: with the end of the Cold War, the struggle between the two superpowers would be replaced by a **clash of civilizations**. Huntington contested Francis Fukuyama's thesis about the '**end of history**': the universalization of Western liberal democracy.
- Definition of civilization (Huntington): "the highest cultural grouping of people and the broadest level of cultural identity people have short of what distinguishes humans from other species". Examples: Western, Sino-Confucian, Japanese, Islamic, Hindu, Slavic-Orthodox, Latin American, possibly African.
- The **Iranian revolution** played a pivotal role in shaping Huntington's theory, which gained popularity after 9/11, although it was critiqued by scholars.

Reading Materials

Required

Jeffrey Haynes (ed.), *Routledge Handbook of Religion and Politics*. Routledge (2nd edition) 2016.

- Chapter 10: John Madeley, *Religion and the State*

Suggested

Jeffrey Haynes, *Religion, secularization and politics. A postmodern conspectus*, in ID., *Religion, Politics and International Relations: Selected Essays*, Routledge 2011

(all uploaded on DIDA)

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