Religion, Power, Politics

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## Contents

**Introduction** 1

1. Religion and Politics in Conflict? 11
   - The Return of Religion to the Public Sphere 11
   - Religion and Politics: What Are We Talking About? 17
   - Religion and Politics in Premodern Societies 23
   - Redefining the Relationship between Religion and Politics in Modern Europe 29
   - Modernization and Secularization 32
   - Critique and the Further Development of Secularization Theory 36

2. Beyond Church and State 41
   - The Public Space: State and Politics 41
   - Religion in the Public Space: Europe 45
   - Public Religion in the United States of America 50
   - Public Religion in Postcolonial States 53
   - The Debate about Religious Freedom 58

3. Religion and Politics in Islam 61
   - The Return of Islam to the Political Stage 61
   - Dissolution of the Traditional Order and Reform Movements 70
   - The Question of Islamism 73
   - Islamic Perspectives for a New World Order 81
   - Future Perspectives 88
4. The Challenge of Fundamentalism 95
   The Political Shift of Fundamentalism 99
   Fundamentalism as a General Type of Political Religion 101
   Fundamentalist Movements in World Religions 105
   Fundamentalism and the Power of Religion in Society 112

5. Religion, Power, and Politics 119
   Legitimacy Problems in the World of States 119
   Order, Power, and Violence 122
   Power, Law, and Morality 128
   Political and Religious Action in the Public Space 134
   Religions as Advocates for a Culture of Dialogue and Peace 138

Summary and Conclusion 149

Notes 153
The relationship between religion and politics is currently the subject of heated debate, not only in academic books and essays, but also at conferences and in the programmes of political foundations. The debate has even reached the editorial pages of the major newspapers. This is astonishing, given the otherwise strictly secular character of public, and particularly political, discourse, at least within European societies. While public opinion as portrayed in the media was and still is prepared to accord religion a limited place within the public space, it nevertheless insists on a clear separation between religion and politics.

One of the catalysts for this unexpected and critical interest in the relationship between religion and politics has certainly been the debate about developments in the Muslim world dating from the Iranian Revolution of 1979 up to current militant forms of Islamism and the international terrorism that invokes them. This obliges us to reflect anew on the secular conception of the state and politics that our culture takes for granted. Our preconceptions are also challenged by the observation that despite the constitutional separation of church and state in the United States, conservative Christian positions have exercised a direct influence on government policy, and not only under the administration of President George W. Bush.

Moreover, there are many countries and regions in which religious traditions have become allied to ethnic and nationalist political movements and have been used to legitimize “identity politics.”
Such tendencies have become stronger since the end of the Cold War and through the pressure of the process of globalization. As a result, many observers and commentators have concluded that religious differences and tensions are among the key reasons for the civil conflicts and disputes of recent decades. According to this view, religion is therefore above all a highly problematic factor in the political arena, and thus needs to be neutralized as far as possible and kept out of the political process.

Such a view has gained additional support from the theory of the American political scientist Samuel P. Huntington, who sees the ideological conflict between the two power blocs of the Cold War being replaced by a “clash of civilizations,” in which a different religion is identified as being at the centre of the eight civilizations that he describes. The theory that he first presented in a 1993 essay and then three years later in a much-discussed book titled *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order* became, in retrospect, a “self-fulfilling prophecy” given the attacks of 11 September 2001 and the proclamation of the “War on Terror” that followed it.¹

A response to Huntington’s provocative thesis came from an unexpected quarter. In a speech to the General Assembly of the United Nations on 21 September 1998, the then president of the Islamic Republic of Iran, Seyed Mohammad Khatami, proposed that the year 2001 be declared the “Year of Dialogue among Civilizations.” The Tübingen theologian Hans Küng had already been promoting his conviction that “there will be no peace among the nations without peace among the religions” in his lectures and in discussions at UNESCO. His efforts bore fruit in 1993 in the “Declaration Toward a Global Ethic” at the Second Parliament of the World’s Religions in Chicago.² After the General Assembly of the United Nations had adopted Khatami’s proposal, the then UN secretary-general, Kofi Annan, appointed a “group of eminent persons,” including Küng and Richard von Weizsäcker, to draw up a report on the Dialogue of Cultures. The report was published in 2001 with the title *Crossing the Divide: Dialogue among Civilizations.*³ It countered the theory of the clash of civilizations, based...
on the classical friend/enemy perspective, with a new paradigm for global relations based on dialogue and cooperation and guided by the affirmation of common values as formulated in the Declaration Toward a Global Ethic.

This is the background to the question being dealt with in this book as to whether religions are able to provide an autonomous and possibly even a constitutive contribution to building a new world order. This is linked to the wider question as to whether in the global context, and in what way, traditional perspectives on the role of religion and politics need to be revised and rethought. The starting point for this study is the observation that globalization has demonstrated the limits of the state-centred paradigm of the international order and has made urgent the development of forms of political governance that transcend the model of the nation-state, which is sovereign both internally and externally. The state-centred and secular understanding of politics is linked to a particular understanding of religious practice and to demands for the legal and institutional separation of religion and politics that are questionable in a global framework. It is the “return” of religion to national and global public space that points to fundamental problems of legitimacy in the “world of states.” A world order that does not exist exclusively to balance the national interest of sovereign states, but is intended be in accordance with the intentions and interests of people and nations, needs, for the sake of its own legitimacy, to respect the values transmitted through the cultural and religious traditions of humanity and to translate them into general rules for human coexistence. The development of a global “rule of law” based on the universal application of human rights presupposes the creation of a “public space” within which religion and politics are able to deploy their distinct but interrelated power to become responsible for shaping a future world order.

The first chapter examines the historical development of the fraught relationship between religion and politics and the way each of them relates to power. It becomes clear that the secular understanding of politics and the increasing banishment of
religion to the private sphere is the result of a historical process in Europe that is without parallel in other regions. The secularization theory based on this development and the assumption that there is a necessary connection between modernization and secularization must therefore be revised. Chapter 2 introduces the concept of the “public space” and sets out its consequences for understanding religion and politics. It examines the different forms of public religion in Europe, the United States of America, and in postcolonial states. The public space is the area of interaction between religion and politics and their respective forms of power. The fundamental significance of the principle of religious freedom is that it prescribes rules as protection both from the hegemonic claims of institutional politics and from attempts to establish religious or cultural domination. Chapter 3 traces the historical development of Islam and the current controversies about the relationship of religion and politics within Islam, and attempts to sketch out Islamic perspectives for a new world order by picking up the reform discourse within Islam and against the background of recent interreligious dialogue. Chapter 4 tackles the challenge of fundamentalism, which is not restricted to its Muslim form. It begins by examining the origins of Christian fundamentalism in the United States, then moves on to a more general analysis of fundamentalism as a form of “political” religion that has developed in the various religious traditions as a reaction to conflicts over modernization. The debate with fundamentalist movements underlines the need to critically reevaluate the power of religion in society and to develop new forms of the relationship between religion and politics that preserve the freedom and integrity of both of these dimensions and their significance for the life of society. This task is the focus of chapter 5, which, on the basis of what has gone before, concludes the study by attempting to redefine the interaction of religion and politics as far as the relationship between religion, power, and morality is concerned. The aim is to develop criteria for differentiating between political and religious action in the public space, given their simultaneous
reciprocal relationship. In this context, religions have a particular responsibility to be advocates of a culture of dialogue and peace.

The starting point for this study has been the insight and conviction gained through Christian ecumenical and interreligious work that we need to give greater attention to the action of religious communities in the public space. A central concern for all religious traditions is the preservation of a sustainable order in which peoples and nations are able to coexist. They serve in all traditions as the “custodians” of the foundations and rules that maintain order and provide protection from chaos and self-destruction. This can be briefly demonstrated in the following three examples.

First, the declaration of a global ethic of the Parliament of the World’s Religions is based on the “Golden Rule” that is present in all religious traditions as a basic norm for human coexistence and develops this principle in four “guidelines” or commitments:

- Commitment to a culture of nonviolence and respect for life;
- Commitment to a culture of solidarity and a just economic order;
- Commitment to a culture of tolerance and a life of truthfulness;
- Commitment to a culture of equal rights and partnership between men and women.⁴

Since then, in later meetings of the parliament, this basic orientation has been further developed and made more specific. Alongside this there is a range of suggestions for interreligious and intercultural cooperation in dialogue, to which reference is made in chapter 4.

Second, the triad of “Justice, Peace and the Integrity of Creation” affirmed in the Christian ecumenical discussion names the crucial values to which a new world order must be directed if it is to be viable and sustainable. At the World Convocation for Justice, Peace and the Integrity of Creation in Seoul in 1990, ten affirmations were formulated that developed these values,⁵ gathering the
harvest of more than four decades of ecumenical discussion. From the very beginning, “responsibility for the world” has been a central theme of the work of the World Council of Churches. In the first two decades following the founding assembly in Amsterdam (1948), efforts to prevent a nuclear confrontation between the two power blocs during the Cold War were at the forefront. In the course of decolonization, the issues of economic and social development and overcoming racism gained in importance. By the mid-1990s, at the latest, the issue of globalization and its consequences had moved to the centre of the discussion. There is no doubt that the search for a new world order has taken on a new urgency and quality for the churches because of the process of globalization.

Third, the Roman Catholic Church has joined in the debate about globalization and a new world order through the social encyclical of Pope Benedict XVI, Caritas in Veritate. The encyclical is dedicated to the memory and new reception of Populorum Progressio, the encyclical by Pope Paul VI on integral human development published more than 40 years ago. Among the changes that have taken place since then the encyclical raises up the “explosion of worldwide interdependence,” that is, globalization (no. 33). Globalization is a priori neither good nor bad. It offers opportunities and carries risks. The financial and economic crisis of the early 21st century means that the process of economic globalization urgently needs to be placed under clear political direction and supervision (no. 41/2). In this context, the encyclical calls for the creation of a “true world political authority” vested with effective power “to ensure security for all, regard for justice, and respect for rights” (no. 67).

This study is an attempt to deal with the experiences and challenges gained through the many years of my work at the World Council of Churches, most recently as general secretary from 1993 to 2003. As a fellowship that now counts about 350 member churches from all regions of the world, the WCC is the biggest and one of the oldest nongovernmental organizations with consultative status at the United Nations. The role of the public political
responsibility that churches share for justice and peace in a new world order has shaped the work of the WCC since its founding in 1948. The intense and controversial debates over worldwide economic and social development, the realization of human rights and the struggle against racism, over nuclear weapons and disarmament, climate change and the preservation of creation, and the continuing search in all of these issues for the foundations and criteria for a political ethic in a global context are among my most important experiences in my three-decade-plus involvement with the WCC.

The historic political upheaval of 1989–1990 that brought with it the end of the confrontation between the Eastern and Western blocs and the rapid spread of the process of globalization obliges us to rethink many of the convictions that existed until then about a future world order. The first Gulf War of 1991, the armed conflicts in the former Yugoslavia from 1992 to 1999, the genocide in Rwanda in 1994, as well as the numerous “new wars” in the Caucasus, Sudan, and West Africa, in the Philippines, and in Indonesia have led to intense debates about nonmilitary, political forms of conflict resolution, and responsibility for the protection of populations that are victims of the military use of force. Such debates have become more intense through the spread of international terrorism. Apart from this, the WCC has participated intensively in the major world conferences of the United Nations on environment and development (Rio 1992), human rights (Vienna 1993), social development (Copenhagen 1995), the role and the rights of women (Beijing 1995), racism (Durban 2001), and in the respective follow-up conferences. Through these conferences and through the controversial debate about the consequences of economic and financial globalization, the WCC has been increasingly pulled into to the search for a sustainable world order.

One of the particular challenges was and is linked to the entry of the major world religions into the global public space. The Parliament of the World’s Religions gave a clear signpost with its “Declaration Toward a Global Ethic” in Chicago noted above. The WCC has for many years played a consultative role in
the initiatives of the World Conference of Religions for Peace. As WCC general secretary I was invited to events with “religious and spiritual leaders” at the Millennium World Peace Summit (2000), a meeting of the World Economic Forum (2002), a consultation of the International Labour Office about the “Philosophical and Spiritual Dimensions on Decent Work” (2002), a meeting of the InterAction Council (2003), and of the Europe Economic Forum (2006). It became clear to me as I took part in these events that there was a need for a more fundamental evaluation of the relationship between religion and politics and of the way in which they exercise their responsibility for social order in both the national and international context. The expectations that economic leaders and politicians have of religions and their leaders as guardians of the moral and ethical traditions of humanity, and of their ability to mediate in the current situations of conflict, requires religions, and not least Christian churches, to engage in critical self-reflection about their action in the public space.

After leaving the WCC I had the opportunity to deal in greater detail with these issues both theoretically and practically, as the only representative of a religious organization to be appointed to the “Helsinki Process on Globalization and Democracy.” Within this process, which concluded in 2008, I had many opportunities to deepen my reflections on issues of religion and politics and to test them with experts from all areas of public life. Two teaching assignments—at Harvard Divinity School (2005/6) and the Ecumenical Institute Bossey (2006/7)—offered the possibility through seminars with students to go more deeply into the ethical issues linked to the relationship of power, law, and morality, as well as the different entry points of religious traditions into the relationship between religion and politics.

What I now present in this study are the preliminary conclusions of a path of discovery that has certainly not come to an end. In the course of my reflections I have found that the issues of religion and politics are the subject of lively academic debate, especially in the Anglo-Saxon world, which has resulted in numerous
publications. The chapters that follow testify my debt to such investigations, although the choice of the research from the political, social, and religious sciences is to a certain extent arbitrary and makes no claims to academic completeness. I am aware that in this study I am dealing with an area that lies outside my own academic competence. I have therefore abstained from engaging in critical debate with the various positions and research that are presented here. My interest is not to join in a discussion among established experts but, rather, to consider and to critically reflect upon the various experiences that have been mentioned and the challenges that become apparent in a wider context.

My roots in the ecumenical movement of the Christian churches and my longstanding interest in the issues of Christian political ethics and the responsibility of churches in the public political space is, of course, able to be discerned in the chapters that follow. However, I have concentrated on the issues that affect all religions, naturally including Christianity.

In working on this study, I have received suggestions, encouragement, and constructive criticism from my longstanding colleagues and friends Martin Robra (Geneva), Heinrich Schäfer (Bielefeld), and Wolfram Stierle (Berlin). The continual exchange with my wife, Elisabeth, and the discussion with my four sons, Martin, Ulrich, Simon, and Christoph, all of whom have their own expertise in many of the issues discussed here, was and continues to be of particular importance to me. This book is dedicated to them.
1. Religion and Politics in Conflict?

**The Return of Religion to the Public Sphere**

One of the most striking features of the world’s current upheavals is that politicians and business leaders repeatedly look to humanity’s religious traditions in the hope that a dialogue of cultures and religions might help create a culture of mutual responsibility among citizens and communities, thereby engendering a solid foundation for efforts to create a new world order.¹ There are, however, strong reasons to be somewhat skeptical as to whether religions are able to make such a contribution toward shaping a new, sustainable world order. We have seen only too clearly the many conflicts of recent times in which the protagonists legitimized their policies through the use of religious values or by stirring up religious passions and loyalties. Even if it is conceded that most of these conflicts are due not to religious differences but have political or economic origins, religious traditions nevertheless seem to possess a potential for violence that can be used at will to advance sectional interests and objectives.

It is the so-called monotheistic religions of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam that are the principal targets of this critique. Some scholars say, for example, that their zeal to enforce the truth of the one God is evidence of their “inherent violence.”² While they concede that these religions have taken crucial steps toward overcoming
traditional hierarchies and boundaries between nations and ethnic groups, races and classes, establishing a powerful religious universalism through the principle of the equality of all believers, they assert that this has been at the cost of making a radical distinction between believers and unbelievers:

The seed of religiously motivated violence lies in the universalism of the equality of believers which withholds from non-believers what it promises to believers: dignity for fellow human beings and equality in a world of strangers. [...] Whoever declares him- or herself in favour of belief will be saved. Whoever neither will nor can believe will be damned—in this world and the next. The distinction between ‘we’ and the ‘others’ becomes emotionally charged by the cosmic struggle between the ‘powers of good’ that have to overcome the ‘powers of evil’ if the world is to be saved. In this way, the absolute nature of the one-and-only monotheistic God creates an entire world of ‘others’ who have to be combated.3

These provocative claims are based on an idiosyncratic interpretation of the source material, especially the biblical texts. In his book about the alleged dangers of religion,4 the Berlin theologian Rolf Schieder has convincingly refuted such claims. The “monotheism theory,” however, is just one of the apparent threats for which religions are held responsible. Many people find the religiously motivated terrorism emanating from fundamentalist movements still more threatening. In his book Terror in the Mind of God, published even before the attacks of September 2001, the American sociologist Mark Juergensmeyer studies the global increase in religiously motivated violence, examining five case studies in the United States, Israel, Palestine, India, and Japan.5 He concludes that those who commit such acts are making symbolic statements. Their political strategy is to use religious images and the symbols of a cosmic war between the children of light and the children of darkness to create a climate of fear and a readiness to engage in an all-embracing spiritual conflict that demands an “all-or-nothing” response, and in
Religion and Politics in Conflict?

Juergensmeyer points out that symbolic representations of violence can be found in all religions: violence is sacralized by a “spiritual battle,” since only thus can the violent experiences of chaos, death, disorder, destruction, and decay be brought under control. At the same time, this symbolic legitimation of violence often compensates for experiences of powerlessness and humiliation. This is particularly the case for young men in the Islamic world, for whom social and professional marginalization is linked to their disillusionment with the model of society provided by secular nationalism and who are searching for an alternative based on religion.⁶

Religiously motivated terrorism is, of course, only the most dramatic, and in its influence probably overestimated, manifestation of a development that began in the 1970s and that has resulted in religions and religious movements becoming key actors on the political stage in many different contexts. Until a few decades ago, the dominant and barely questioned belief was that the influence of religion on the organization of social and political life would decline and that religions would be relegated to the private sphere of purely personal views. Religious beliefs should thus, it was argued, be kept out of the rational business of politics and business. This was expressed in demands for a clear separation between religion and politics, so as to keep the organization of the political order free from the influence of religious principles.

This tacit assumption has been challenged in recent times by the emergence of religious movements with overtly political aspirations. There have already been several studies of such developments. Thus, in his book first published in 1991, The Revenge of God: Resurgence of Islam, Christianity and Judaism in the Modern World, Gilles Kepel, a French sociologist and researcher of Islam, studies conservative and fundamentalist movements such as the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt and the Islamic revolution in Iran, the Catholic movement “Communion and Liberation” (Communione e Liberazione), the New Christian Right in the United States, and the Gush Emunim (“Block of the Faithful”) movement in Israel. All
of these movements, he concludes, radically call into question the fundamentals of secular modernity, and thus also the separation of religion and politics, and seek a fundamental reorganization of the world based on religious principles.\textsuperscript{7}

Other studies have placed these developments in a broader global context, interpreting the growing public influence of religious movements and organizations as evidence for the need to revise the conventional idea that modernization leads to the progressive secularization, that is, privatization, of religion. Thus Jeff Haynes in his 1998 book \textit{Religion in Global Politics} examines the processes of “deprivatization” of religion in different regions of the world. His conclusion is that religions gain new influence in the public sphere when they contribute to the defense of the endangered cultural identity of a social group, strengthening its internal solidarity in a situation of cultural change. “In sum,” Haynes states, “the key to understanding the contemporary socio-political role of religion is that it regularly furnishes the resources for groups to try to deal with the effects stemming either from the processes of modernization or the contradictions of post-modernity.”\textsuperscript{8}

Meanwhile, Juergensmeyer has produced a revised and updated version of his earlier study, \textit{The New Cold War? Religious Nationalism Confronts the Secular State} (1992). In his 2008 book, \textit{Global Rebellion: Religious Challenges to the Secular State, from Christian Militias to al Qaeda}, Juergensmeyer argues that “the revival of religious politics at the dawn of the twenty-first century is due in large part to the loss of faith in secular nationalism in an increasingly globalized world.”\textsuperscript{9}

In the course of decolonization and the beginnings of modernization in former colonial states, secular nationalism became the dominant ideology of state building. Leaders of religious and cultural minorities, in particular, as well as members of the educated, urban elites, willingly adopted the “spirit of secular nationalism.” Nationalism took the place formerly occupied by religion as the glue that held society together. This development, influenced as it was by the European Enlightenment, now faces increasingly strident opposition, especially in the regions of the southern hemisphere, where the
social and political order is still anchored in practices and customs shaped by religious traditions. In these countries we are therefore dealing with two competing frameworks of social order: secular nationalism (allied with the nation-state) and religion (allied with large ethnic communities, in part transnational).10

Because religion ... and secular nationalism are ideologies of order, they are potential rivals. Either can claim to be the guarantor of orderliness within a society; either can claim to be the ultimate authority for social order. Such claims carry with them an extraordinary degree of power, for contained within them is the right to give moral sanction for life-and-death decisions, including the right to kill. When either secular nationalism or religion assumes that role by itself, it reduces the other to a peripheral social role.11

As ideologies of social order, religion and secular nationalism have such a close structural and functional equivalent, according to Juergensmeyer, that the dividing line between them has always been quite thin: “Both are expressions of faith, both involve an identity with and a loyalty to a large community, and both insist on the ultimate moral legitimacy of the authority invested in the leadership of that community.”12 In its cultural expression secular nationalism shows itself to be a “Western construct” and is therefore considered by many in the global South as a “mask for a certain form of European Christian culture” that needs to be resisted.13 Particularly for those who had welcomed secular nationalism with almost messianic expectations, disappointment at the failure of its blessings to materialize is turned into its “satanization.”14 This results in different forms of religious politics based on a hazardous attempt to combine religion and the modern ideologies of nationalism and transnationalism. In his book, Juergensmeyer analyzes the manifestations of this “religious rebellion” against secular nationalism, starting with its origins in the Middle East, via the regions of Asia to Eastern Europe and the United States. A separate chapter is devoted to the transnationalization of the rebellion in the form of “global jihad.”
In a comprehensive analysis of the role of religion in the context of globalization, Peter Beyer concludes that while the instrumental rationality of social systems and economic policies inexorably drives religion into the private sphere, new religious movements are developing and operating in the public, political sphere. Such movements are a reaction to the contradiction between the officially proclaimed values of the global system such as equality and progress, and its actual consequences as seen in increasing structural inequality and marginalization. Like all social movements, they have their place in the lifeworld that determines the collective identity of social groups, and they mediate traditional religious functions and new social challenges in the context of globalization. Beyer examines five case studies: the new Christian Right in the United States, movements of liberation theology in Latin America, the Islamic revolution in Iran, the new religious Zionism in Israel, and the ecumenically inspired environmental movement. Despite their obvious differences, all these movements have two main similarities: (1) they mobilize around the unresolved problems of the global system and thus behave in an “antisystemic” fashion; and (2) they address these problems by attempting to influence the dominant social systems, especially the political and legal systems. This may take the form of the defense of religious and cultural identities against the relativizing forces of globalization, and be linked to nationalist aspirations. The movements may also, as in the case of liberation theology or comparable ecumenical endeavours, direct themselves to the creation of a new global culture of solidarity and thus the transformation of the global system itself. This confirms the observation that the “return” of religion in the public sphere is, at least indirectly, a consequence of the process of globalization. A critical examination of the traditional notions of the relationship between religion and politics is required, to the extent that the state-centred model of the political order has reached its limits as a result of globalization.
Religion and Politics: What Are We Talking About?

Up until now we have been employing the words *religion* and *politics* in very general terms without defining how they are being used. Such clarification is particularly necessary given that the apparent changes in the relationship between religion and politics, and the critical discussion about the alleged “return” of religion to the public sphere, is at least partly related to different approaches in dealing with the social reality of religion and politics. Each attempt at a definition raises more questions than it can answer. Despite this, we need to clarify the terms we are talking about to arrive at a working definition.

In the case of “religion,” any definition depends on whether it is based on a functional or a substantive understanding of religion. The functional definition of religion, first developed by Emile Durkheim within the sociology of religion and still very influential, sees religion as a system of beliefs and practices that promotes the social integration of a social group.16 The substantive definition of religion goes back to the early attempts to elaborate a phenomenological understanding of religion and sees the relationship to transcendence as being central to all forms of religion. Such a definition may be based on religious symbolic systems and the ideas they express about the general order of existence, or it may relate to religious experience and religious practice as ways of dealing with contingency in human life. Any such definition has its justification and its plausibility in the context of a reference system of given theoretical assumptions. This relativity of all definitions applies particularly to the commonly accepted understanding of religion in the European tradition, which is focused on an organized system of religious teachings and on the form of institutionalized religious bodies. This understanding of religion, based on the historical forms of Christianity and the related distinction between religion and culture, cannot simply be applied to other social and cultural contexts: “In cultures where religion is an integral part of the whole of life and is not separated out as a separate area, where it is understood as
a path for the whole of the life of the community and of the individuals within it, as in Eastern cultures, or as the basis of all forms of life, as in tribal societies . . . then a specific concept that refers only to religion is largely absent.”

In the context of this study that focuses on the relationship of religion and politics, the definitional discussions in the science and philosophy of religion can complement each other. At any rate there is a growing trend to do away with a “definition” of religion, and instead to concentrate on the description and analysis of religious practice. This would mean taking into account both the subjective and objective aspects of religious practice, that is to say, the perspective of individual religiosity and its collective expressions, as well as its emotional and cognitive dimensions.

The Religion Monitor 2008 published by the Bertelsmann Stiftung uses a grid of six core dimensions of religiosity that come from the sociology of religion, that is, “intellect, ideology (belief), public practice, private practice, experience, consequences.” In the context of this study, Martin Riesebrodt has produced a helpful analysis in stating that religious practice rests on three basic assumptions that distinguish it from other forms of social action, namely: (1) the assumed existence of “supernatural” personal or impersonal powers whose actions (2) control dimensions of human social life that normal social actors cannot control directly by their own power, and to which there is nevertheless (3) access by certain forms of practice or communication. Religious practice is thus directed at those dimensions of human life that are beyond the routine technical control of a given society and for the management of which the intervention of supernatural powers appears necessary. Religious institutions can thus be understood as the ensemble of rules and norms that regulate the interaction between human and superhuman powers. Religious practice and religious institutions have therefore to do with power, or, as Rolf Schieder puts it: “Religion is the management of power.” Thus religion inevitably finds itself in tension with other manifestations of power and authority, especially when it comes to preventing and resolving crises.
Religious practice is different from other forms of social practice through its reference to transcendence, in making a fundamental distinction between immanence and transcendence, although transcendence does not necessarily need to be interpreted in terms of a conception of God. Instead, it expresses that religion in its symbolic practice is directed toward the meaning of reality as a whole. According to Detlef Pollack, the problem of contingency and the meaning of all existence is at the very centre of religion:

By introducing the distinction between immanence and transcendence, religion narrows the horizons of the world and converts the indeterminate of the world into the determinate. In this way it makes contingency bearable. . . . The issue for religion is thus, that if it wants to deal with contingencies, it needs to make the transcendent accessible. . . . Only if both things can be guaranteed—the reference to transcendence and its accessibility in the immanent—are religious forms able to fulfil their function of dealing with contingency.

For the purpose of a working definition, the proposal of Theo Sundermeier may suffice, who “defined” religion as follows: “Religion is the communal response of a human being to the experience of transcendence, which is expressed in ritual and ethics.” Within this understanding of religion Sundermeier distinguishes between “primary and secondary religious experience,” thereby expressing that the phenomena of coping with the world and the experience of religion are interdependent. The limited experience of reality of self-contained small groups or tribal societies corresponds to “primary religion.” Such “primary religions” express experiences that contain a universal claim to validity. They influence and shape their societies, ethics, and culture through symbols and rituals. These primary experiences are clearly present within all religions. The “secondary religious experience” comes into play when there is a change in the perception of reality: “To the extent that the smaller society is destroyed or is called into question . . . and changes to become a
larger society, so there needs to be a new way of coping with the world. The traditional conception no longer applies. In the religious sphere, this process of change is sensed, predicted, initiated and managed by seers, prophets and reformers. The larger society leaves people to their own devices in a broader space of decision making and choice. Secondary religion” is thus characterized by increasing individualization. It takes on conceptual rationality, thereby becoming a system able to be transmitted and characterized by a claim to universality.

The analytical distinction between primary and secondary religion should not, however, be understood as signifying a historical development from “primitive” to “high religion,” since secondary religious experience does not simply replace primary religion but, rather, presupposes it: “The primary religious experience is the foundation on which the secondary is superimposed.” Sundermeier holds that “every world religion is based on the synthesis of two experiences, and is conditioned by the living, unfinished process of these two experiences.” From a historical and philosophical perspective, the fundamental change from the “primary” to “secondary” religion may be interpreted with the help of the theory of the “Axial Age,” as Karl Jaspers characterized the intellectual and religious upheavals in the period from 800 to 200 BCE.

Defining what is meant by “politics” faces similar problems to those encountered in defining religion. A look at current scholarly encyclopedias and reference books shows that there is no consensus as to how politics is to be understood. Each definition is based on different historical, cultural, and ideological assumptions. In the European tradition, politics is primarily associated with the state and state action. In his famous lecture of 1919, “Politics as a Vocation,” Max Weber responds to the question, “What do we understand by politics?”: “The concept is extremely broad and comprises any kind of independent leadership in action.” He continues: “We wish to understand by politics only the leadership, or the influencing of the leadership, of a political association, hence today, of a state . . . a state is a human community that (successfully) claims the
monopoly of the legitimate use of physical force within a given territory.” And a little later, he states: “Hence, ‘politics’ for us means striving to share power or striving to influence the distribution of power, either among states or among groups within a state . . . . He who is active in politics strives for power either as a means in serving other aims, ideal or egoistic, or as ‘power for power’s sake,’ that is, in order to enjoy the prestige-feeling that power gives.”

By tying politics to the state and the pursuit of power, Max Weber is part of the tradition of European modernity that goes back to Niccolo Machiavelli and Thomas Hobbes, which disengaged itself from the older tradition of understanding of politics developed by Plato and Aristotle in Greek philosophy. In this latter understanding, politics is related to the *polis* as the basic form of communal life, as Hannah Arendt has underlined in her writings. *Politeia* refers to the space for the life of an ordered community, and particularly the participation of free citizens in shaping this order, which is directed to a “good life in righteousness.” Politics in this sense as an expression of concern for “public affairs” was clearly defined and distinguished by Aristotle from the *Oeconomica*, which he saw as a matter for the “private” household, understood as *oikos* and thus needing to be kept apart from the “public space” of the *politeia*. In this tradition, particularly in that founded by Aristotle and which continued in the Roman philosophy of the state, politics was an integral part of practical, that is, ethical, philosophy.

This tradition persisted in the thought of Augustine and Thomas Aquinas, and still influenced how politics was understood in the European Middle Ages. A fundamental change began with the Renaissance and the beginnings of modernity. This break with the classical conception of politics is expressed most clearly in the thought of Machiavelli, which quite intentionally severed the traditional connection between politics and ethics (or religion). Politics was “secularized” and reorganized as the theory and practice of acquiring and exercising power, applied to the state as the ruling apparatus. *Raison d’état* replaced the former ethical rationale for politics. The Wars of Religion and the rise of absolutism, together
with the revolutionary movements of the 18th and 19th centuries, strengthened and consolidated this secular understanding of politics, liberated from moral and religious control.

Compared to this étatist understanding, the Anglo-Saxon tradition, and particularly the American tradition influenced by Puritanism, has preserved an older understanding of politics and its ethical justification. Politics as the practice of governance, that is, the leadership of a community, is understood here as a function of society and is linked to the recognition of the legal system (common law). The self-organization of society, including the religious dimension, takes precedence over politics. To a large extent, this tradition lacks a counterpart to the European conception of the state. Politics refers to those specific actions that are characteristic for the task of leadership, that is, the tactics and strategy used in the political process.

The differences between these two traditions have narrowed since the Second World War, mainly due to the fact that democracy has become an accepted constitutional form while the economy has simultaneously emerged as an autonomous power centre. The role of the state vis-à-vis society has thus changed, and politics is no longer solely related to the state and the struggle for power. The field of politics is not confined to the institutional political system, that is, the government, administration, parliament, political parties, courts, and their formal decision-making authority. As Erhard Eppler puts it, “Politics has always had to do with how people live and how, mostly very decidedly, they do not want to live. Civil society is the most primordial instrument available, which people use so that they can live the way they want to live. . . . To that extent, civil society is a place of politics.”

In contrast to the prevailing tendency in both traditions to focus on politics as the practice of governance and the means that are necessary for this, the issue of the objectives of politics—the question of the “good” or “sustainable” organization of the community—is now taking on a new significance. Alongside the guiding values of peace, justice, and human rights, the question of legitimacy is
coming to the fore. In this expanded understanding, politics relates to all intentional actions in the public space. This “working definition” will be used and developed in the chapters that follow. Politics thus includes both the institutional political system (government), as well as the broader framework of political society as a complex of actions and initiatives that aim to influence institutional policies, and finally the civil society—the ensemble of all social groups, including religious communities, that take part in influencing public opinion and in determining the goals of political action.\(^{33}\)

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**RELIGION AND POLITICS IN PREMODERN SOCIETIES**

We turn now to the central question, namely the relationship and reciprocal influence between religion and politics in the shaping of the social order. The discussion so far has made clear that both religion and politics have to do with power and that both are constitutively related to the order of human society. Both religion and politics have to do with the integrity of human coexistence in community—although from different perspectives—and therefore with the issue of “the management of power” (Rolf Schieder). Even a very general description such as this suggests that religion and politics are in tension, because each of them has to do, albeit in different ways, with “the whole” of the life of human society and the way it is organized.

This underlying competitive relationship between religion and politics has, throughout history, led to different policies intended to prevent or at least to limit potential conflicts. It is possible to conceive three different “ideal types” of relationship: (1) religion recognized as the fundamental source of power and authority and thus the measure of the legitimacy of all forms and structures of governance (theocratic tendency); (2) politics exercising an absolute claim to power, including the control of religion up to and including the complete integration of religion into the state system...
(Caesaro-papist tendency); (3) mutual distance, whether in the form of a clear institutional and legal separation of the spheres of religion and politics, with the secularization of politics and the privatization of religion (secular trend), or a conscious withdrawal of religion from public space into an inner world (ascetic/mystical/pietistic tendency). Making a distinction between these three “trends” helps us to analyze the complex relationship between religion and politics. In the way they have developed in history and in social reality, these trends have often been superimposed on each other, because both religion and politics represent fundamental dimensions of the life of the human community as their common field of reference.

We can say that in all premodern, traditional societies the specific roles and functions of religion and politics are scarcely differentiated. Such differentiation takes shape only over a longer period of time. What Sundermeier has identified as being characteristic of “smaller societies” and their primary religious experience also extends beyond tribal societies: an all-encompassing ordering of the world is expressed through symbolic forms, rituals, and rules of conduct. Maintaining this order and restoring it after ruptures is simultaneously a “political” and a “religious” task, and forms the core of the “culture” in question. The categories and distinctions traditionally used in rational analysis cannot simply be applied in a clear-cut fashion. The same goes for the distinction between the specific roles of priests, rulers, and judges. The order that is symbolically represented and ritually secured is simultaneously the source of law and legitimate governance.

To the extent to which self-contained and closed small societies become differentiated and transformed into larger units, so the experience of the world changes, as well as the way in which this order that supports this extended world is conceived. The mastery of the world (Weltbewältigung) that is now required leads to changes at the level of fundamental symbolization and ritual performance. Sundermeier interprets this transition in terms of the emergence of “secondary religions” that, together with a new value being placed
on individuality, and a transcendentally founded order of existence aiming at universality, singles out “religion” as an independent dimension of life in society. Important elements of “primary religion” remain alive in all cultures, however, in the form of “popular religiosity.” This changed experience of the world has implications for the processes of shaping and securing the social order. The area of “politics” in the form of continuous, institutional, and legal arrangements and the appointment of persons with extensive responsibility for leadership takes on a profile of its own, whether through the formation of city-states or feudally ordered empires. Nevertheless, “religion” and “politics” still remain inextricably related to each other in shared responsibility for “the whole” of the life of the community, and continue to be so related for a long period. “Politics” exercises its specific task within the framework of a religiously sanctioned order, from which all forms of governance or exercise of power receive their legitimacy.

Crucial for the differentiated and simultaneously charged relationship between religion and politics is the emergence of a legal system that extends beyond the control of ritual and cultic functions, and that maintains internal peace by placing the relationships of members of the community on a secure basis. All legal systems have their origin in sacred law, which reflects the transcendent order, and from thence receive their binding force. It was a priestly role, assigned to the area of religion, to ensure its respect and enforcement. Sacred law provided the framework within which the “political” governors, that is, judges and kings, could exercise their responsibilities for applying and making laws. The sacred foundations of the traditional fabric of law, morality, and ethics continued for a long time. It is not possible here to discuss the details of the complex historical development, particularly in Egypt, in the ancient Near East, and in the biblical-Israelite context that have been the subject of academic debate in recent years.34 The contemporary discussion about how law and morality are distinct from or related to each other refers back to the original function of law as an intermediary between religion and politics.35
Within the general framework that could only be sketched out here, specific traditions regarding the correlation or differentiation of religion and politics have emerged in different cultural environments. A detailed description and analysis cannot be undertaken here and is not necessary for the limited purposes of this study. Despite criticism of certain details, Max Weber’s research on the typology of domination, as well as on communal and associative relationships, and in this context on the sociology of religion, particularly its relationship to the world, may serve as a starting point for further discussion.\(^{36}\) Weber’s studies on the legitimacy of social and political orders and the characteristic forms of power and domination are of critical importance here. These correspond, as far as religious traditions are concerned, to differing symbolizations of transcendent reality (monotheistic, polytheistic, or pantheistic) and their relationship to and influence on the “world.” The formation of wider social and political power structures is associated with the process of hierarchical structuring and the concentration of transcendent agencies.\(^{37}\)

However one might interpret the apparent phenomenological differences, it was the emergence and political reception of monotheism in Israel and then in Christianity and Islam that led to the tension between religion and politics characteristic of the developments that followed. We have already mentioned the questionable and controversial interpretation of the available source material, especially the biblical narratives of Moses and the covenant at Sinai (Exodus 34), and the possible links to Egyptian traditions from the time of Pharaoh Akhenaten.\(^{38}\) Despite some differences, especially over dating, research leaves little room for doubt that the worship of the one God, who makes a covenant with Israel as God’s people, and at the same time is revealed as the creator and lord of the whole world, is the result of the critical appropriation of the failure of the political ambitions of the kingdoms of Israel and Judah in their disputes with the neighbouring Assyrian and Babylonian empires. There is no direct model for this in the ancient Near Eastern world.
The one God reveals the divine self through God’s law, which determines the order of life of the people and to which the holders of political power are subjected. Through the recognition of the one God as the source of power, of law and of justice, a “secularization” of all traditional forms of “cosmic religiosity” is taking place. The cosmos as God’s creation no longer serves as a religious symbol. The critique of the prophets who have a mandate from God to challenge royal power is the precursor to the fundamental critical distinction between religion and politics, which remains a leaven in the development of both Christianity and Islam.

We will deal in a later chapter with the particular way in which the idea of the unity of God and its consequences contributed to Islam’s understanding of the relationship between religion and politics. To conclude this survey, we shall briefly review the emergence in Christianity of the way in which the relationship between religion and politics was conceived until the beginnings of modernity. In the first centuries CE, the Christian community remained clearly within the prophetic tradition of Jesus, whose proclamation of the rule of God that had dawned fundamentally challenged the religiously legitimized claims to power of the Roman emperor and the Pax Romana proclaimed by the emperor. As followers of their Lord, who was himself a victim of Roman rule, the Christian community lived as a persecuted minority. Their witness to the reign and justice of the one God, and their example of how in their own lives they dealt with persecution, gradually gained acceptance until the so-called shift in the 4th century under Emperor Constantine, who—whether from conviction or from political expediency to preserve the unity and internal peace of the kingdom—recognized the Christian church as a legitimate religion (Edict of Tolerance, 313). Under Constantine’s successor Theodosius I the persecuted minority became the official state religion. The one God of the Christian faith was now identified with the deus summus, the Roman state ideology. In his study of the emergence of the Byzantine state, Hendrik Berkhof arrives at the conclusion:
A state church and an Orthodox imperial ideology as a civic duty—this structure resembles the relationship of state and religion in the heathen Roman Empire like one drop of water resembles another. . . . In the deeper sense, the Christian church was not the victor in 313 but the loser, as it took the place of the old state religion and had to take on the character of this religion against its will and without any gratitude. It became a function of the life of the state and its faith degenerated to an external compulsory cultic act.  

In the years that followed, two different lines of tradition developed in the East and West of the imperial church. In the Byzantine tradition of the East, with its mystical and speculative emphasis on all-encompassing unity, the emperor was regarded as the earthly representative of the universal rule of God. He was responsible not only for maintaining peace and order in the kingdom, but also for protecting the true faith, including the persecution of dissenters and heretics. The relationship between religion and politics, and between church and state, was interpreted as a “symphony,” that is, a close relationship of mutual responsibility and support. The relationship between state and church has often been interpreted as analogous to the relationship between body and soul. Each of the two sides was required to respect the specific role of the other, but together both were responsible for the unity of the empire as a hallowed space.

Unlike the Byzantinism that prevailed in the East with its tendency toward “Caesaropapism” and the high degree of passivity of the church hierarchy vis-à-vis the emperor, a genuinely theocratic tendency, reaffirming the prophetic tradition, developed in the West, influenced by Ambrose and his active commitment to the freedom of the church. According to this perspective, the emperor is a son of the church and does not stand over her, so he has no right to intervene in the life of the church. Even in nonecclesiastical matters, the emperor is to obey the commandment of God, and the church has the prophetic task, *in extremis*, to call the emperor to
obedience to God’s word if he deviates from it in his actions. This primacy of the freedom of the church continued in the West until the Middle Ages. Berkhof notes: “There is a direct line from Milan (the dispute between Ambrose and the Arian Emperor Valentine II) to Canossa (the submission of Henry IV in the Investiture Controversy); it denotes the unity of church and state in the sense that even the holder of the highest state power, because he is a Christian, is subject to the moral commandments of the church and thus the instrument according to God’s will for the construction of a Christian social order.”

We do not need to deal here with further developments in the West from Augustine, via Gelasius, to Pope Gregory VII. To the extent, however, that the theocratic tendency solidified the belief that the emperor’s authority ultimately derives from the church, an ethical and theological principle became an issue of power. Berkhof concludes: “If the church identifies its own authority with the authority of the Word with which it has been entrusted, and sees its obedience to this authority being fulfilled in its obedience to the Pope, it has silently mistaken God’s business for its own business. It was to this distortion that the theocratic idea fell victim in the Middle Ages.”

Redefining the Relationship between Religion and Politics in Modern Europe

The two traditions briefly described here remained in place until the beginnings of modernity and even beyond. The Eastern tradition of the symphony between church and state and the legitimacy it received through the theology of the Byzantine Empire remained determinative in Eastern Europe with its Greek and Slavic influence. After the conquest of Constantinople in 1453 and the end of the Eastern Roman Empire this tradition continued in the national Orthodox churches of the East, especially in Russia, with the claim of Moscow as the “third (and last) Rome” taking the place of the
30 Religion, Power, Politics

Byzantine Empire. Even the later Ottoman Empire saw itself as the “regulatory political successor” of Byzantium.⁴³

In the West, however, developments until the end of the Thirty Years’ War were determined by the conflict between *sacerdotium* and *imperium*, between the papacy and the newly established “Holy Roman Empire of German Nation.” The struggle for the freedom of the church from the religiously legitimated power of the empire reached an initial culmination with the *dictatus papae* of Pope Gregory VII in 1075. But the “papal revolution”⁴⁴ and the universal claim to power of the papacy that it entailed led only to a new phase of the conflict, ultimately acting as a catalyst for the increasing emancipation of politics from a unitary culture founded upon religion. This process of emancipation began in the Italian city-states that were the first to develop a purely secular political structure. It found its theoretical expression in the writings of Niccolo Machiavelli (1469–1527), whose understanding of politics was the “sum of resources that are necessary to acquire power, to maintain power and to make best use of power, whether to win friends, weaken enemies or to widen one’s own sphere of influence.”⁴⁵ According to Machiavelli, the state is a secular order and religion is to be judged by whether or not it is useful to the state. He rejected the autonomous authority of religion and the order that it proclaims; this is the basis for his opposition to Christianity as embodied by the Roman church of his time. *Raison d’état* takes the place of the religious legitimation of measures to maintain the state order.

The most momentous opposition to the unity of the *corpus christianum* characterized by the conflict-ridden interplay between emperor and pope came with the Protestant Reformation in northern Europe. Its political momentum was based on the early emancipation of the cities and principalities from imperial sovereignty, as well as the social revolution of the Peasants’ War. The conflict was not only about the unity of the church, but also and especially about the unity of the empire, which was ultimately guaranteed through the unity of religion. Only when it was demonstrated that military means could not guarantee this unity was there a preliminary
convergence in the Augsburg Religious Peace of 1555 on the basis of “cuis regio eius religio” (“whose realm, his religion”) through the imperial recognition of the Confessio Augustana. This meant, in effect, the end of the political and religious unity of the empire. The traditional guiding principle of the corpus christianum, however, remained intact. “Because it could no longer be sustained in the imperial territory, it was returned to the level of the territories of the sovereign princes where there could still be only one faith. However, this led at the same time to a theologically consummated rupture with the ideal of the unity of Christendom, since the basis of ‘cuis regio eius religio’ was determined precisely by the fact of confessional division.”46 The emergence of territorial states and of confessional territorial churches (Kirchentümer) has the same roots.

The agreement reached in the Augsburg Religious Peace was, however, of only limited duration. The political tensions that followed the Counter-Reformation reopened the conflict and expanded it to the European level. The question of whether it is appropriate to refer to the Thirty Years’ War as a war of religions is still disputed in historical research. Without doubt, the confessionalization of Christendom that began in the second half of the 16th century created a situation where confessional identities could be used to mobilize the population in political conflicts. Religion served as a basis of legitimacy and as a way to stigmatize other believers as “heretics.” In this climate, tolerance was seen as a betrayal of true religion.

The Peace of Westphalia, which ended the Thirty Years’ War in 1648, is often viewed as the beginning of the process of the secularization of politics in Europe and as the basis of the system of sovereign nation-states. Recent studies indicate, however, that a close connection between religion and politics continued long after that date in the European tradition and if anything was reinforced during the era of absolutism. On the other hand, the passions invested in religious conflicts had largely been exhausted by the end of the 17th century, so that the secular political language available since Machiavelli and developed by Hugo Grotius and Thomas Hobbes...
was able to slowly gain acceptance. Therefore, even if the idea and rituals of a God-ordained rule of kings remained in existence for some time, there was a gradual development toward understanding politics and governance as a human institution with the task of guaranteeing the peace and welfare of citizens.47

Historical periodization sees the Peace of Westphalia as the end of the period of transition that began at the Renaissance, in which the closed world of the Middle Ages began to dissolve, and as the beginning of modernity. The Age of Enlightenment that subsequently began is characterized by the critical use of reason, the scientific study of nature, and the emancipation of the new bourgeoisie. Its underlying aim was the freedom of human beings, in the sense of responsibility and autonomy from all external authority, not least from religion.

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MODERNIZATION AND SECULARIZATION

With the French Revolution came the development that is now described by the term secularization. The initial measures undertaken by the National Assembly such as the confiscation of church property and the proclamation of the Civil Constitution of the Clergy, that is, the abolition of the clerical estate, were not fundamentally opposed to religion, but were mostly directed against the central power of the church in social and political life. In the course of the revolution, however, a radical, secular Enlightenment tendency prevailed. This led to a first step in 1795 toward separating church and state. In the conflict-ridden period that followed the Revolution these decisions were modified or partially withdrawn. It was only 100 years later that this fundamental decision was finally implemented through the 1905 law on the separation of church and state. The law prohibited state funding for the church(es) and banished religion from the public space. This secular orientation of the French constitutional tradition is still valid.
today, even if there are increasing demands for it to be revised, not least because of the presence of a large Muslim minority.

French secularism (*laïcité*) has been and is still seen as an expression of the religiously critical direction of the Enlightenment, whereas the Anglo-Saxon tradition of political enlightenment, based on Deism and ethics founded on natural law, maintained the idea of the interrelationship between religion and politics. This was expressed in the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution of the United States of America. The First Amendment (1791), which prohibits the establishment of a state church, as well as any restriction of the free exercise of religion, is also aimed at the separation of church and state. Unlike the French tradition, however, it was not intended to banish religion and the church from the public arena but, rather, to prevent any state or political interference in the sphere of religion. We will return to this difference in the next chapter.

The impetus of the French Revolution, and especially its anticlerical orientation, spread to the neighbouring countries of continental Europe. Everything seemed to suggest that the traditional European system that had existed since the Peace of Westphalia of territorial churches with their close ties to the nation-states was coming to an end. Certainly, the churches took this development seriously, seeing it as a fundamental challenge. It seemed it would contest their hitherto largely unchallenged place in public life and their decisive influence on education, culture, and morals, and cut them off from the support they had hitherto received from the public authorities. It took almost a hundred years, however, until such tendencies prevailed.

These changes have been interpreted using the concept of “secularization.” Originally this term referred to the transfer of church property rights to public authorities (the Principal Decree of the Imperial Deputation, 1803), analogous to the change in the status of priests or religious who left the clerical state and became “secularized.” Since the beginning of the 20th century, however, the term has been used in a figurative sense to describe the impact of
the social and cultural changes unleashed by industrialization and the spread of the modern scientific worldview on the self-understanding and the place of the churches in society. The confrontation with the process of secularization played a central role in European church and theological debates in the first half of the 20th century.

A theoretical version took the form of the theory of secularization as an inevitable consequence of the development of a modern, differentiated society as in the writings of Emile Durkheim and Max Weber. According to Durkheim, secularization designated a change in the social location and role of religion (not only of Christianity) as a consequence of the increasing functional differentiation of society. The division of labour leads to the economy, law, and education taking shape as distinct areas of society, each with its own rationality. Durkheim saw this differentiation of social functions and actors responsible for them as an inevitable consequence of the emergence of modern society. Whereas in the medieval system of the corpus christianum the church and the state authority together ensured the integration of these different functional areas, churches and religious communities became one functional actor among others, with the functions that are not religious in the strict sense being “secularized” and taken over by other actors. Durkheim himself was a staunch supporter of French laïcité.48

Max Weber followed a similar approach in his analysis, though he placed greater emphasis on the interpretation of the change in people’s relationship to the world that began with the Enlightenment, and expressed in the increasing “rationalization” and “disenchantment” of the world. Science, technology, and instrumental reason take the place previously occupied by a religious or magical understanding of the world. The traditional role of religion, namely presenting an all-encompassing view of the world, is transferred to modern science. In his lecture, “Science as a Vocation,” Weber warns against expecting that science will provide a binding interpretation of meaning as a sort of religious prophecy. To the person who cannot bear “like a man” the “fate of the times” in the shape of increasing rationalization, intellectualization, and the disenchantment
of the world, “one must say: may he rather return . . . simply and plainly. The arms of the old churches are opened widely and compassionately for him. After all, they do not make it hard for him. One way or another he has to bring his ‘intellectual sacrifice’—that is inevitable.”

A self-contained theory of secularization was developed, building on the studies of Durkheim and Weber. Its starting point was that the process of modernization accompanied by the increasing rational differentiation of social functions would push religious communities out of public life to the sphere of private life. As a result, religions would concentrate on the specifically religious functions of interpreting reality (Sinndeutung) and dealing with contingency through cultic and ritual exercises. While this might allow a space to develop to shape religious life that is independent of the state, without concern for the social order as a whole, the theory of secularization in its more radical, critical forms, and not only that of Marxism, was linked to an assumption that religions are increasingly marginal factors in the life of society, or even that they would simply die out.

The supporters of this theory, which became a central element in the formation of sociological theory, pointed to the manifest weakening of traditional church structures and the “de-ecclesiasticalization” (Entkirchlichung) of a broad strata of the population in European societies. The fact that the situation in the United States was clearly different was treated as an exception to this rule. There was also the expectation that, as a result of modernization and industrialization, other cultural and religious contexts, not influenced by the Christian tradition, would follow a similar process of secularization—that is, the diminishing influence of religion on public life.

This makes it all the more striking that an author such as Harvey Cox, whose book The Secular City caused a stir in the 1960s by praising secularism as an experience of liberation, would speak thirty years later about the “revival of religion” and the “return of the sacred.” Meanwhile, the sociologist Peter L. Berger, whose 1967 book The Sacred Canopy (also published under the title The Social
Religion, Power, Politics

Reality of Religion) has long been considered a standard work of secularization theory, edited a volume in 2005 under the title The Desecularization of the World. In it he states: “My point is that the assumption that we live in a secularized world is false. The world today, with some exceptions . . . is as furiously religious as it ever was, and in some places more so than ever. This means that a whole body of literature by historians and social scientists loosely labeled ‘secularization theory’ is essentially mistaken.” Berger is here questioning the assumption that modernization “necessarily leads to a decline of religion, both in society and in the minds of individuals.”

Critique and the Further Development of Secularization Theory

Discussions in recent decades have shown that both the concept of secularization and the sociological theory that buttresses it, along with its reception, are ambiguous and require further clarification. It is thus a helpful development that several attempts have been made recently to formulate the theory more precisely and to differentiate its various dimensions and aspects more clearly. This is still more important if the theory is to stand up to critical empirical examination. In an analysis of the available literature published in 1981, the Belgian Catholic sociologist Karel Dobbelaere proposed distinguishing between “societal secularization” (corresponding to the Durkheimian concept of social differentiation), “organizational secularization” (i.e., the corresponding changes in religious organization), and “individual secularization” (referring to changes in individual religious behaviour and in the systems of religious belief, i.e., especially the relativity of absolute truth-claims). It then becomes clear that there is no necessary connection between these three dimensions of secularization.

The research of the Spanish-American sociologist José Casanova in his book Public Religions in the Modern World is particularly
helpful in this regard. He sees the core of secularization theory that is still valid in the thesis of the “process of functional differentiation and emancipation of the secular spheres—primarily the state, the economy, and science—from the religious sphere and the concomitant differentiation and specialization of religion within its own newly found religious sphere.” He distinguishes between this central thesis and two other subtheses that have been derived from it, namely the inevitable decline of religion and its privatization and marginalization in the modern world. It is these two subtheses whose credibility is called into question by the empirical data.

One consequence of the critical differentiation that is required is the need to concede that a general theory of secularization is no longer tenable. The concept and the theory are both of European origin and Casanova is correct to state in a later essay from 2003 that they need to be seen in their historical context:

> From a global historical perspective the series of changes we call secularization evince an internal dynamic unique to a particular form of religious regime, Western Christendom and its Catholic and Protestant derivatives, which has very few parallels in other world religions, or even in the oldest and most traditional forms of Christianity, the Eastern Churches. In order to facilitate genuine comparative historical analyses, we need to dissociate the historical theory of European secularization from general theories of modernization. The secularization of Europe is a particular, unique and ‘exceptional’ historical process, not a universal teleological model of development which shows the future to the rest of the world.\(^5\)

As far as the process of modernization is concerned, there is increasing acceptance for Shmuel N. Eisenstadt’s claim that modernization takes different forms according to the historical and cultural context.\(^5\)

The same historical relativism is also called for when it comes to the general theory that religion will decline as a result of
modernization. This theory has its origin in a particular form of Enlightenment thought that became linked to a general critique of religion, and which has been revived by various parties today. It became a political ideology in the rationalism of the French Revolution and Marxism. While the Enlightenment prepared the ground for the development of modern science, the idea of a fundamental opposition between science and religion remained largely confined, however, to Europe. Modern instrumental rationality has indeed banished religion to the “private” realm of subjectivity, but it is the paradox of this rational interpretation of the world that has led to the new question about religion in the public space.

The apparent vitality of religion in the global South and its incipient revival in postmodern societies, therefore, cannot be really described as an expression of “desecularization.” Indeed, we need to give much greater attention to the contextual, historical, cultural, and sociopolitical factors than has hitherto been the case for much of the research. This is also the case for the concept of “postsecularism” introduced into the discussion by Jürgen Habermas. In his acceptance speech at the reception of the German Book Trade Peace Prize in 2001, Habermas spoke of the “postsecular society which adapts to the fact that religious communities continue to exist in a context of ongoing secularization.” With this concept Habermas bids farewell to his previous position of equating social modernization with the secularization of society. Instead, he advocates a process of learning that makes it possible to translate ongoing living religious beliefs into the categories of secular reason. In a later text, his speech for the reception of the Holberg Prize in 2005, Habermas explicitly addresses the increased presence of religion in the public sphere and calls for the widening of the liberal conception of democratic citizenship and the principle of separation of state and church, or of politics and religion, toward a recognition of the cognitive and moral heritage of religions that has still not been exhausted under modern, postmetaphysical conditions. Nevertheless, the main point of reference remains the secular understanding of the democratic state and its public culture,
including the separation of religion and politics. That this constitutive framework itself is due to a unique form of cultural and historical process with its origin in a particular expression of religion, that is, the Judeo-Christian tradition and its particular form in Western Christianity, is indirectly acknowledged, but this insight does not lead to a truly self-critical relativization of secular consciousness. In the final analysis, even the concept of “postsecularism” remains trapped in the assumptions of secularization theory.

Nevertheless, this confirms that religion needs to continue to be taken seriously as a central dimension of human existence. While for a long time it was largely displaced in its various aspects from the public sphere, there is again a public awareness of religion. Admittedly, it is also clear that the special form of “public religion” as it has existed in the territorial churches in Europe analogous to states is hardly sustainable. These churches may be able to continue to function for a little while as a sort of “vicarious religion.” Grace Davie, from whom this term stems, describes it as meaning that “significant numbers of Europeans are content to let both churches and churchgoers enact a memory on their behalf, . . . more than half aware that they might need to draw on the capital at crucial times in their individual or collective lives.” At the same time it is clear, and the Religion Monitor confirms this for Germany, that the process of increasing individualization of the search for meaning and certainty is probably irreversible and that the traditional Christian religious communities will be increasingly assimilated into civil society and thus will need to adapt to a situation of cultural and religious pluralism.

It remains to be seen whether the so-called New Religious Movements, formed on a Christian and/or syncretistic basis, responding to the individualization of religion and transforming it at the same time into new forms of communal relationships (Vergemeinschaftung), will bring forth their own form of “public religion.” Some of the examples presented in the following chapter point in this direction. At any rate there are indications that religious communities and religious movements are trying to position themselves
in the global competition for power and political influence. They are aware that these new forms of political involvement of “public religion” do not mean turning their back on the arduous, hard-fought secular separation of religion and politics. Instead, both religion and politics inevitably have to do with power and are in latent tension with one another. The clear delineation of functions and sectors, as it evolved as a result of the process of secularization, is only one of the historically determined processes of the underlying tension and cannot be generalized. Instead, under the pressure of the process of globalization, all religions are being forced to reflect in a new and critical way on the relationship between religion and politics.