

# Ideological Religion in World Politics

## *Chapter for Routledge Handbook on Ideology and IR*

Gregorio Bettiza  
University of Exeter

**ABSTRACT:** This chapter starts by questioning the common perspective across multiple traditions that equate and reduce religion to ideology. It draws on scholarship in religious studies to suggest that religion should be approached as its own category of analysis and practice distinct from that of ideology. While claiming that we should not treat religion *as ideology*, the chapter nonetheless argues that religion can *become ideological* in the context of and in reaction to our modern secularized world. The chapter puts forward the concept of ‘ideological religion’ to capture the modern relationship between religion and ideology. It then proposes a tripartite categorization of ideological religion as political theology, religious ideology, and religious identitarianism. It argues and empirically illustrates how these manifestations of ideological religion lie on a continuum: from ideological expressions that have a deeper and thicker connection to religious structures and theologies, to those that have a weaker and thinner connection instead. Lastly, the chapter identifies three areas which make ideological religion a distinct phenomenon in world politics: its uniquely multivocal character; its ability to escalate and exacerbate divisions and conflicts; and its entanglement with some of the most powerful ideological forces contesting the current international order.

\*Religion, Theology, Secularization, Ideology, Liberal International Order, Identity Politics\*

In this chapter I start by questioning the common perspective across multiple traditions that equate and reduce religion to ideology.<sup>1</sup> In the following section, I then engage with definitional debates about ideology and religion. Here I draw in particular on scholarship in religious studies to suggest that religion – especially in our modern largely secularized world – should be approached as its own category of analysis and practice, which is distinct from that of ideology. Yet, I also maintain that while religion should not be understood *as ideology* it can and does *become ideological*.

In the chapter's third section, I address how to think about this relationship through an engagement with the concept of 'religious ideology' found in the field of ideological analysis. I argue that the commonly adopted category of religious ideology suffers from a degree of conceptual stretching and propose that it should be seen instead as a specific form of a broader concept which I label 'ideological religion'. I identify three general kinds of ideological religious phenomena and place these on a continuum: on the one end is that of *political theology*, at the other end is that of *religious identitarianism*, between them I situate a more narrowly defined concept of *religious ideology*. The travelling direction on this spectrum is from ideological expressions of religion that have a deeper and thicker connection to religious structures and theologies, to those that have a weaker and thinner connection instead.

The fourth section explores what is distinct about ideological religion and why we should take it seriously in world politics. First, I emphasize how religions are complex, multivocal, and relatively independent social entities. This means that ideological religion will often be hard to neatly categorize on our conventional political spectrum going from left to right and that it will always be – to a greater or lesser extent – nested, embraced, and contested from within larger religious traditions and communities themselves. Second, I highlight how ideological religion has the power to exacerbate, more so than initiate and cause, violence and war. Third, I argue that ideological religions are among the main challengers of the existing international political, economic, and ideological status quo represented by nation-states, capitalism, and the liberal international order.

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## Ideology, Religion and the Problem of Reductivism

In social scientific scholarship there are two traditions – broadly speaking – that tend to equate, for distinct reasons, religion to ideology. The first, quite well-established, intellectual current is *Marxist*. The juxtaposition between religion and ideology in Marxist analysis is evident also in the extent to which religion is equally assigned all the pejorative normative connotations that the term ideology implies from this standpoint, namely as “false consciousness”, “oppression-legitimizing systems”, or “fanatical or dogmatic forms of belief”.<sup>2</sup> This view of faith is notoriously captured in a well-known passage from Marx: “Religion is the sigh of the oppressed creature, the heart of a heartless world, and the soul of soulless conditions. It is the opium of the people”.<sup>3</sup> Indeed, in many respects, the Marxist critique of religion in general and Christianity in particular, is the foundation for its critique of ideology in general and Bourgeois ideologies in particular. Not all Marxist approaches however treat religion pejoratively. Gramscian perspectives view religions as embodying also an emancipatory and counter-hegemonic potential.<sup>4</sup> Yet, once again, such analysis does tend to unreflexively transpose the concept of religion onto that of ideology and *vice versa*.<sup>5</sup>

The second major intellectual tradition equating religions to ideologies is *functionalism*. Functionalist analysis of religion and ideology represent the two phenomena as essentially analogous in their expression and manifestation. This approach traces its origins to Emil Durkheim’s famous definition of religion as “a unified system of beliefs and practices relative to sacred things, that is to say set apart and forbidden.”<sup>6</sup> From a functionalist perspective, certain modern secular phenomena, including ideologies, are therefore viewed as taking on similar sacred characteristics and social functions like those embodied by religions. Here we can situate approaches that treat nationalism as a religious phenomenon,<sup>7</sup> along with attendant discussions of

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<sup>2</sup> Leader Maynard (2017, 301).

<sup>3</sup> Marx quoted in Achcar (2008, 57). For a wider engagement with religion from a Marxist perspective, see also Bocock and Thompson (1985).

<sup>4</sup> Achcar (2008), Williams (1996).

<sup>5</sup> See also Jahn (2019).

<sup>6</sup> Durkheim (2008).

<sup>7</sup> Smith (2000).

civil religion;<sup>8</sup> as well as others that frame modern totalitarian ideologies as ‘political religion’ or ‘secular religions’;<sup>9</sup> and finally scholarship that highlights the seemingly missionary nature and sacred character of liberal internationalism, human rights, and humanitarianism.<sup>10</sup>

To sum up, both Marxist and functionalist perspectives view religion and secular ideologies as hardly distinct. The former approaches religion as if it was ideology, the latter ideology as if it was religious. Both perspectives are problematic, however, because they take a reductive stance on religion. What I mean by this is that religion is reduced to ideology and hardly understood as something other than or distinct from it. The point being, as Katherine Brown similarly notes when discussing how terrorism studies approaches faith, is that religion is all too often turned “into a class of something else”.<sup>11</sup> This includes a longstanding tendency to reduce religion not just to ideology, but also to other cognate concepts such as culture<sup>12</sup> or identity.<sup>13</sup> This chapter proposes instead to treat religion on its own terms which means – as Brown argues – taking “seriously the theoretical questions raised about the ontology and epistemology of religion in the field of theology and religious studies”.<sup>14</sup>

## Defining Ideology and Religion

The discussion at this point stumbles upon the thorny issue of defining our central concepts, ‘religion’ and ‘ideology’. Let us begin with ideology, which like most concepts in the social sciences has multiple – often theoretically-laden – understandings. Cleavages exist in terms of the evaluative connotations given to ideology (pejorative or nonpejorative), the degree of coherence ascribed to them (integrated explicit wholes or implicitly-held loosely structured systems), and the ideational substance and components that make up ideologies.<sup>15</sup> Much of the recent literature in

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<sup>8</sup> Bellah (2006), also Gorski (2017).

<sup>9</sup> Gentile (2005), Maier (2007).

<sup>10</sup> Barnett (2015), Barnett and Stein (2012), Hopgood (2006).

<sup>11</sup> Brown (2020, 280).

<sup>12</sup> E.g. Geertz (2008).

<sup>13</sup> E.g. Huntington (1996).

<sup>14</sup> Brown (2020, 280).

<sup>15</sup> Leader Maynard and Mildenerger (2016, 564-67).

ideological analysis tends to approach ideology as a neutral concept and independent constitutive force in the social world, moving away from Marxist-inspired analysis that view it negatively as ‘false consciousness’ and as a ‘superstructure’ dependent on the material bases of reality.<sup>16</sup> What is evident from this literature, is that at its core the concept of ideology refers to a system of *political* ideas and beliefs.

For instance, Jonathan Leader Maynard defines ideology as a “distinctive system of normative and/or reputedly factual ideas, typically shared by members of groups or societies, which shapes their understandings of their *political* world and guides their *political* behaviour [emphasis added].”<sup>17</sup> According to Manfred Steger “ideologies are indispensable ideational systems that shape and direct human communities in concrete *political* ways [emphasis added].”<sup>18</sup> In short, despite various disagreements in the literature, ideology is generally understood as capturing a set of variably patterned “politically orientated worldviews”.<sup>19</sup>

Building on the above understanding of ideology, I maintain that religion as a category of analysis and practice, cannot be singlehandedly reduced to a system of ideas and beliefs oriented towards the political. This is especially the case in our modern world, an issue – that of modernity – which I will elaborate on further in the next section. Conversely an insistence on the centrality of the political in our understanding of ideology, provides a perspective that helps us also not to conflate ideology – in the words of Rhys Williams – with “any and all belief systems”.<sup>20</sup> Williams is especially concerned with distinguishing ideology from culture, but I would argue that a similar logic applies if we are to more neatly distinguish between ideology and religion as well.

This, of course, begs the question as to what is religion? I will not attempt to resolve complex definitional debates here. Rather, I show how an engagement with these discussions nonetheless leads us to an understanding of faith which cannot be simply equated to the concept of ideology as outlined above. The most common definition of religion is that offered by *substantivists*. Religion is understood from this perspective as belief or faith in one or more

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<sup>16</sup> Seminal in this regard is the scholarship of Michael Freeden (1996, also Freeden 2006, Freeden, Sargent, and Stears 2013).

<sup>17</sup> Leader Maynard (2017, 300).

<sup>18</sup> Steger (2013, 217).

<sup>19</sup> Leader Maynard and Mildenberger (2016, 565).

<sup>20</sup> Williams (1996, 374). See also Hanson (2003).

supernatural beings (a God, or Gods, or spiritual forces) and transcendent realities (such as heaven or nirvana). While a substantivist perspective overlaps with the concept of ideology to the extent that it prevalently understands religion as *belief*, it does not conceptualize this belief system as being principally or exclusively *political*. This is not to say that religious beliefs cannot be also political or about politics, nor that ideas about the transcendent may not have mundane consequences.<sup>21</sup> It is to highlight, however, how from a substantivist perspective which rests on a sharp transcendent/immanent and, more broadly, religious/secular distinction,<sup>22</sup> politics and political ideologies are fundamentally confined to the latter side of these dichotomies.<sup>23</sup>

Recently (*de*)*constructivist* approaches to religion, rooted in post-structural intellectual currents, have developed an important critique of substantivism.<sup>24</sup> A key insight of this literature is to suggest that the contemporary understandings of religion as apolitical, mostly privately-held, belief in the transcendent, is Euro- and Protestant-centric and problematically discards both the notion of religion as being profoundly public and political, as well as something that goes beyond individual faith. In their insistence on problematizing the secular/religious dichotomy as a modern intellectual construct, however, (de)constructivist approaches risk dissolving – once again, similarly to Marxists and functionalists – religion as a distinct category of analysis and practice.

Yet, what is notable here, is the stress that (de)constructivist perspectives put on thinking about religion beyond ‘belief’,<sup>25</sup> neither exclusively as individual faith nor as a system of ideas. (De)constructivist approaches suggest that scholars ought to approach the sacred instead in terms of ‘lived religion’,<sup>26</sup> the everyday practices, rituals, and experiences that are most meaningful to the faithful rather than as codified orthodoxies and theologies. Ultimately, therefore, contra the

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<sup>21</sup> This latter point is most notoriously captured by Max Weber’s (2002) argument about the roots of modern capitalism in Calvinist theodicy. Others more recently have explored how particular theologies can lead to social practices, such as caring for refugees and immigrants, that can be interpreted as deeply political (Wilson 2014).

<sup>22</sup> See also, for instance, Taylor (2007, 15,16).

<sup>23</sup> For example, Toft, Philpott, and Shah (2011, 20-21), who in their seminal contribution to the field of religion and global politics adopt a substantivist definition of religion, very much emphasize how this perspective does “not [...] include ideologies like nationalism and Marxism”.

<sup>24</sup> Asad (2003, 1993). In IR see Hurd (2008).

<sup>25</sup> Asad (2011, 37).

<sup>26</sup> Orsi (2003). In IR see Hurd (2015).

concept of ideology from a (de)constructivist perspective religion is not understood principally in terms of any particular ideational content.

The late sociologist of religion Martin Riesenbrodt has put forward one of the most authoritative definitions of religion currently in use. This definition partly reworks the critique of (de)constructivist approaches stressing the importance of practices, into an updated version of substantivism which maintains the immanent/transcendent distinction.<sup>27</sup> Religion is thus conceptualized as “a complex of practices that are based on the premise of the existence of superhuman powers, whether personal or impersonal, that are generally invisible”.<sup>28</sup> This complex of religious practices essentially constitute “a system of warding off misfortune, overcoming crisis, and providing blessings and salvation”.<sup>29</sup> In short, “religion is primarily a promise of salvation”.<sup>30</sup>

What is notable, is that this understanding neither equates religion with belief nor with politics as such, but rather to practices whose objectives and concerns are largely other-worldly. Once again, this does not exclude that religious practices – such as prayer, worship, rituals, fasts, and other acts of faith to secure salvation – may not have political meaning or consequences.<sup>31</sup> What this discussion nonetheless does suggest is that if ideological analysis is to take seriously – which I argue it should – current definitional debates about religion then whatever we understand faith to be, this is not immediately reducible to ideology.

### From Religion ‘as Ideology’, to Religion ‘becoming Ideological’

The discussion so far tackled head-on an all-too-common understanding in the social sciences which, viewed from a religious studies perspective, reductively treats religion as ideology. Marxist and functionalist perspectives are problematic to the extent that they miss the complexities – and some would argue also the *sui generis* character – of religion as both a category of analysis and

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<sup>27</sup> Riesenbrodt (2012).

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.* 74-75.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.* 85-86.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.* 89.

<sup>31</sup> Ron Hassner (2016, see especially p.15) draws explicitly on Riesenbrodt’s definition, to show how sacred practices have constitutive effects on how military battles are conducted. Alexseev and Zhemukhov (2017) explore how religious rituals can instead foster inter-group tolerance rather than violence.

practice. The point was not to demonstrate that there is categorically no relationship between religion and ideology, even less so between religion and politics. Rather it was intended to provide a firmer conceptual ground on which to stand when investigating these connections. The suggestion I make is to approach religion – especially in our late-modern condition – not as if it is equivalent to ideology, but as having the potential to become ideology. Put differently, the argument here is an invitation to move away from treating religion *as ideology* to viewing it instead as *becoming ideological*.

Religion can become ideological to the extent that, to borrow from Rhys Williams, “religious doctrine and theology can offer coherent and elaborated cognitive rationales that diagnose social problems, prescribe possible solutions, and justify [...] actions – often in the cause of universal verities.”<sup>32</sup> This is in part the implicit premise on which much existing literature in ideological analysis that adopts the concept ‘religious ideology’ rests to highlight the interconnections between religion and ideology. The notion of religious ideology is a promising starting place. Yet there is a need to deepen the analysis and expand it beyond existing treatments of the concept of religious ideology, especially since every conceivable ideological expression of religion tends to be lumped together in it.

With this in mind, I propose to use as main master-concept that of *ideological religion* rather than *religious ideology* in order to capture this shift from religion as ideology to religion becoming ideological. I then put forward a trinity of concepts to highlight the multifaceted ways that ideological religion manifests itself in world politics, namely as: *political theology*, *religious ideology*, and *religious identitarianism*. These are not entirely distinct, mutually exclusive, forms of ideological religion. Rather they should be approached as lying on a continuum that goes from ideological constructs that exhibit a thicker and deeper connection to established religious traditions, doctrines, and institutions on one end (i.e. political theologies), to those that exhibit a shallower and thinner connection to established religious traditions and a greater enmeshment with secular ideological forces on the other end (i.e. religious identitarianism).

It is here the moment to tackle the issue of modernity. All ideological religion today is in a way or another the product of a modern world and political reality that has been highly secularized. By secularized I do not principally mean a world where religious beliefs, belonging,

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<sup>32</sup> Williams (1996, 377).



and practices are universally disappearing. Indeed, it is hotly debated whether – except in Europe and certain elite cultural milieus – modernization does actually bring with it a uniform decline of religiosity.<sup>33</sup> What I mean by secularization, following especially José Casanova and Charles Taylor, is the growing process of functional and cultural differentiation unleashed by modernity between religion and other spheres of life.<sup>34</sup> Notable has been the separation between religion and the sciences or the arts. Similar processes have taken place also in politics, especially in the context of the rise of modern secular ideologies and the nation-state; and in the economic sphere, especially to the extent that much of capitalist activity functions according to secular – although certainly not strictly rational – logics.

Today's ideological religion – manifest in political theologies, religious ideologies, and religious identitarianism – is a modern phenomenon born out of the functional and cultural separation of religion from politics across the world.<sup>35</sup> As Charles Taylor observes, in “earlier societies, religion was “everywhere”, was interwoven with everything else”, compared to the contemporary era where it largely constitutes “a separate “sphere” of its own”.<sup>36</sup> Kristina Stoeckl similarly notes, “in the pre-modern period, arguably, all theology was political and all politics were theological”.<sup>37</sup> Thus revolutions in theology were also political revolutions and *vice versa*, as was the case with the Protestant Reformation for instance.<sup>38</sup>

Conversely, as Beate Jahn points out, the very concept of ideology emerged during the French revolution in contraposition to religion, in order to shift the justification of political power from a transcendental basis onto an immanent one.<sup>39</sup> The story of the rise of modern ideologies is therefore to a great extent also a story of the displacement of religion from political authority and

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<sup>33</sup> Berger (2014), Casanova (1994), Habermas (2010).

<sup>34</sup> I draw here on Casanova's ‘third’ (1994) sociological understanding of secularization as functional differentiation; as well as from Taylor's (2007) conceptualization of secularity III as a shift in conditions of belief, whereby “belief in God [...] is understood to be one option among others” (Taylor 2007, 3).

<sup>35</sup> This point echoes discussions about religious fundamentalism, often viewed as a pre-modern form of religiosity, it is actually best understood as a product and reaction to modernity (Lawrence 1989, Marty and Appleby 1991-1995, Roy 2004).

<sup>36</sup> Taylor (2007, 2).

<sup>37</sup> Stoeckl (2017, 15).

<sup>38</sup> Philpott (2001), Nexon (2009).

<sup>39</sup> Jahn (2019, 330-32).

power, of making domestic and global politics secular and this-worldly. This has not just been a Western phenomenon, but to differing degrees a global one too. European colonialism, along with the international spread of secular ideologies and modern institutions like the nation-state, have likewise been displacing religion over the past centuries across Latin America, Africa, the Middle East, and Asia.<sup>40</sup>

The emergence of ideological religion takes place therefore once faiths and communities of faith across all major world religious traditions – including Christianity, Islam, Judaism, Buddhism, and Hinduism – need to come to terms with and define their political stance in a world whose parameters are no longer primarily contained within a spiritual worldview.<sup>41</sup> Religious ideological constructs all over the world are thus both profoundly shaped by, while also seeking to respond to, the evolving historical transformations and social forces of our times, including the power of the state and its core ideology of nationalism,<sup>42</sup> multiple and complex forms of imperialism,<sup>43</sup> processes of globalization,<sup>44</sup> or the challenges posed by liberalism<sup>45</sup> and capitalism.<sup>46</sup> A central *problematique* of ideological religion, revolves around the extent to which various aspects of the modern secular world – its politics, economics, culture, and communities – should be once again incorporated within and brought under religious authority, or whether instead modern life should be shaped and infused – but not necessarily subsumed – by faith and the sacred. Let us call the former form of ideological religion ‘strong’ to the extent that it seeks to subsume

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<sup>40</sup> See for example Dalacoura (2014), Künkler, Madeley, and Shankar (2018). On how secularism and secularization have reshaped world politics more broadly, see also Hurd (2008), Philpott (2002).

<sup>41</sup> Stoeckl (2017, 15), also Jahn (2019, 332). Interestingly, scholarship on ‘political religion’ follows a similar premise in its analysis. For Gentile (2005), in fact, political religion is very much a “consequence of modernity and of secularisation” (25) and the resulting need for the re-sacralization of politics after this “gained its autonomy from the traditional metaphysical religions” (29).

<sup>42</sup> Cesari (2016), Juergensmeyer (1993).

<sup>43</sup> Agensky (2017), Masuzawa (2005).

<sup>44</sup> Esposito, Fasching, and Lewis (2007), Mandaville (2005), Wilson and Steger (2013).

<sup>45</sup> Dalacoura (2007), Jahn (2019), Laborde (2017).

<sup>46</sup> Connolly (2008), Sandal (2019).

the temporal to the spiritual, while the latter ‘soft’ to the extent that it seeks to draw on the spiritual to influence the temporal instead.<sup>47</sup>

### *Political theology*

Political theology is a complex concept with multiple meanings. In religious studies and political philosophy it is commonly associated with the work of the controversial German legal philosopher, Carl Schmitt. Rather than drawing upon the Schmittian tradition,<sup>48</sup> however, my argument is situated in the context of an alternative understanding of political theology which directs the gaze towards how religious actors define, in Stoeckl’s words, their “understanding of the political”.<sup>49</sup> From a similar standpoint, Toft, Philpott and Shah define political theology as a “set of ideas that a religious community holds about political authority and justice”.<sup>50</sup> These include what particular religious doctrines say about who possesses legitimate political authority, whether a king, a khalif, or people ruling through a constitution; what is the right relationship between religion and political order; whether and how political authorities should promote faith and manage religious affairs; when is the use of force justified; or what does justice consist of, including for example respect for other religious communities and religious freedom.<sup>51</sup>

Political theologies are always a product of their times, as Toft, Philpott and Shah explain in this passage worth quoting at length:

“Religious actors arrive at their political theologies through reflection upon their religion’s texts and traditions and its foundational claims about divine being(s), time, eternity, salvation, morality, and revelation. Contemporary circumstances,

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<sup>47</sup> Steger (2013, 227) and Laborde (2014) identify similar distinct orientations in their analyses, respectively, of ideological religion and political theology.

<sup>48</sup> With the concept of political theology, Schmitt (2006) seeks to reveal how the political – in his case the modern secular theory of the sovereign state – is not only structurally analogous to but also deeply grounded in the theological. In IR see Paipais (2020).

<sup>49</sup> Stoeckl (2017, 18). See also Laborde’s (2014) ‘Thesis 2’ on political theology.

<sup>50</sup> Toft, Philpott, and Shah (2011, 9).

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.* 16, 27

however, matter as well. In any particular context, political theology translates basic theological claims, beliefs and doctrines into political ideals and programs”.<sup>52</sup>

While boundaries are often blurred, I would suggest that political theologies are articulated and held chiefly by religious and faith-based actors which for the most part are distinct from formal political structures, whether political parties or state institutions (with some notable exceptions, such as the Vatican). These actors may be formal representatives of a specific religious tradition and community – such as Catholic orders or Shi’a clerics – or faith-based organizations and movements that are variably affiliated with one or multiple traditions, as in the case of more ecumenical actors such as the World Council of Churches or the World Buddhist Sangha Council.

Toft, Philpott, and Shah present political theology as the overarching religio-ideological category for conceptualizing any religious actors’ politically oriented beliefs.<sup>53</sup> I would argue that such an approach is too capacious. It includes for instance political parties or self-organizing people claiming a faith which, however, may not have much formal relationship to existing religious bodies and who can also often be quite divorced from theological and religious debates themselves. Such actors, I contend, are more likely to hold forms of ideological religion with thinner theological content closer to what I label religious ideology and religious identitarianism.

One of the most well-known and clearly articulated examples of political theologies is liberation theology. Its history lies within Catholic clergy in Latin America and their encounter with socialism and Marxist critiques of capitalism in the 1960s and 70s. Developing an understanding of the faith centered on a foundational commitment to the poor and the marginalized, liberation theology called for radical structural social and economic changes that would address existing injustices. Largely opposed by the formal – and more conservative – hierarchy of the Vatican, liberation theology was at the time quite unique for its involvement in contemporary political struggles contra much of “modern theology” which tended to be found in the “academy” and prizing “detachment and the quest for objectivity”.<sup>54</sup> Over the decades its ideas have become more mainstream, with some of its themes appearing to shape the thinking of Pope Francis or even that of America’s second-ever Catholic president, Joe Biden. A theology that puts the needs of the poor front and center is not confined to Catholicism, but can be seen as the

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<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.* 27

<sup>53</sup> Toft, Philpott, and Shah (2011, 22).

<sup>54</sup> Rowland (2009, online), see also Achcar (2008, 59-64).

conceptual core of what Wilson and Steger call religious justice globalism which stretches across multiple traditions.<sup>55</sup>

Political theologies do not just come in progressive garbs, but also in reactionary ones. According to Stoeckl, political theologies chiefly articulate a religious traditions' response – depending on its doctrinal, historical, and cultural resources – to the challenges of modernity.<sup>56</sup> These challenges present themselves as “the religious-cultural disconnect, religious freedom, and anthropocentric morality”.<sup>57</sup> In Stoeckl's model, political theologies may come to terms and even embrace these three challenges or reject and contest them, which she finds is what defines much of the Russian Orthodox Church's highly conservative worldview.

### ***Religious ideologies***

Religious ideology is the concept that most commonly is associated with ideological religion. I contend that religious ideologies articulate a belief system that has some degree of separation from more orthodox – as well as heterodox – theologies held by faith-based actors, and thus can gain also greater traction among wider audiences of faithful as well as not particularly faithful religious adherents. As noted earlier, in the context of the emergence of the great modern secular ideological and political forces, religious ideologies aim to draw from sacred doctrines and scriptures, but also religious histories and traditions, in order to (re)subordinate (in 'stronger' articulations) or influence (in 'softer' articulations) the temporal according to spiritual logics.

Religious ideologies are likely more comprehensive than political theologies. Especially to the extent that they may develop a vision for the whole organization of a polity's – and not just that of a specific religious institution or community's – spiritual, cultural, social, political, and economic affairs. Religious ideologies find their organizational expression for the most part in lay political parties and social movements, be them domestic or transnational, peaceful or violent, democratic or fundamentalist.

The family of existing religious ideologies is quite broad and complex. One of its clearest expressions is found in the phenomenon of political Islam also known as Islamism, which has the typical *-ism* ending of standard ideologies. For Mohammed Ayoob political Islam “amounts to the

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<sup>55</sup> Wilson and Steger (2013).

<sup>56</sup> Stoeckl (2017, 18).

<sup>57</sup> Stoeckl (2017, 20).

use of religious idiom and religion-based historical references for the mobilization of Muslim populations for political action both domestically and internationally.”<sup>58</sup> Islamism, Ayoob continues, “provides political responses to today’s societal challenges by imagining a future, the foundations for which rest on reappropriated, reinvented concepts borrowed from the Islamic tradition”.<sup>59</sup> Speaking to an important distinction made in this chapter between political theology and religious ideology, Ayoob notes that “political Islam is an ideological not a theological construct”.<sup>60</sup> That is also why, he argues, “its appeal resonates with substantial segments of Muslim populations around the world”.<sup>61</sup>

Islamism is a complex ideology with multiple manifestations and actors pursuing a variety of agendas and strategies. While historically Islamists appear to share an “opposition to “secular” states”, Cesari stresses how this political and ideological phenomenon is largely “multivocal”.<sup>62</sup> Islamism is a broad tent that can encompass Tunisia’s Ennahda party or Turkey’s Justice and Development Party (AKP), major political formations that seek power within a national context peacefully and democratically (although the latter increasingly less so),<sup>63</sup> to smaller but powerful violent fundamentalist transnational movements such as Al Qaeda or ISIS, and anything in between. As existing scholarship shows, Islamism and Islamists evolve over time. An understanding of Islamists’ religio-political agendas and strategies cannot therefore be grasped by looking at some putative essence of Islam and its holy texts, scholars note, but rather in the historical and political context in which their interpretations of Islam emerge and develop.<sup>64</sup>

There are also multiple forms of ‘political Christianity’. Its two most significant ideological currents are to be found, on the one hand, in the Christian Right which is largely an American and

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<sup>58</sup> Ayoob (2007, 633).

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>62</sup> Cesari (2021, 1, 2). For useful entry points exploring the complexity of Islamism as political and ideological phenomenon, see Ayoob (2008), Cesari (2018b), Mandaville (2014).

<sup>63</sup> These political forces can be seen as having also a ‘softer’ form of religious ideology, to the extent that their opposition to the secular state is not about subsuming it to religion by demanding an ‘Islamic state’, but rather bringing greater religion into politics and society. For that matter too, some refer to these political formations as “mildly Islamist” (Cesari 2018a, 8), “post-Islamist” (Bayat 2013), or “Muslim Democrats” (Driessen 2018, 115).

<sup>64</sup> Cesari (2021, 2-3) also Dalacoura (2000, 887).

Protestant phenomenon and, on the other, in Christian Democracy which is mostly a European and Catholic phenomenon. The Christian Right is a social movement organized chiefly – although not exclusively – around an evolving network of white Evangelical American pastors and organizations. It articulates one of the most distinguishable religious ideologies devoted to the accumulation and exercise of political power within Christianity today. Some of the Christian Right’s key concerns revolve around upholding traditional norms on gender, sexuality, and family; promoting the presence of religious – chiefly Christian – values, symbols, and practices in the public sphere; supporting a ‘small government’ view of the state when it comes to economic issues and social services; and is hawkish on matters of defense, gun control, and death penalty.<sup>65</sup>

Like Islamism it is multivocal. Some elements of the movement and ideology are deeply nationalist and have become one of the main constituencies of the Republican Party.<sup>66</sup> Parts seek to erode norms of church and state separation and turn the US into an explicitly Christian (or Judeo-Christian) nation, thus adopting a ‘strong’ stance on the subsumption of the secular by the religious, while others instead take a ‘softer’ orientation focused on protecting the private and public religious liberties of conservative Christians perceived to be under assault by secular forces. Other Christian Right formations are more globally oriented, concerned with what they view is the persecution of Christians abroad as well as with promoting traditional family values internationally.<sup>67</sup>

Christian Democracy has historically been a powerful, although possibly waning, ideological force in Europe. Carlo Invernizzi Accetti shows how Christian Democrats’ religiously informed views about the nature of the state, democracy, the economy, society, and human beings, have profoundly shaped the development of continental European welfare states, economic and social policy, the project of European integration, and international alliances in the post-war period.<sup>68</sup> We are not strictly in the realm of political theology however. As Invernizzi Accetti notes,<sup>69</sup> Christian Democracy was not straightforwardly the political arm and extension of the Catholic Church. Christian Democrats actually sought to be a relatively autonomous and

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<sup>65</sup> Wilcox (2018).

<sup>66</sup> Wilcox (2018), also Whitehead and Perry (2020).

<sup>67</sup> Bettiza (2019, Ch.3), Bob (2012, Chs. 3, 4).

<sup>68</sup> Accetti (2019), see also Driessen (2021).

<sup>69</sup> Accetti (2019, 177).

independent force from the Vatican seeking to apply Christian/Catholic values and beliefs in the pursuit of what they viewed was the temporal common good.<sup>70</sup>

Within most world religions there are important nationalist currents. Religious nationalism is especially tricky to categorize. Varying from religion to religion, state to state, and political actor to political actor this ideological phenomenon may be closer to religious identitarianism rather than being a full-fledged religious ideology. This may depend on whether a particular variant of nationalism is informed by theological and doctrinal imperatives, as it appears to be the case with Religious Zionism as I explore below; or whether religion is mostly mobilized as an identity marker and cultural resource, as it appears to be the case with Hindu or Christian Nationalism which I will discuss in greater detail in the following sub-section.

Compared to universalizing religions like Islam, Jocelyne Cesari observes, Judaism has an intimate relationship both with a specific people (‘chosen people’) as well as territory (‘promised land’).<sup>71</sup> While Judaism is central to Israel, much of the modern Zionist movement as envisioned by Theodore Herzl was informed by secular nationalist ideas whereby a Jewish nation-state “would provide political independence and sovereignty to the Jewish people but did not have to embody “religious” ideas and values.”<sup>72</sup> However since the 1967 Six Days war, a religious Zionist movement inspired by the messianism of Rabbi Abraham Yitzhak Kook (1865–1935) began to gain steam. This movement, which has organized itself also into political parties competing for elections, would explicitly locate “messianic claims within the boundaries of the secular nation-state”.<sup>73</sup> Seeking to combine “allegiance to the holy land and the state,” religious Zionism calls for the state – and not only individual Jews – to abide by the religious sanctity of the land to avoid

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<sup>70</sup> Michael Driessen (personal communication) suggests that when it comes to Christian Democracy the boundary between political theology and religious ideology is possibly fuzzier than I present it. The thought of Catholic philosophers like Jacques Maritain and theologians like Henri de Lubac, which deeply shaped Christian Democracy and the way in which Christian Democrats like Alcide De Gasperi or Robert Schuman approached politics, can be considered closer to political theology than religious ideology according to Driessen. This is an important point, which reminds us not to treat these ideological categories as distinct, mutually-exclusive, closed entities, but on a continuum. It may thus be the case that certain religio-ideological phenomena could stretch across the boundaries between one category and another.

<sup>71</sup> Cesari (2018a, 3).

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid.* 9.

<sup>73</sup> *Ibid.* 10.



being “considered heretical and delaying messianic times”.<sup>74</sup> Thus, religious Zionism goes beyond just relating national belonging to religious identity and culture, which is for the most part the remit of religious identitarianism. It seeks to shape, if not even subsume Israeli political, economic, and social affairs according to specific interpretations of religious doctrines and law.

### ***Religious Identitarianism***

Religious identitarianism is, borrowing from Michael Freeden, the most theologically ‘thin’ of the three forms of ideological religion.<sup>75</sup> Indeed, there is often very little that is substantively religious here. Even if actors present themselves as primarily religious rather than secular, which is often not necessarily the case with religious identitarianism, the religious element constitutes one component of what are often broader secular ideologies. Religion is for the most part mobilized as an identity and cultural marker, feeding into what are essentially conservative forms of “identity politics”.<sup>76</sup> In versions of religious identitarianism that appear to have greater religious content, reference is made to certain faith-based values and morals. While this may seem to inject some theological and spiritual content, discourses about values and morals are mainly a form of religious “acculturation”:<sup>77</sup> turning religion into a cultural marker intended to shore up a particular identity and reinforce self-other, friend-enemy, distinctions.

I view religious identitarianism as an *ideological religious* phenomenon for two reasons. First, it is *ideological* because efforts to constitute, defend, and advance collective identities are deeply political projects. As Siniša Malešević argues, “Because human beings are ideological creatures, no identity claim is free of ideology”.<sup>78</sup> Indeed, Malešević contends, “identitarianism” is among the “leading ideological paradigm[s] of our age”.<sup>79</sup> Moreover these identities are not empty categories, but endowed with a complex set of values which religious identitarians claim ought to be defended and promoted along the way. Second, despite being largely hollowed out of its theological content, this ideological formation remains nonetheless *religious*. That’s because

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<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>75</sup> Freeden (1998).

<sup>76</sup> Fukuyama (2018).

<sup>77</sup> Roy (2010).

<sup>78</sup> Malešević (2011, 281).

<sup>79</sup> Malešević (2006, 4).

political actors who invoke religion as an identity category and cultural marker underpinning a set of norms, bind themselves to a broader faith tradition whose content, discourses, rituals, practices, and institutions cannot be completely ignored.

This interpretation of religious identity politics as ideological, differs significantly from approaches that present this phenomenon as a process of cultural reassertion in a supposedly post-ideological world, most notably in the case of the ‘ancient hatreds’<sup>80</sup> or the ‘clash of civilizations’<sup>81</sup> theses. Ultimately, my understanding of religious identitarianism comes close to what Wilson and Steger define as “neotraditional religious globalism”, which they suggest is “an attempt to promote strong religious identities” especially – in their view – as a form of resistance to secularist as well as neoliberal projects.<sup>82</sup> More so than globalist, I would argue though, religious identitarianism is largely sectarian, nationalist, or civilizationalist in orientation.

Aparna Devare’s portrayal of Hindu nationalism fittingly captures the essence of what I mean here.<sup>83</sup> As she notes, Hindu nationalism – the guiding ideology of Narendra Modi’s Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) – should not be viewed as an expression of atavism or a resurgence of traditional pre-modern religiosity, rather instead as a “modern discourse rooted in modern categories such as a homogenous national identity, objective science and history, hyper-masculinity, and secularism”.<sup>84</sup> Devare shows this by carrying out a close analysis of the writings of V.D. Savarkar, a founding founder of *Hindutva* the ideology underpinning Hindu nationalism. As she argues, in Savarkar’s Hinduism there is “little room for the sacral, spiritual, or transcendental”.<sup>85</sup> Rather the “outer ideological shell of religion is maintained within a rational secular and political discourse”, which ties Hinduism to identity and nationhood, while “religiosity itself as piety or faith has been completely emptied out”.<sup>86</sup> This emptying out of religious content and Hindu nationalism’s modern character helps to explain in part, Devare argues, *Hindutva*’s

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<sup>80</sup> Kaplan (1994).

<sup>81</sup> Huntington (1996).

<sup>82</sup> Wilson and Steger (2013, 491).

<sup>83</sup> Devare (2009). See also Pirbhai (2020).

<sup>84</sup> Devare (2009, 156).

<sup>85</sup> *Ibid.* 159.

<sup>86</sup> *Ibid.* 159. Devare (2009) contrasts the Hindu nationalist vision of India with that, on the one hand, of Nehru which provided a fully secularized view of Indian nationalism which did not rely on religion, and, on the other, that of Ghandi who instead infused his politics with substantive religious/spiritual content and practices.

acceptability beyond “fringe or ‘fanatical’ elements” and its growing appeal among “the Hindu middle classes”.<sup>87</sup>

Along with nationalism, the other major expression of religious identitarianism can be associated with what Rogers Brubaker has termed ‘civilizationalism’.<sup>88</sup> For example, notions of ‘Judeo-Christian values’ are being increasingly embraced and mobilized by right-wing populists in North America and Europe to define the identity of a West perceived to be under assault by ‘domestic’ progressive forces and globalist elites, and by ‘foreign’ forces in the shape of migrants and above all Islam and Muslims. Brubaker highlights how there are different orientations to Judeo-Christian civilizationalism, for instance more libertarian strands among Northern and Western European populists while more conservative ones among Central and Eastern European populists. Notions of a Judeo-Christian West closely relate and often contain within them also narrower forms of Christian nationalism and identitarianism. Once again, in such instances Christianity is mostly appropriated by populists in Europe and North America, Olivier Roy observes, as a “cultural factor” rather than a “value system” centered on the exclusion of the Muslim ‘other’.<sup>89</sup> It is about defending “the territory of Christendom rather than the values of Christianity”, Marzouki and McDonnell pithily put it.<sup>90</sup> This disjuncture explains in part why studies are finding that religious commitment is not necessarily correlated with supporting Christian nationalist or Judeo-Christian civilizationalist ideas.<sup>91</sup>

From such a perspective, the unabating popularity of narratives presenting world politics in the midst of a clash of civilizations<sup>92</sup> – a discourse which not only populists in the West subscribe to, but Islamists like ISIS<sup>93</sup> or conservative elites in Russia<sup>94</sup> evoke as well – is itself an expression of the growth of ideological forces shaped by religious identitarianism. In some of the most extreme versions of this phenomenon, religion is not solely reduced to an identity or cultural

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<sup>87</sup> Devare (2009, 158).

<sup>88</sup> Brubaker (2017); see also Bettiza (2014) and Haynes (2017).

<sup>89</sup> Roy (2018, online).

<sup>90</sup> Marzouki and McDonnell (2018, online).

<sup>91</sup> For a more detailed discussion, see Marzouki, McDonnell, and Roy (2016), Whitehead and Perry (2020).

<sup>92</sup> Bettiza and Petito (2018).

<sup>93</sup> Baele et al. (2019).

<sup>94</sup> Tsygankov (2008).

marker, but becomes a racial one too.<sup>95</sup> The racialization of religion constitutes a key ideological element of the extreme right in Europe and the USA, whereby Christian symbolism and traditions become, for instance, synonymous with whiteness while Islam with nonwhiteness.<sup>96</sup>

## Ideological Religion in World Politics

What characterizes ideological religion and its influence in world politics? Three areas stand out, I would argue, which make ideological religion distinct.

### *Ideological Ambivalence and Religious Contexts*

The first issue is the often ambivalent political orientation of ideological religions, which is a product of the complex and heterogeneous nature of religions themselves. The concept of ‘ambivalence’ is generally used to discuss the seemingly both violent and peaceful orientations of most world religious traditions.<sup>97</sup> I employ this notion to highlight the multiple directions and at times seemingly inherent tensions between progressive and reactionary ends that can be found across, but also within, the same ideological religion/s. Unlike most standard secular ideologies that can be positioned – with greater or lesser ease – somewhere on a right-left spectrum, ideologized religions cannot be categorized as easily.

Certain forms of political theology such as liberation theology or of religious identitarianism such as Judeo-Christian civilizationalism, can be clearly placed on a conventional left-right spectrum.<sup>98</sup> However many others defy steadfast categorization. Islamism is one. First, because of its multivocal nature, as noted earlier, going from democratic and peaceful to extremist and violent. Indeed, the tendency in the literature has been to generate a proliferation of labels such as Muslim Democrats, post-Islamism, Jihadism, and so on to capture this diversity.

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<sup>95</sup> Pasha (2017).

<sup>96</sup> Cremer (2020), Thorleifsson (2021).

<sup>97</sup> Appleby (2000), Philpott (2007).

<sup>98</sup> For an approach which situates different ideological expressions of religion along a conventional left-right spectrum, see for example Wilson and Steger (2013). For a more complex mapping and categorization, see Ozzano (2014).

Second, political categorization is tricky because the same ideological force can appear both regressive and progressive at the same time.<sup>99</sup> The Islamist ideologies animating the Iranian revolution or transnational Jihadism – such as that of Al Qaeda – have been understood as deeply reactionary and conservative forces,<sup>100</sup> as well as the most significant contemporary expressions of anti-imperialist and anti-colonial sentiments in the context of the waning ideological force of Communism.<sup>101</sup> The political theology of the Catholic Church under Pope Francis is likewise difficult to categorize. Seen to be emphasizing a number of progressive themes such as structural economic inequalities or environmental issues, it has remained fairly conservative on social and moral issues around gender and sexuality.

Similar to secular ideologies, any one ideological religion is unlikely to be entirely homogenous and will exhibit various forms of internal contestation. Yet, compared to secular ideologies, whichever political orientation ideological religion embodies, hybridizes, or transcends, these systems of meaning are likely to be subject to a potential further layer of contestation. That's because ideological religions will be nested within wider religious traditions with dynamics of their own that cannot be reduced to a particular ideological program.<sup>102</sup> Hence when political operatives draw – either instrumentally or out of genuine conviction – on religious symbols, practices, ideas and identities, this will always take place against the backdrop of existing official faith-based institutional structures, theological debates, and lived spiritual practices of followers. Thus, compared to secular ideologies, political theologies, religious ideologies, and religious identitarianism can be potentially challenged by actors and forces within the broader religious tradition and community these ideological phenomena reside in, draw upon, and relate to. In other words, few can safely claim to be on the side of God/s, faithfully executing the commands of a sacred text, or defending a certain religious community without opening themselves up to potential contestation by actors from outside as well as followers from within a particular religious tradition.

### ***Violence and the Power of Ideological Religion***

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<sup>99</sup> A similar point is made also by Achcar (2008, 65-66).

<sup>100</sup> Tibi (2007), also Wilson and Steger (2013, 491).

<sup>101</sup> Ayooob (2007), also Evans (2011).

<sup>102</sup> See also Hasenclever and Rittberger (2000, 649).

Religion, it is often remarked, is a powerful political force. There is a well-established tradition that presents religion as irrational and dogmatic, whose entanglement with global politics inevitably leads to conflict and destruction. In recent years, however, a considerable amount of scholarship has convincingly shown that such an understanding of faith's irremediably violent nature constitutes more of a "myth", in William Cavanaugh's words, then a reality.<sup>103</sup>

The literature questioning the facile link often made between religion and conflict is vast and diverse. Cavanaugh's argument about the myth of religious violence, speaks to a wider critical tradition that problematizes the secularist lenses through which religion in general and Islam in particular are unreflexively securitized in modern discourses, while the destructive power of modern secular ideologies is simultaneously overlooked.<sup>104</sup> Empirical, quantitative, studies have likewise pushed back against the all-too-facile connection made between religion and the onset of war.<sup>105</sup> The 'just war' tradition shows how violence is highly regulated, rather than being indiscriminately exercised, within most religious traditions.<sup>106</sup> Last, but not least, substantial scholarship highlights the important role of religious traditions in promoting peace and social justice, rather than solely conflict.<sup>107</sup>

While it is evident that religion should not be uniquely associated with war and its initiation, research does show that faith can contribute to shaping as well as exacerbating violence in significant ways. Notions of cosmic wars between good/faithful and evil/unfaithful, strong moral and ethical codes, promises of immaterial rewards in the afterlife, or the highly sacred character of religious symbols, identities, places, and objects deployed or fought over in battles – which may be meaningful not just to local but also to wider transnational communities and audiences –, have the power to raise the stakes in and of conflicts.<sup>108</sup> The result is that when religion becomes entangled with civil wars or international conflicts these can become especially

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<sup>103</sup> Cavanaugh (2009).

<sup>104</sup> Gunning and Jackson (2011), Hurd (2008), Laustsen and Waever (2000).

<sup>105</sup> Fox and Sandler (2006), Toft (2012).

<sup>106</sup> Reichberg, Syse, and Hartwell (2014)

<sup>107</sup> Philpott (2012), Sandal (2017).

<sup>108</sup> See also Brubaker (2015).

intractable, lasting longer, as well as exhibiting particularly high numbers of casualties.<sup>109</sup> The kind of political theologies, religious ideologies, or religious identitarianism that actors do (or do not) hold and mobilize in a specific situation, therefore have a powerful influence on shaping the sacred and profane meanings that are attributed to violence, significantly contributing to its escalation and exacerbation.

### *Contesting and Transforming World Orders*

The complex interaction between ideological religion and world ordering dynamics is emerging as a further important area of research and attention. On the one hand, scholars are excavating the theological roots of our modern secular international order, understood in terms either of a state-centric Westphalian international system<sup>110</sup> or structured along the lines of a liberal international order.<sup>111</sup> On the other hand, though, ideological religions are emerging today – in the context of what some view as a wider “global resurgence of religion”<sup>112</sup> and others present as a turn to the “post-secular”<sup>113</sup> – among the most fundamental challengers of existing international structures.

While states have over the centuries domesticated and formatted faith traditions according to their national purposes,<sup>114</sup> most religious communities and solidarities continue to be transnational in character.<sup>115</sup> Some highlight how transnational Catholic, Sikh, and Muslim forms of belonging can overcome the exclusivism of national identities,<sup>116</sup> while others instead suggest that religious and civilizational identities may not necessarily be less exclusivist than national ones.<sup>117</sup> Wilson and Steger find that there are multiple forms of religious globalisms – progressive and reactionary – which approach politics from a global rather than national vantage point.<sup>118</sup>

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<sup>109</sup> Both qualitative (Gravers 2015, Hassner 2009, Horowitz 2009, Juergensmeyer 2004) and quantitative (Blair et al. 2021, Deitch 2020, Fox 2004, Henne 2012, Isaacs 2016, Toft 2007) studies have reached similar conclusions.

<sup>110</sup> Bain (2020), Philpott (2001).

<sup>111</sup> Barnett (2015), Menchik (2021), Moyn (2015).

<sup>112</sup> Toft, Philpott, and Shah (2011).

<sup>113</sup> Bettiza and Dionigi (2015), Wilson and Steger (2013).

<sup>114</sup> See footnote 55.

<sup>115</sup> Toft, Philpott, and Shah (2011, 24), also Haynes (2012), Katzenstein and Byrnes (2006).

<sup>116</sup> See Byrnes (2011) and Shani (2008).

<sup>117</sup> See Huntington (1996) and Phillips (2010).

<sup>118</sup> Wilson and Steger (2013).

Ultimately, what is notable here, is that different manifestations of ideological religion – whether political theologies, religious ideologies or religious identitarianism – are increasingly articulating political programs and identities that often go beyond, transcend, and undermine – for better or worse – territorial boundaries and national belongings.

In parallel, religious ideologies may be among the most important and powerful forces contesting and transforming liberal modernity and ordering projects. Contra “end of history” theories, which argue that humanity is universally converging towards one liberal, secular, model of modernity, Shmuel Eisenstadt draws on a reappraisal of role of religion across contemporary societies to suggest that modernity rather than being single presents itself in multiple culturally distinct ways.<sup>119</sup> From a liberal progressive standpoint, Habermasian post-secular theorizing argues that religious ethics and theologies constitute in a post-Cold War context marked by the decline of socialist ideologies, the most important critical voices of the pathologies, inequalities, and exclusions generated by the present capitalist system.<sup>120</sup>

Many of the most illiberal reactionary forces in world politics are, in parallel, rooted in or influenced by distinct forms of ideological religion. We see these expressing themselves in the context of emerging culture wars, the defense and promotion of the ‘traditional values’ agenda, the rise of religious fundamentalism, and support for right-wing populists and strongmen in North America, Europe, Russia, Africa, the Middle East, Asia, or Latin America. In this context, ideas of civilizational difference and clash constitute today among the most explicitly articulated conservative and communitarian critique of the liberal world order.<sup>121</sup> Whether one understands Islamism as a regressive or anti-imperialist (or both) force, multiple accounts present its different manifestations as the main post-Cold War ideological alternative to the global hegemony of liberalism.<sup>122</sup> In the context of ongoing debates about the crisis of the liberal international order, if and when a post-liberal order is to emerge, ideological struggles will be more – rather than less –

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Phillips (2010) and Huntington (1996). Others still, like Wilson and Steger (2013), find that there are multiple forms of religious globalisms – progressive and reactionary – which are sustained by the transnational character of faith traditions and approach politics from a global rather than national vantage point.

<sup>119</sup> Eisenstadt (2000), also Casanova (2011). On the end of history, see Fukuyama (1992)

<sup>120</sup> Habermas (2010), also Mavelli and Petito (2014), Wilson (2014).

<sup>121</sup> Bettiza and Lewis (2020), Haynes (2019).

<sup>122</sup> Adamson (2005), Hamid (2011).



likely shaped and influenced by political theologies, religious ideologies, or religious identitarianism.<sup>123</sup>

## Conclusion

This chapter I sought to make an explicit intervention in debates addressing the thorny relationship between religion and ideology in world politics. I suggested that religion should not simply be reduced to ideology, but rather approached as a distinct category of practice and analysis. While we should not treat religion *as ideology*, I argued that religion can and does nonetheless *become ideological* in the context of and in reaction to our modern secularized world. Thus religion participates in the ideological struggles of our time not *qua* religion or *qua* ideology, but as ‘ideological religion’ often seeking in ‘stronger’ versions to subsume or in ‘softer’ ones to shape the temporal according to the spiritual. I proposed a tripartite categorization of ideological religion as political theology, religious ideology, and religious identitarianism.

Compared to analysis which differentiate the ideological forms of religion according to faith tradition, or whether they are nationalist or globalist, progressive or reactionary, the typology I present centers on an ideological manifestation’s connection to theology and official religious institutions. The boundary between political theology and religious ideology is certainly often blurred, as it is also that between religious ideology and religious identitarianism. However, the usefulness of placing ideological religion on such a spectrum becomes apparent when comparing political theologies to religious identitarianism. In the former case there is an attempt – generally from actors that are anchored to a greater or lesser extent to formal religious structures – to grapple in a substantive way with theology and particular traditions of religious thought and experience, in the latter case the sacred is often emptied of its theological content and largely treated by principally secular actors as a cultural force and/or identity marker.

It therefore should not surprise that tensions and clashes between theologically thicker, on the one hand, and thinner, on the other, ideological religious forces have been notable. The limited religious content of political actors and social movements that embrace religious identitarianism (often as part of larger, secular, ideological conservative and reactionary frameworks), is generally

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<sup>123</sup> See also Jahn (2019), Wilson and Steger (2013).

a cause of concern for religious institutions and faith-based actors, who may also embrace theological and political views that are more universalist and ecumenical in orientation (although not necessarily more progressive). It is in this context that we have seen tensions for example emerge between the Catholic Church and milieus close to Christian Democratic ideals, on the one hand, and new forms of Christian identitarianism championed by right-wing populists in Europe.<sup>124</sup> Likewise, as a reaction in part to ISIS's ideology which dramatically highlighted sectarian differences acquiring thus a marked religious identitarian character, Islamic clerics and institutions worldwide came to call the group *Daesh* as a means to contest and deny the theological and religious recognition ISIS sought.<sup>125</sup>

Yet, it should be noted, that political theologies and religious identitarianism are not necessarily mutually exclusive. It is also the case that certain ideological forms of religion can travel from theologically thicker political theologies to thinner forms of religious identitarianism, and *vice versa*. This is for example the case with how the political theology of the Russian Orthodox Church can feed into – and itself may be shaped by – the civilizationalism endorsed by Putin;<sup>126</sup> or how the traditionalist and conservative political theology of certain sections of the Catholic Church alimments – and in return may be also influenced by – the religious identitarianism of right-wing populists in Italy or Poland.<sup>127</sup>

Ultimately, ideological religions are plural, complex, multivocal, and often internally contested belief systems that cannot be reduced to some putative immutable essence of this or that faith tradition. The tripartite typology I proposed of ideological religion helps, furthermore, to nuance our analysis by drawing attention as much to the similarities across, as it does to the divisions and points of conflict between, distinct forms of religious politics which a more undifferentiated notion of 'religious ideology' would miss. Rather than treating religion as ideology, I suggested that religions become ideological. They do so largely in the context of and

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<sup>124</sup> Driessen (2021), Ozzano (2016).

<sup>125</sup> Juergensmeyer (2018, 20-23). Contestation of ISIS' religious and theological credentials have been based not solely on its sectarianism, but on other considerations as well, including its claims to have re-established a Khalifate or use of extreme violence .

<sup>126</sup> Stepanova (2015).

<sup>127</sup> Korolczuk (2020), Ozzano and Bolzonar (2020).

as a reaction to the forces unleashed by modern global political and economic dynamics, which in turn ideological religions seek to shape in distinct ways.

Drawing on sacred religious symbolism, objects, doctrines, identities, communities, and practices ideological religions can contribute to dramatically escalating and exacerbating, or conversely solving and overcoming, divisions, violence, and wars. Different ideological manifestations of religion appear at once to be deeply entangled with, and yet also among the most powerful forces contesting some of the central features of today's world order constituted by states, the structures of capitalism, and the globalization of liberal norms. In a world which many view as becoming post-liberal, post-Westphalian, and post-secular, we should expect that political theologies, religious ideologies, and religious identitarianisms will play a growing and transformative role in global politics.

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