To understand the political and social importance of religious actors, it is necessary to comprehend what they say and do in their relationship with the state. Following Stepan (1988, p. 3), I mean something more than ‘mere’ government when referring to the state: it is the continuous administrative, legal, bureaucratic, and coercive system that attempts both to manage the state apparatus and to ‘structure relations between civil and public power and to structure many crucial relationships within civil and political society’. In the modern world, states typically try to reduce or control religion’s social and political influence – that is, they seek to privatise it, to dominate it. Sometimes, in countries at differing levels of economic development – for example, the USA, Nigeria, Tanzania, Indonesia, Israel, Burma and Poland – the state attempts to build a ‘civil religion’, that is, where a specified religion ‘functions as the cult of the political community’ (Casanova, 1994, p. 58). The aim of civil religion is to create consensual, corporate religion, guided by general, culturally appropriate, societally specific religious beliefs, yet not necessarily tied institutionally to any specific religious tradition (Haynes, 1998). When the state seeks to build a civil religion, the aim is to avoid societal conflicts and promote national consensus, especially in countries with pronounced religious, ethnic or ideological divisions. Minority religious groups may perceive civil religion as an attempt by the state to perpetuate the hegemony of a dominant religious tradition at the expense of other, less major, ones.

Religion’s relationship with the state is not only bounded by attempts to build civil religions. In recent years, it has become of greater public salience in relation to a range of state-religion relationships. That relations between religious organisations and the state have become more visible and often increasingly problematic in many countries in recent years does not, of course, constitute in itself evidence against the idea that states in the contemporary era do not need the kind of religious legitimation exemplified by civil religion. One certainly has, for example, to entertain the possibility that the recent proliferation of religious-based challenges to the authority of the state is merely a transitory reaction to the onward trajectory of secularisation. Moreover, even if states today seem vulnerable to legitimation crises, it does not mean that religion is necessarily becoming relevant to the functioning of state machinery. Religion-based or -linked challenges to the state often have their roots in endeavours by the latter to assert a monitoring role vis-à-vis religion, or to control it. This development is noticeable at three levels: political society, civil society and the state.
Religion and political society

Today, religion is being liberated from providing slavish legitimacy for secular authority. Religious leaders and activists often criticise governments in relation to social, economic and political policies. Yet, even if heightened concern about state policy is held up as evidence of the regeneration of religion’s socio-political power, it is still necessary to examine further the nature of this development. When the issues are clearly secular – such as poverty alleviation, migration and gender equality – and religious actors are vocal, it indicates a radical shift of concern from the supernatural and from devotional acts, to topics emphatically concerned with the here-and-now. This is not to suggest that when religious interest and pressure groups act in ways similar to secular counterparts that they are necessarily more effective. Wilson (1992, pp. 202–203) points out that the more secular a society, the less likely religion has a consistently significant social or political voice.

At the level of political society – that is, the arena in which the polity specifically arranges itself for political contestation to gain control over public power and the state apparatus – we can see a range of religious responses which are in part dependent upon the degree of secularisation in a country. They include (1) resistance to disestablishment and/or differentiation of the religious from the secular sphere – that is, a prominent goal of many so-called ‘fundamentalist’ religious actors; (2) the mobilisations and counter-mobilisations of religious groups and confessional parties against other religions or against secular movements and parties; and (3) religious groups’ organisation in defence of religious, social and political freedoms – that is, demanding the rule of law and legal protection of human and civil rights and protecting the autonomy of civil society and/or defending democracy against autocracy (Haynes, 1997).

Religion and civil society

Civil society is the arena where multiple social movements – for example, neighbourhood associations, women’s groups, religious organisations, intellectual currents, and the like – join with civic organisations – including those coordinating lawyers, journalists, trade unions and entrepreneurs – constitute themselves into an ensemble of arrangements. The aim is to advance members’ interests (Stepan (1988, p. 3). The concept of civil society is sometimes used to contrast such concerns with those of political society. Unlike the latter, civil society refers to institutions and movements – not including political parties – not overtly or consistently involved in the concerns of governance or in obvious political management. This does not prevent civil society organisations from exerting sometimes pivotal political influence on various matters, ranging from single issues to the character and complexion of a country’s constitution.

In relation to religion, at the level of civil society we may distinguish, for example, between hegemonic civil religions – such as evangelical Protestantism in nineteenth-century America – and the public intervention of religious pressure groups today. The latter may be concerned with single issues such as anti-abortion or with a morally determined view of wider societal development, including the role of women in society. Trying to influence public policy – without seeking to become political office-holders – religious leaders employ various tactics, including (1) lobbying the states’ executive apparatus, including the president or prime minister; (2) going to court; (3) cultivating sustained links with like-minded political parties; (4) forming alliances with groups in civil society – whether secular or religious – which have similar aims; (5) mobilising followers to protest or complain; and (6) seeking to sensitise public opinion via the mass or social media. The overall point is that religious actors use a variety of methods to try to achieve their social, political and/or economic objectives.
Religion and the state

Interactions between the state and the leaders of major religious organisations used to be widely identified as ‘church-state’ relations. In the modern world, however, this nomenclature is deficient. The very concept of church is a somewhat parochial Anglo-American standpoint with relevance only to the Christian tradition. It is derived primarily from the context of British establishmentarianism – that is, maintenance of the principle of ‘establishment’ whereby one church, such as the Church of England, is legally recognized as a country’s ‘established’ – that is, hegemonic – church. In other words, when we think of ‘church-state’ relations, we often assume a simple relationship between two clearly distinct, unitary and solidly but separately institutionalised entities of profound societal importance. In this implicit model, built into the conceptualization of the religio-political nexus, there is a state and only one church of singular religious authority; both entities’ jurisdictional boundaries are carefully delineated constitutionally. Both separation and pluralism must be safeguarded, because it is assumed that the leading church – like the state – will seek institutionalised dominance over rival organizations. For its part, the state is expected to respect individual rights even though it is assumed to be inherently disposed toward aggrandisement, sometimes at the expense of citizens’ personal liberty. In sum, the conventional concept of state-church relations is rooted in prevailing Western conceptions of the power of the state necessarily being constrained by forces in society – including those of religion – to deliver a ‘balance’ of power.

This traditional European-centred perspective is built on the understanding that church and state have a fair degree of power in relation to each other. Yet, when we look at the situation in, for example, Central and Eastern Europe during Soviet-dominated communism, there was a different situation. There, Communist governments presided over – and typically rigorously enforced – monolithic unity with comprehensive institutional interpenetration of political-administrative and religious ideological orders. In Western Europe, there has been in many cases a declining societal position for Christian churches as the countries of the region have secularised. In France, for example, when the dominant Catholic Church placed itself on the wrong side of the French Revolution in 1789 it found itself losing much power, privilege and moral authority until, by the mid-twentieth century, the church in France had lost much of its earlier political influence (Martin, 1978, p. 16). The overall point is that in much of contemporary Europe, state prevails over church, while the political saliency of church-state issues has declined in importance as the trajectory of secularisation has been consistent, digging ever deeper into countries’ social fabric.

Expanding the issue of church-state relations to non-Christian contexts away from Europe necessitates some preliminary conceptual clarifications – not least because the very idea of a prevailing state-church dichotomy is culture-bound. Church is a Christian institution, while the modern understanding of state is deeply rooted in the Post-Reformation European political experience. In their specific cultural setting and social significance, the tensions and debates over church-state relationships are uniquely Western phenomena, present in the ambivalent dialectic of ‘render therefore unto Caesar the things which be Caesar’s and unto God the things which be God’s’ (Luke 21, 25). Encumbered with Western cultural history, the two concepts cannot satisfactorily be translated into non-Christian terminologies. Some world religions – for example, Hinduism – lack an ecclesiastical structure, and consequently there cannot be a clerical challenge to India’s secular state comparable to that of Buddhist monks in Southeast Asia or Shiite mullahs in Iran. On the other hand, political parties and civil society organisations motivated and energised by religious concerns – especially Hinduism and Sikhism – are of great importance in twenty-first-century India.
Elsewhere in the Global South, only in Latin America is it pertinent to speak of church-state relations along the lines of the European model. This is because of the historical regional dominance of the Roman Catholic Church and the creation of European-style states from the early nineteenth century, following the demise of Spanish and Portuguese colonialism. Elsewhere, the traditional European-centric Christian conceptual framework of church–state relations is alien within and with respect to nearly all African and Asian societies – whether predominantly Christian, Muslim, Buddhist or Hindu – or in those countries with no dominant religion and a number of competing religious traditions.

The differences between Christian conceptions of state and church and those of other world religions are well illustrated by reference to Islam. In the Muslim tradition, mosque is not church. The closest Islamic approximation to ‘state’ – dawla – means, as a concept, either a ruler’s dynasty or his administration (Vatikiotis, 1987, p. 36). Only with the specific Durkheimian stipulation of church as the generic concept for moral community, priest for the custodians of the sacred law, and state for political community can we use these concepts in Muslim and other non-Christian contexts. On the theological level, the command-obedience nexus that constitutes the Muslim definition of authority is not demarcated by conceptual categories of religion and politics. Life as a physical reality is seen as an expression of divine will and authority (qudrah’). There is no validity in separating the matters of piety from those of the polity; both are divinely ordained. Yet, although both religious and political authorities are legitimated in Islam, in the modern world they invariably constitute distinct, sometimes independent, social institutions, while in many cases regularly interacting with each other with various outcomes (Dabashi, 1987, p. 183).

There is a variety of church–state relations in the contemporary world, which can be seen in five common relationships. First, there is the confessional church–state relationship where ecclesiastical authority is preeminent over secular power. The dominant religion seeks to shape the world according to its leadership’s interpretations of God’s plan for humankind. However, confessional states are rare in the twenty-first century, explicable by the trajectory of secularisation which has the effect of separating religious and secular power, to the advantage of the latter, seemingly regardless of religion or type of political system. On the other hand, as developments in Saudi Arabia after the country’s creation in 1932, in Iran since the 1979 Islamic revolution, and in Afghanistan since the return of the Taliban to power in 2021, indicate, some Muslim-majority countries have political and social systems dominated by religion under the hegemonic control of one interpretation of a religious faith.

Second, there are the ‘generally religious’ states, such as the USA and Indonesia. Both are guided by (different) religious beliefs – where the concept of civil religion is important, untied to a specific religious tradition. Both countries express a belief in God as a crucial base of the nation’s values on which the country should be developed. In Indonesia, this belief is one of the five pillars of Pancasila, the official, foundational philosophical theory of the country, since its liberation from Dutch colonial control in 1947. Conceptually, pancasila is similar to the notion in the USA of civil religion. However, whereas the generally religious policy of religion in Indonesia is an official policy, civil religion in the USA is not formally recognised and in recent years, many have noted, has declined as inter- and intra-religious conflict has deepened (Haynes, 2021).

Third, there are countries that, for long periods, had an officially established faith – yet are also socially highly secular. They include Denmark, Finland, Norway, Sweden and England. Over time, voices of established churches in these countries became increasing marginalised. However, in England, the Anglican church has – quite recently – begun once again to add its voice to demands for greater social justice.
Fourth, and frequently encountered in the modern era, there is the *liberal secular* model. Conceptually, it encapsulates the notion of secular power holding sway over religion; there is distance, detachment and separation between state and church(es) (Weber, 1978, pp. 1159–1160). The state strives to use religion for its own ends, often to ‘legitimate political rule and to sanctify economic oppression and the given system’ of social stratification (Casanova, 1994, p. 49). In such countries, secularisation policies are widely pursued, where post-colonial governments believe that it is an avenue to enhanced national integration. In the *liberal secular* model, no religion is given official predominance. In aggressively modernising countries such as China, modernisation was expected to lead inevitably to a high degree of secularisation, a development enhanced by the national communist ideology. In India, a country, which in the post-colonial era believed that the state should be neutral towards religion, things developed in an unexpected way: democratisation and secularisation worked at cross-purposes. Increasing participation in the social and political arena drew in new social forces – including religious Hindus, Sikhs and Muslims – who demanded greater formal recognition of their religions by the state, leading to religious difference becoming a central issue in contemporary Indian politics. In Turkey, the accession to power in the early 2000s of the Justice and Development (AK) party and the subsequent turn to Islam in social policy, indicates that even when secularisation is aggressively pursued over a long period – in this case, more than 70 years – there is no certainty that, for important constituencies, the socio-political appeal of religion will wither (Haynes, 2022).

Finally, there is the declining number of *Marxist secular* states. Before the overthrow of communism in 1989–1990, Central and Eastern Europe was filled with officially anti-religious polities, where the state sought to stifle religion or, as in Albania between 1947 and 1990, to ‘abolish’ it. Most Marxist regimes were less hard line than the government of Albania. Religion was at least permitted to exist – but only as the private concern of the individual, constituting a kind of promise that the authorities would respect the people’s religious faith and practice – as long as they did it behind closed doors as a solitary vice not for public view. Skeletal religious organizations were allowed to exist, but only so the state could use them for the all-important objective of social control. As a result, religions were reduced to liturgical institutions, with no other task than the holding of divine services, whose numbers were reduced at the behest of the state.

Paradoxically, however, even the most strident and prolonged Marxist anti-religion campaigns failed to secularise societies. When measured by the high levels of religiosity and the pivotal role of the Christian churches in many – but not all – Central and Eastern Europe countries after the political demise of Communism in the early 1990s and the contemporaneous revival of Islam in formerly communist Central Asian countries, such as Tajikistan and Kazakhstan, it is clear that popular religiosity retained immense social importance during the years of Communist domination.

The overall point of seeking to categorise state-religion relations is that none has been permanently able to resolve the tension between religion and the secular world. The chief manifestation of this tension in recent times is the desire of religious organisations not to allow the state to side-line them as – almost everywhere – secularisation bites ever deeper into social life. There are widespread attempts either to reverse or prevent religious privatisation in numerous countries, apparently irrespective of what form of relationship pertains between state and religion. The remainder of the chapter looks at three examples of recent religious involvement in civil society in relation to political change, including democratisation; culture wars; and recent rebellions in the Middle East and North Africa.
Religion and political change, including democratisation

To understand the general political importance of religious actors in the context of the third wave of democracy (mid-1970s to early 2000s), it is necessary first to comprehend what they say and do in their relationship with the state.

The nature of the relationship between religion and political change, including democratisation, is a crucial issue in the political life of the contemporary world. Although scholars disagree about their nature and scope, there is widespread concern in many countries regarding the role of religious actors in civil society in (1) helping underpin or support authoritarian regimes, (2) intercommunal clashes, and (3) transnational extremist networks. In Europe, for example, such phenomena today represent a dual challenge: first, religious communities must effectively integrate into democratic institutions while, second, policy-makers must work out and implement new policies and forms of cooperation to cope with previously unexpected threats and issues, some of which come from religious extremist actors.

Theoretically, the issue of how significant religious actors might affect political change, including democratisation, has long been debated. During the decades immediately after World War II, many scholars agreed that political culture – defined here as citizens’ orientation toward politics, affecting their perceptions of political legitimacy – was very important in explaining success or failure of democratisation. The political culture approach focused on how and in what ways religious traditions and actors were believed to feed into and affect a country’s political culture, including citizens’ preference or dislike of democracy. For example, in West Germany, Italy and Japan, cultural traditions – including Roman Catholicism in Italy, Christian Democracy in (West) Germany and a rich heritage of democracy-oriented philosophies and traditions in Japan – were said to be important, facilitating – with external assistance – the (re) making of these countries’ political culture after lengthy experiences of undemocratic, totalitarian regimes.

By the 1960s, Germany, Italy and Japan were established democracies. Soon after, a new theoretical orthodoxy emerged. This was linked to the period of sustained decolonisation in Africa, Asia and elsewhere in the developing world. The theoretical focus in relation to democracy in the post-colonial world shifted to institutional and economic factors. The emphasis was on robust, more representative institutions coupled with sustained economic growth; to have these qualities would make democracy more likely, it was widely believed. At this time, the importance of cultural factors, including religion and ethnicity, was marginalised. Later, from the mid-1970s until the early 2000s, the ‘third wave of democracy’ – entailing the role of civil society, including religious actors, in the pivotal shift from communist rule in Central and Eastern Europe – encouraged attention to the role of culture, including that of religion and ethnicity via civil society, in political change. For example, in Poland, the Roman Catholic Church played a key role in civil society in helping to undermine the country’s communist regime, helping establish a post-communist, democratically accountable government. The perceived pro-democracy role of the church was not however restricted to Poland but extended to many Latin American, African and Asian countries. There was also the contemporaneous rise of the Christian Right in the USA, and its considerable impact via civil society on the electoral fortunes of both the Republican and Democratic parties. Add to this the widespread growth of Islamist movements across the Muslim world, with significant ramifications for electoral outcomes in various countries, including Algeria, Egypt, Morocco, and the electoral successes of the Bharatiya Janata Party in India from the late 1990s and early 2000s. The overall result was that in multiple countries, religion was an effective motivator of civil society, with sometimes dramatic effects on political outcomes (Haynes, 2009).
Culture wars and civil society in the USA

In the USA, culture wars developed as the once consensual idea of civil religion declined. What is the connection between the two developments? To explain what happened, it is useful to identify why religion retains clear political significance in the USA. Writing three decades ago, Wald (1991, p. 241) argued that religion was multifaceted, expressed 'through such diverse paths as the impact of sacred values on political perceptions, the growing interaction between complex religious organizations and State regulatory agencies, the role of congregational involvement in political mobilization and the functionality of Churches as a political resource for disadvantaged groups'. Wald explained that America’s cultural, political and social development was greatly affected by patterns of individual and group religious commitment, which encouraged religious differentiation. This led to a growing number of extant religions in the USA, often with divisions within them. It also resulted in religious voluntarism; that is, most people believe that religious choices are not necessarily an ascriptive trait, conferred by birth. Instead, they are more a matter of choice and discretionary involvement. What is the situation today, compared to Wald’s comments 30 years ago? Religious cleavages did not disappear as America modernised. Instead, they were redefined and extended to a growing number of social and political issues, expressed in what are known as the country’s ‘culture wars’.

Following World War II, America went through a long period of rising prosperity and national optimism. At this time, America was said to be characterised by ‘civil religion’, a consensual non-partisan allegiance to a communal religious outlook. Society was believed not to be associated with any particular political or ideological position, reflective of a shared religious and cultural tradition, which had developed over time. The American state sought to cultivate ‘civil religion’ as the cult of the political community. Jean-Jacques Rousseau was the first to use the term ‘civil religion’ in his *The Social Contract*, published in 1762, while de Tocqueville (1969) examined it in the specific context of America. To Rousseau, civil religion was the American polity’s shared religious dimension. Mainly through the work of Robert Bellah, civil religion became an important concept in the modern sociology of religion. He sought to define the concept as a demonstrative assertion of a shared civic faith, which had been of great social and political significance throughout the history of post-colonial America. In ‘Civil religion in America’, an influential article published in 1967, Bellah identifies civil religion as the generalised religion of the ‘American way of life’, existing with its own integrity alongside particularistic expressions of faith, including several Christian denominations and Judaism. Robbins and Anthony (1982, p. 10) understand civil religion as the ‘complex of shared religio-political meanings that articulate a sense of common national purpose and that rationalize the needs and purposes of the broader community’. Thus, for both Bellah and Robbins and Anthony, civil religion advanced the idea that a post-colonial democratic USA was an agent of God, signifying that the American nation exhibited a collective faith serving a transcendent purpose. Political and religious spheres were constitutionally separate, and civil religion was regarded as the means to unite them, a crucial component of what it meant to be American.

Bellah (1964) saw civil religion as essential to restrain the self-interested elements of American liberalism, encouraging it towards a public-spirited citizenship which enabled republican institutions to thrive. He also regarded civil religion as a fundamental prerequisite of a stable democracy, a necessary antidote to the inherently pluralistic and individualistic culture of the USA. It was the glue that held society together, the key means by which Americans arrived at common societal values in a country built, on the one hand, on ideals of mutual tolerance and unity and, on the other, on great cultural and religious diversity. Civil religion made a highly positive contribution to societal integration, exhibiting a clear ability to bind a group of diverse
people, who were nevertheless united in achieving a common goal, while imparting a sacred character to citizens’ civic obligations and responsibilities.

The concept of civil religion also provided a means for public manifestation of religious faith, counteracting particular religious expressions’ tendency towards individuality. However, just as Bellah was proclaiming the great importance of civil religion to the integrity of the USA, the country was being torn apart by societal strife which, in hindsight, can be seen as the opening shots in the culture wars. On the one hand, there was increasing structural differentiation of private from public sectors, and on the other, there were widening societal divisions: religious, racial, ethnic and class. Collectively, these developments undermined generalised acceptance of a shared conception of moral order. Bellah’s book, *The Broken Covenant* (1975), argued that social changes were destroying public confidence in US intuitions, fatally weakening consensual traditions that had historically sustained faith in the republic. The societal consensus, believed central to civil religion, was effectively shattered by national reverses and scandals, including the Vietnam War and the Watergate scandal. Adding to these specific social and political travails, American unity was further undermined by polarising disputes over racial, moral and ethical issues. While the former mainly focused on the position of African Americans and Hispanics, the latter included state prohibitions on gender- and race-based discrimination, abortion rights, increased rates of cohabitation, permissiveness towards sexual expression in art and literature, reduced sanctions against homosexuality and a Supreme Court decision proscribing school prayer.

Taken together, these developments are indicative of a decisive shift from traditional Judeo-Christian morality to a new divisiveness in the late 1960s and early 1970s, where civil religion could no longer fulfil its traditional unifying role among Americans. It led to the Moral Majority, followed by the (New) Christian Right. As Wald (1991, p. 256) noted, ‘if the core of the concept of civil religion is ‘the tendency to hold the nation accountable to divine standards, then the case can be made that US political culture has actually been revitalized by the rise of the “New Christian Right” (NCR)’. Rather than seeking to rebuild the consensus manifested in civil religion, the Moral Majority and the Christian Right mobilised against perceived unacceptable manifestations of liberalism, viewed as the engine of America’s moral decay.

From the 1980s, religion was a focus of public struggles over an appropriate moral and ethical direction for America. More generally, the 1980s and 1990s were a time of societal upheaval and division in the USA, as the country was roiled by profound economic, political and cultural insecurities. There were external shocks – including, the unforeseen ending of the Cold War, the unexpected demise of the Soviet Union and the multiple impacts of globalisation; all impacted significantly on the USA and its social, economic and political equilibrium. An earlier book of the current author, published in 1998, sought to capture a picture of America in turmoil:

Angry white people blame African-Americans and immigrants for taking their jobs. Unemployed African-Americans look to blame the Hispanics. Forty million Americans have no health insurance, while blue-collar wages have fallen by nearly 20 per cent in real terms since the 1970s. Middle management is regularly ‘downsized’, while manufacturing jobs relocate to low-wage countries in Asia and Latin America. Meanwhile, the richest 2 per cent of the population control the majority of the wealth (Abramsky, 1996, p. 18). A single company, communications giant AT&T shed 40,000 jobs in the mid-1990s, while its chief executive enjoyed a $5 million (£3.2 million) rise in the value of his share options. In short, the USA is racked by scapegoating and chronic insecurity in the 1990s.

*(Haynes, 1998, pp. 23–24)*
The purpose of the quotation is to illustrate that what was once a class-based, left-right, vertical political division in America was by the 1990s a horizontal societal and political split. It divided, on the one hand, elites and the educated, who on the whole were believed to benefit from globalisation and, on the other, the ‘left-behinds’. These were less privileged Americans further down the socio-economic pyramid. They believed their own positions were declining and, understandably wished to reverse things. Who to blame?

Some politicians were quick to exploit the prevailing conditions of uncertainty, instability and growing insecurity for their electoral advantage. For example, in the 1990s the unsuccessful presidential bids of Pat Buchanan, a Republican, were built primarily on populist appeals to the socio-economic ‘left-behinds’ that he would reverse their declining position. Buchanan is a conservative Catholic and economic nationalist, who was the White House Communication Director in 1985–1987 during Richard Nixon’s presidency. In 1992, following a failed bid to become the Republican party’s presidential candidate, Buchanan made what was known as his ‘culture war speech’, when he derided liberals as the cause of America’s turmoil, claiming: ‘The American people are not going to go back into the discredited liberalism of the 1960s and the failed liberalism of the 1970s . . . ’ (Buchanan, 1992). In 1996, Buchanan achieved credible but surprising victories in several early Republican caucuses and primaries. In 2000, he ran again unsuccessfully for the presidency with the slogan ‘America First!’ (NPR, 2017). Some have claimed that Buchanan is the man who made President Donald Trump electorally possible by airing an earlier version of neo-nationalism, whose central tenets Trump adopted two decades later (Mann, 2019).

The overall result of America’s culture wars is today a polarised civil and political environment, with religious actors, especially the Christian Right, having a significant impact on the demise of the concept and practice of civil religion (Haynes, 2021).

The Arab Spring and civil society

The difficulties of people working purposively together even when they objectively share the same interests and concerns is underlined by the decade-long trajectory of the Arab Spring, also referred to as the Arab uprisings. The Arab Spring/uprisings began in late 2010 in Tunisia. A decade later, in the early 2000s, there was a new wave of civic discontent across many Arab countries in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA). As in the 2010–2011 Arab Spring events, popular concerns focus on universal problems: a perceived lack of democracy, few economic opportunities, especially for young people, and what some see as a lack of equality for women compared to men. Together, such concerns add up to a situation where many people, especially among the young, see little hope for a satisfactory future. Frustration and disappointment sometimes boil over and, in the lack of what are widely seen as legitimate political avenues to express discontent, people take to the streets and demonstrate their concerns via civil society.

In 2010–2011, MENA countries saw political and societal stability undermined as a consequence of such protests, which had both political and economic causes. The targets of popular anger were typically incumbent political leaders, widely regarded as both corrupt and undemocratic. While peoples live in a variety of political environments in the countries of the MENA, protesters were united by feelings of alienation. Despite this, the decade following the Arab Spring events did not see clear progress towards a more democratic picture in any of the countries of the region, except perhaps for Tunisia, which until 2022 was a functioning democracy. There was no uniformity in what subsequently occurred, no blanket return to deep authoritarian regimes, as demands for fundamental change would not be cowed. In some cases, old dictators remain in power, while in others new undemocratic leaders acquired power via the
ballot box. Some regional countries, such as Egypt, saw the ousting of the old authoritarian leaders, a brief spell of democracy, and then a new group of authoritarians took over. What is clear is that a decade of still-simmering rebellion reshaped the MENA. What is however unclear is what will be the eventual result in terms of political and economic outcomes. In Libya, the long-running Muammar Gaddafi regime was overthrown by rebels in 2011 aided by international intervention in the form of a North Atlantic Treaty Organisation bombing campaign. But a decade on, the country is still ungoverned and seemingly ungovernable, fragmented into numerous, sometimes mutually hostile, statelets and fiefdoms. As a result, the prospect of a re-created nation-state seems very far away. In Libya’s neighbour, Syria, the country’s civil war showed no sign of ending after a decade of conflict. In addition, in Yemen in 2023, a long-running war rumbled on.

What does a decade of political instability and upheaval in the MENA tell us about the voices of the people, in relation both to political changes and the impact of religion? On the one hand, it indicates that many people in the MENA are not content with the status quo and seek to express discontent in both ‘legitimate’ (the ballot box) and ‘illegitimate’ (demonstrations and riots) ways. Second, the post–Arab Spring upheavals highlight how many regional regimes manage to overcome popular demands for change; most stay in power and in many cases continue to rule in ways which have not fundamentally changed. The lack of success of the voices of the people to bring about fundamental changes highlights both the capacity of incumbent regimes to remain in power despite popular opposition and a continuing demand for more democracy and economic reforms in order to address the often-pressing need which many ‘ordinary’ citizens feel for political, economic and social improvements. A persistent question is whether governments have the ability or desire to deal with the challenge of fast-growing populations’ demands for more jobs, improved welfare and democracy? Such concerns animate tens of thousands of people in the MENA to continue to demand fundamental changes in order to improve their lives and future prospects. Such people – like their counterparts in many other parts of the world – expect and demand governments to bring about multifaceted improvements to their lives (Haynes, 2020).

Events in North Africa and the Middle East since the Arab Spring events of the early 2010s also provide evidence that on their own the voices of the people raised in protests against what are often seen as fundamental political and economic injustices do not necessarily prevail in the face of determined resistance from rulers very anxious to stay put and not give in to such demands. In power, governments frequently have effective means at their disposal to curb, undermine or defeat citizen-led activists.

Lewis (1993) points to the fact that the more than 20 countries of the MENA, with the exception of Israel, are Muslim-majority countries. For Lewis, this implies that Islam has characteristics which are not amenable to democratisation. Another view is that ‘Muslimness’ is not the problem; what is, is the fact that the Arab countries of the MENA share anti-democratic historical and structural characteristics (Fuller, 2002). Halliday (2005) argues that apparent barriers to democracy and development of effective and powerful civil societies in the Arab world are primarily linked to certain shared social and political features, but not to Islam per se. Impediments to democracy and civil society development include decades of authoritarian rule, fragmented societies and, if they exist, often-unrepresentative political parties.

Although some such features may be expressed in terms of an often vague ‘Islamic doctrine’, there is nothing in fact specifically ‘Islamic’ about them. Karl (1995) asserts that as a result of various structural and historical features, the Arab/Muslim world of the MENA is characterised by ‘a culture of repression and passivity that is antithetical to democratic citizenship’. Fattah
(2006, p. 1) notes that ‘[t]here is no question that Muslim countries are disproportionately autocratic . . . no single Muslim country qualifies today as a consolidated democracy’.

The following historical and structural characteristics make achievement of democracy difficult in the Arab countries of the MENA:

1. **Political systems headed by various kinds of personalistic leaders.** Arab countries were long dominated by rulers heading undemocratic political systems, including personalistic regimes (Libya under Gadhafi), single-party rule (as in Iraq and Syria) and dynastic expressions (for example, Morocco, Jordan, the Gulf Emirates, Saudi Arabia). While each system had singular characteristics, what they shared were (1) top-down mechanisms reliant on institutionalised support from the military and (2) a lack of bottom-up input from civil societies. Instead, civil society was, typically, both weak and fragmented, without sustained capacity to keep a watchful eye on power holders.

2. **Status quo-supporting militaries.** Military personnel quite rightly see it as their job to protect the state from attack. Among Arab polities, however, the key job of the armed forces is to defend both individual rulers and, more generally, the political and economic status quo. Consequently, armed forces’ senior echelons typically function as a de facto arm of government, sharing power holders’ strong interest in preserving the status quo.

3. **Weak and fragmented civil societies.** Civil societies in Arab countries are typically weak and fragmented. This is not by accident. Instead, it is part of a divide-and-rule strategy designed to deter challenges to those in power. The Arab Spring events were stimulated by activists from ‘civil society’, notably people taking to the streets to demand fundamental changes. Yet this apparent show of popular strength and singularity of purpose partially masked significant political differences between, *inter alia*, Islamists and secularists.

4. **Variable ideological stances of political Islam.** Political Islam in the MENA takes three main forms, with different ideological views on the role of Islam in politics.

According to Fattah (2006, p. 4), ‘three predominant [Muslim] worldviews’ significantly influence ‘religion and governance’ – including attitudes towards civil society – in the Muslim-majority countries of the MENA. They are ‘traditionalist’ Islamists, ‘modernist’ Islamists and (Muslim) ‘secularists’. ‘Traditionalist’ Islamists believe that they are the essential keepers of historic – yet timeless – Islamic traditions, with two central beliefs: (1) politics and religion are inseparable and (2) shariah law applies to all Muslims regardless of their own beliefs. ‘Traditionalist Islamists’ believe that for something to be authentically ‘Islamic’, it must be acceptable both to shariah law and to the *ulama* (Muslim clerics). ‘Western-style’ ‘liberal’ democracy is regarded as anti- or un-Islamic. A third belief is that Muslims collectively are the focal point of a conspiracy involving Zionists and Western ‘imperialists’ aiming to take over Muslim-owned lands and their oil resources. Such a concern is underlined, on the one hand, by US-owned transnational corporations’ ‘control’ over ‘Arab’ oil and, on the other, by what they see as Israel’s denial of full political and civil rights for its (mainly Muslim) Palestinian constituency. In Tunisia, Egypt and Morocco, Salafist political parties and organizations are prominent ‘traditionalist’ Islamist political actors.

Second, ‘modernist’ – sometimes referred to as ‘moderate’ – Islamists believe that core Islamic values, norms and beliefs offer a logical and appropriate approach to politics. They also accept that ‘Muslims can learn about anything they believe is good for themselves and society regardless of its origins’ (Fattah, 2006, p. 4). In other words, unlike ‘traditionalist’ Islamists, modernist/moderate Islamists do not summarily reject ‘Western-style/liberal’ democracy, finding neither ethical nor theological problems with adoption of democratic structures and processes, while
seeing nothing wrong in civil society having a role in seeking to advance such goals. Modernists base their acceptance of democracy and Western conceptions of civil society on two main arguments. First, neither democracy nor civil society are exclusively Western concepts and thus can be ‘Islamised’. Second, the Prophet Muhammad and other early Muslims were willing to adopt innovations if necessary to improve governance and the well-being of society (Cook and Stathis, 2012, p. 179). In sum, ‘modernist’ Islamists believe that politics and civil society should be authentically ‘Islamic’ – that is, they must not contradict shariah law – but this does not preclude adoption of democratic mechanisms if they are compatible with core tenets of Islam. In recent years, reflecting such beliefs, Tunisia, Egypt and Morocco have all had important ‘modernist’ Islamist parties: respectively, Ennahda, the Freedom and Justice Party and the Justice and Development Party.

Finally, there are (Muslim) ‘secularists’, who start from two assumptions. First, neither the Qur’an nor shariah law offers a blueprint for governance in today’s complex world, although they are seen as valuable sources of ethical and moral guidance. In other words, for such secularists Muslim holy texts do not usefully inform Muslims today explicitly how to run their societies, in the context of profound and continuing economic, cultural and social changes (Haynes, 2005). Muslim ‘secularists’ second assumption is that to succeed, prosper and improve their existential position and conditions, Muslims must seek to emulate the most objectively successful societies in order to catch them up and eventually pass them. For many Muslim ‘secularists’, this involves adopting the West’s modus operandi: learn from wherever necessary and use that knowledge to make socio-economic progress. For Muslim ‘secularists’, for something to be authentically ‘Islamic’ it must be in society’s objective interests. Finally, Muslim ‘secularists’ agree that both democracy and a strong civil society are desirable and necessary to arrive at representative, legitimate and authoritative governments which respect human rights, including those of women and religious minorities. Both Tunisia and Egypt were for long periods officially secular countries, albeit informed, especially in the case of Egypt, by Islamic values and norms. Morocco, on the other hand, is a country with a monarchical system rooted in Islam with recognisably secular political institutions (Strindberg and Warn, 2011).

**Conclusion**

Religion can affect the temporal world in one of two ways: by what it says and/or does. The former relates to religion’s doctrine or theology, the latter to its importance as a social phenomenon and mark of identity, which can function through various modes of institutionalisation, including civil society, political society and religion-state relations. It is necessary to distinguish between religion expressed at the individual and group levels: only in the latter is it normally of importance for understanding related political outcomes. From an individualist perspective, we are contemplating religion’s private, spiritual side, ‘a set of symbolic forms and acts which relates man to the ultimate conditions of his existence’ (Bellah, 1964, p. 359).

Moving into the realm of politics and civil organisation, we are necessarily concerned with group religiosity, whose claims and pretensions are always to some degree political and societally orientated. That is, there is no such thing as a religion without consequences for value systems, including those affecting societal and political outcomes. Group religiosity is a matter of collective solidarities and, frequently, of intergroup tension, competition and conflict, with a focus on either shared or disputed images of the sacred or on cultural and/or class, in short, political, issues. To complicate matters, however, such influences may well operate differently and with differing temporalities in various parts of the world even for the same theologically defined religion. To try to bring together the relationship between politics, religious actors and
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civil society in their varied aspects and then to try to discern significant patterns and trends is not simple. In attempting it, three points are worth emphasising.

First, there is a distinction to be drawn between looking at the relationship in terms of the impact of religion on politics and society and vice versa. Yet, they are also interactive: one stimulates and is stimulated by the other. In other words, because we are concerned with the ways in which power is exercised in society, and the ways in which religion is involved, the relationship between religion, politics and society is both dialectical and interactive. Both causal directions need to be held in view.

Second, religions are creative and constantly changing; consequently, their relationships with politics and society can change over time. Finally, as political and civil actors, religious entities can usefully be discussed in terms of specific contexts; it is the relationship with government and the state – whether supporting or seeking to undermine them – which forms a common focal point. Yet, the model of responses, while derived from and influenced by specific aspects of particular religions, is not necessarily inherent to them. Rather this is a theoretical construct suggested by much of the literature on state-society relations, built on the understanding that religion’s specific role is largely determined by a broader context.

The assumption is that there is an essential core element of religion shaping its behaviour in, for example, Christian, Muslim or Jewish societies and communities. As the case studies of the chapter show – on political change, culture wars and the post–Arab Spring events in the MENA – the role of religion is not uniform but is contextualised by many factors including local histories and cultural backgrounds of the societies involved.

References


