



MUN Background Guide

Role of Religion in Politics (SDG 5, 10, 16)

Issue & Committee's Focus

To what extent can religion influence political decision-making and be used to advance political agendas?

Focus: Religion's role in politics, ethical concerns, and impact on governance.

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Introduction

Religion has historically served as a powerful source of moral authority, collective identity, and political legitimacy. Despite the widespread adoption of secular governance models, religious beliefs and institutions continue to influence political decision-making through legislation, public discourse, and leadership narratives. This enduring intersection between religion and politics raises fundamental questions regarding the boundaries of state authority, democratic legitimacy, and ethical governance in increasingly diverse societies.

Political actors often invoke religious values to advance political agendas, ranging from the promotion of social cohesion and moral accountability to the consolidation of power and nationalist ideologies. While religion can provide ethical guidance and social stability, its politicization risks undermining pluralism when state policy prioritizes specific belief systems over others. Such dynamics complicate the protection of minority rights, freedom of religion, and equality before the law, particularly in states where religious identity is closely tied to political authority.

A critical dimension of this issue is religion-rooted extremism, in which religious doctrines are selectively interpreted or instrumentalized to legitimize violence, authoritarianism, or radical political movements. The fusion of extremist ideologies with political objectives poses significant threats to domestic stability, regional security, and international peace, often intensifying sectarian divisions and weakening governance structures.

Addressing these threats requires careful distinction between legitimate religious expression and extremist manipulation, a challenge that complicates both security policy and human rights protections.



In an era defined by globalization, ideological polarization, and multiculturalism, governments must balance religious freedom, secular governance, and national security. Delegates are therefore tasked with evaluating the extent to which religion can legitimately influence political decision-making, identifying the ethical and legal limits of its use in advancing political agendas, and assessing how states can counter religion-rooted extremism without eroding democratic principles, civil liberties, or social cohesion.

Aspects for Consideration

1. Models of Religion–State Relations

Delegates should examine varying approaches to the relationship between religion and governance, including strict secularism, state religion models, and hybrid systems that accommodate religious influence within constitutional frameworks. Research should assess how these models affect political legitimacy, policy-making, social cohesion, and minority rights. Prevailing global opinion remains divided: while secular governance is widely viewed as essential for inclusivity and equality, many states argue that religious values remain integral to national identity and democratic expression.

2. Ethical Legitimacy and Democratic Accountability

An important consideration is whether religion enhances or undermines ethical governance. Delegates may explore arguments that religious principles provide moral guidance and social responsibility versus concerns that religiously motivated policies compromise rational policymaking, transparency, and accountability. Globally, there is increasing scrutiny over policies justified on religious grounds, particularly when they conflict with international human rights norms, gender equality, or freedom of expression.



3. **Religion as a Political Instrument**

Delegates should analyse how political actors use religion to mobilize support, legitimize authority, or marginalize opposition. This includes examining populist movements, identity-based politics, and the strategic framing of religious narratives. Current global discourse increasingly recognizes the risks of politicizing religion, particularly in fuelling polarization, weakening democratic institutions, and entrenching majoritarian rule.

4. **Religion-Rooted Extremism and Radicalization**

Research should also focus on how extremist groups exploit religious narratives to justify violence, authoritarianism, or transnational agendas. Delegates should consider the political, social, and economic conditions that enable radicalization, as well as the role of state policies in either mitigating or exacerbating extremism. The prevailing global consensus emphasizes that extremism stems from political grievances and manipulation rather than religion itself, though debates persist over effective prevention and counter-radicalization strategies.

5. **Governance, Security, and Human Rights Trade-offs**

States responding to religion-based extremism often face tensions between ensuring national security and protecting civil liberties. Delegates should evaluate counter-extremism measures such as surveillance, religious regulation, and legal restrictions, alongside concerns of overreach, discrimination, and collective punishment. Globally, there is growing concern that heavy-handed approaches may undermine trust, alienate communities, and ultimately weaken governance.

6. **Implications for Global Governance and International Norms**

Finally, delegates should consider how religion in politics



influences international relations, diplomacy, and compliance with international law. This includes examining conflicts with religious dimensions, faith-based diplomacy, and debates over universal human rights versus cultural or religious relativism. The international community remains divided on the extent to which religious considerations should shape global governance, highlighting the need for dialogue, legal clarity, and multilateral cooperation.

Past UN Actions/Resolutions

1. Universal Declaration & Foundational Human Rights Frameworks
2. UN Declaration on the Elimination of All Forms of Intolerance and of Discrimination Based on Religion or Belief (GA res. 36/55, 1981) — This declaration elaborates on the right to freedom of thought, conscience, religion or belief and calls for eliminating discrimination rooted in religion or belief. It builds on Article 18 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights to affirm religious freedom as a universal human right.
3. General Assembly Resolutions on Tolerance, Dialogue & Extremism
4. Resolutions on Culture of Peace (e.g., GA/12226 in 2019; GA/12519 in 2023) — These texts underscore the importance of interreligious dialogue and tolerance to counter hate speech and prevent violence tied to religious difference, reflecting a broad consensus on promoting peaceful coexistence.
5. Security Council Resolutions Addressing Extremism and Religious Violence
6. UNSC Resolution 2686 (2023) — Highlights the impact of discrimination, intolerance, and extremism (including those influenced by religion) on peace and security, urging States and stakeholders — including religious and community



leaders — to address hate speech and violent extremism through tolerance and dialogue.

Key Terms

Secularism

The principle that government institutions and political decision-making should operate independently from religious authority, ensuring neutrality toward all belief systems.

Political Legitimacy

The justification of political authority and governance, which may derive from democratic processes, legal frameworks, or, in some contexts, religious or moral authority.

Freedom of Religion or Belief

A fundamental human right protecting the ability of individuals and communities to hold, change, manifest, or reject religious beliefs without coercion or discrimination.

Politicization of Religion

The strategic use or manipulation of religious beliefs, symbols, or institutions by political actors to mobilize support, justify policies, or marginalize opposition.

Religion-Rooted Extremism

The exploitation or selective interpretation of religious doctrines to legitimize violence, authoritarianism, or radical political agendas that threaten peace, security, and human rights.

Pluralism

The coexistence of diverse religious, cultural, and ideological groups within a society requires inclusive governance and equal legal protection for all communities.



Incitement to Hatred or Violence

Advocacy or expression—often framed in religious or ideological terms—that promotes discrimination, hostility, or violence against individuals or groups.

Separation of Religion and State

A governance principle in which religious institutions do not exercise direct political power, and the state refrains from endorsing or enforcing specific religious doctrines.

References and Citations

<https://www.un.org/en/about-us/universal-declaration-of-human-rights>

https://legal.un.org/avl/ha/ga_36-55/ga_36-55.html

<https://press.un.org/en/2019/ga12226.doc.htm>

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[https://docs.un.org/en/s/res/2686\(2023\)](https://docs.un.org/en/s/res/2686(2023))