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INTRODUCTION

Special Issue Introduction: Religion and Democratic Theory

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Abstract
In this introduction to the Special Issue "Religion and Democratic Theory," we sketch how political theory can contribute to understanding contemporary political challenges in the context of religion and democracy. We outline the contributions to this Special Issue in terms of their main claims.

Keywords: democratic theory; instrumentalization of religion; political theory; religion; religious reestablishment; rising authoritarianism

At the 2026 Security Conference in Munich, U.S. Secretary of State Marco Rubio gave a much-noticed speech, addressing European leaders: "We are part of one civilization—Western civilization. We are bound to one another by the deepest bonds that nations could share, forged by centuries of shared history, Christian faith, culture, heritage, language, ancestry, and the sacrifices our forefathers made together for the common civilization to which we have fallen heir."[1] This statement, alluding to both transnational alliances and key elements of "Christian nationalism" (Gides and Braune 2025; Gorski and Perry 2022), delivered on a global stage and met with standing ovations by leading politicians of democratic states, raises fundamental challenges for political theorists concerned with the relation between religion and democracy.

On the one hand, the political ideas reflected in such statements reaffirm that "the assumption, common some years ago, that Western liberal democracies had solved the problem of the relationship between state and religion, with constitutional secularism as a main plank of the solution, now seems somewhat naïve and precipitous" (McCrudden 2015, 434). From this perspective, the renewed debate about the connections between secularism, constitutionalism, and legitimacy that has been flourishing in political theory in recent years is concerned with just the right questions (Cohen and Laborde 2016; Seglow and Shorten 2019; Taylor 2007; Habermas 2006).

But, on the other hand, the political orientation apparently reflected in the Rubio speech also puts political theory under pressure to take stock and ask whether the

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terms of political discourse have shifted in a way that challenges approaches that seek to understand the relation between religion and democracy in terms of liberal norms of constitutional democracy. One might ask if fascism or authoritarianism, not democracy, are the crucial categories here (JW Müller 2026; Stanley 2024). For the research field, this raises the question of how established debates, for example, about conceptions of religion or religious exemptions in legal orders, need to be reconceived in light of the political moment.

Against this background, this Special Issue reexamines the *relation between religion and democratic theory*. Our guiding assumption is that democratic theory has much to contribute to analyzing and criticizing today's more hidden political challenges in the context of religion—if we take into account its substantive and methodological diversity. We understand democratic theory as a multidisciplinary research field and a "vibrant community of thinkers and ideas" characterized by "overlapping and contradictory concerns" (Dean et al. 2019: xiii). Our contributions build on the longstanding debate in political theory about religion, but we zoom in on different challenges in and for democracy. In recent years, political theory's debate about religion has proliferated and diversified (Eberle and Cuneo 2023; Lægaard 2023). Liberal theorists of religion have presented nuanced analyses of the normative challenges of religion, including religious exemptions or religious symbols in public spaces (see e.g., Bardon 2022; Seglow and Shorten 2019). The debate on whether "religion is special" has been at the center of liberal political theory and legal theory for many years. The question is whether religion raises particular normative challenges for democracy or constitutional states (Laborde 2016; Schwartzman 2012). This discussion was accompanied by a critical dialogue about the assumptions and unacknowledged biases of liberal, Western conceptions of religion. Critical scholars of religion have highlighted the dangers of ignoring unequal discursive and political background conditions in (allegedly) secular states (see e.g., Asad 2018; Mahmood 2016). Democratic theorists have only recently started to explore the normative, institutional, and social requirements for taking democratic decisions on religious matters (see e.g., Baycan and Gianni 2019; Landemore 2017; Pow and Garry 2023; Rouméas 2020).

Despite their differences and disagreements, these approaches have contributed to a vibrant and flourishing field, addressing questions about the concept and nature of religion, religion's relation to the democratic state, and the power and limits of religious speech (Lægaard 2023). As we cannot provide a full mapping of democratic theory and religion in this introduction, let us spotlight two key issues at stake in the contributions to this special issue: reestablishing and instrumentalizing religion.

The first is the debate about the reestablishment of religion, which challenges conventional notions of the legitimate place of religion in democratic states. Political theory has for a long time discussed the principle of "state neutrality" and the demands of "secularism" (Bhargava 2008; Laborde 2017). The idea that there should be an adequate, but not necessarily fully strict, separation between the institutions of the state and religion has long dominated liberal political discourse. Critical scholars have challenged those arguments that build on a limited conception of religion based on a protestantized version of Christian belief (Mahmood 2016).

Regarding "Christian nationalism," political theorists have pointed out that it should be seen as an example of a broader phenomenon of religious nationalism not limited to

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Western liberal democracies (Brubaker 2012; Grzymala-Busse 2019). A revival of religion and religious articulation of the political, not limited to Christian nationalism, can be observed in various places around the globe, with Russia, Turkey, India, and Poland offering "radical religious alternatives to liberalism" (Vallier 2023, 6). For democratic theory, this is not an entirely new challenge but rather a political development that can be criticized as "reestablishing religion," meaning that the political and legal separation of state and religion is weakened (Schragger et al. 2025). This also includes reintroducing religious symbols in public buildings, such as crucifixes in public buildings in Bavaria, Germany, or the Ten Commandments in public schools in several US states (Bardon 2022). The fact that the political dangers connected to reestablishment have long been neglected could be attributed to the selective attention dedicated to different religious groups (Beaman 2013). As scholars of critical religion have demonstrated, it is highly context-dependent when and where a specific religion is marked as potentially dangerous—or whether it has the "privilege of being banal" as does Catholicism in France, for example, as a recent ethnography suggests (Oliphant 2021). Taking such in-depth empirical studies on reestablishing "culturalized religion" (Astor and Mayrl 2020) into account, political theorists can question their use of overly broad notions of religion, secularism, and the state.

This debate about religious claims that are framed as "cultural" is closely connected to the second debate concerning the "instrumentalization" of religion. Political scientists increasingly examine how religious frames are used in democratic politics, especially by far-right parties (Engelhardt 2026). The rollback on reproductive rights in the United States, for example, has been framed by anti-abortion groups in explicitly religious terms (Kraybill 2026). Religion still functions as a rhetorical frame for broader struggles around nation, belonging, migration, race, gender, and sexual orientation (Arato and Cohen 2017). Today, religious claims and arguments are sometimes misused to justify anti-democratic political agendas, and religious narratives in political discourse are increasingly laced with conspiratorial elements and apocalyptic imagery (Armaly et al. 2022; Mitrofanova 2025).

To evaluate such charges of instrumentalization, political theory will need to update and broaden the debate about the democratic legitimacy of religious arguments in public discourse (Lafont 2007; Rawls 1993). The liberal and deliberative debate about religious reasons focuses on the democratic legitimacy of political decisions and the need to justify these in a manner accessible to both religious and secular citizens. The return of religious rhetoric to the political stage seems to raise different normative concerns, however. As the term "instrumentalization" suggests, one of the challenges is that religious arguments are not used sincerely but merely invoked for political gains. Political theory might respond to this, for example, by connecting the public reason debate with the more recent discussion on hypocrisy and democratic falsehood (Lepoutre 2024; Runciman 2018), or by applying the insights of the debate about cultural and religious appropriation to the context of public reason (Bucar 2022; Bardon and Page 2025).

Both the reestablishment and the instrumentalization of religion require political theory to break new ground in terms of its conceptual, empirical, and normative assumptions about the relationship between religion and democracy. Political theory not only needs to reevaluate whether the special normative status attributed to religion

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is appropriate, but it needs to "catch up" with critical scholarship that has challenged conceptual and normative shortcuts.

This Special Issue

Our Special Issue "Religion and Democratic Theory" brings together theorists of democracy from various theoretical backgrounds to discuss the relationship between religion and democracy. The contributions challenge dominant assumptions about religion and democracy in order to shed light on different contemporary political controversies. They problematize the political and social consequences of state engagement with religion, covering both how religious minorities are singled out and how historically dominant religions are privileged. In doing so, these articles can add to a more nuanced understanding of the twin challenge of reestablishing and instrumentalizing religion.

The Special Issue is marked both by its plurality of theoretical approaches to democracy and its methodological diversity. It assembles works rooted in different traditions of political theory, including liberal, deliberative, and agonistic perspectives. Their normative assumptions shape how the relationship between religion and democracy is addressed: What is a good democratic decision about religious matters? Which conception of democracy is promoted in programs of democracy promotion? How are spaces of everyday democratic discourse shaped by different ideas about what the state is and how it should relate to religion? How should we understand the role of legal contestation about freedom of religion? What does 'secularism' mean for democratic theory, and how important is the distinction between religious and secular reasons? The authors reconsider core practices of democracy, such as participation, representation, and contestation, and connect them to a variety of democratic values like equality, self-government, diversity, and autonomy.

Despite these different starting points, the authors share an orientation toward close engagement with concrete political cases. The methodological boundaries of political theory are pushed in various directions by drawing on legal scholarship and socio-legal studies, empirical political science and sociology, cultural anthropology and religious studies. Every author in this special issue has picked one specific empirical setting in which the relationship between religion and democracy demands theoretical attention. These include democracy promotion programs and how they construct distinctions between Christianity and Islam, the role of religious expertise in democratic decision-making, or religious strategic litigation. The empirical material is addressed with a variety of methods in political theory, such as ethnographic field work, critical qualitative document analysis, or reconstructive approaches in normative political theory. Several contributions stress the need to move beyond Western conceptions of religion and the state, or call for a decolonial approach to democratic theory of religion.

Aurélia Bardon (2026) reflects on the role that religious experts should play in making political decisions on religion. Her article challenges the constriction of religious expertise to either clerical or academic voices. Bardon argues that in a religiously neutral state, the crucial question is whether a political decision concerns religious freedom or religious establishment. This distinction determines which information is relevant and which actors are best suited to provide it.

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Schirin Amir-Moazami (2026) examines German state programs aimed at preventing "Islamism" and promoting democracy. Her article traces both the epistemological and regulatory dimensions of the distinction between "Islam" and "Islamism" articulated in these programs. She criticizes their simultaneous racialization of Muslim minorities and depoliticization of democracy, in which the latter is rendered a stable order rather than a contested political project.

Tobias Müller (2026) calls for more nuanced, ground-level analyses of how state interventions affect religious life, specifically minoritarian religious life in democracy. His approach combines anthropological fieldwork on two superdiverse neighborhoods in Munich and London with Neo-Marxist, Foucauldian, and anthropological theories of the state. He demonstrates the effects of state intervention on local communities and their conditional access to democratic participation.

Cristina Lafont (2026) challenges the idea that religion is uniquely special in political justification. Instead, she advocates for an institutional approach beyond the religious-secular distinction that treats religion alongside other social practices. Her article deems religion socially special, although other social practices may share this characteristic. Lafont names science, the arts, and the family as similarly deserving of specific treatment without needing to inscribe a unique quality to them. She calls into question whether religion should continue to be treated as a central category in the legitimacy of democratic decision-making.

Svenja Ahlhaus (2026) argues that religious strategic litigation is not uniquely problematic compared to other forms of strategic litigation. She takes a deliberative-democratic perspective and warns of the potential for strategic litigation to disempower citizens. When litigation collectives exploit the gap between their actual legal case and the narratives that they publicly present around it, they can use (religious) strategic litigation for hiding their agenda, the nature of the group behind the case, or the reasons for going to court. This undermines citizens' capacity to challenge and contest problematic forms of strategic litigation.

In the interview concluding this Special Issue, Cécile Laborde discusses her theory of "minimal secularism" (Laborde and Ahlhaus 2026). Laborde proposes minimal secularism as a transnational model setting a benchmark for liberal democratic states that does not stand on Western notions of secularization. She presents three principles: (1) the accessible state, (2) the limited state, and (3) the inclusive state. Drawing on both liberal and republican traditions, the three principles engage different dimensions of religion. The conversation with Laborde explores the relationship between liberalism and republicanism, her critique of standard liberal public reason, and the challenge of phenomena such as Christian nationalism. Laborde also reflects on her broader intellectual trajectory, linking her work on secularism, discrimination law, and the interplay of freedom, equality, and inclusion in democratic theory.

The Special Issue aims to contribute to a methodologically diverse and normatively nuanced field of religion and democratic theory that enables scholars to critically analyze contemporary challenges. This includes the tendency toward reestablishing and instrumentalizing religion. Our hope is that the research field opens a number of new paths for studying the relationship between religion and democracy.

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Note

1. A transcript of Marco Rubio's remarks at the Munich Security Conference has been published as a press release on the Website of the U.S. Department of State: https://www.state.gov/releases/office-of-the-spokesperson/2026/02/secretary-of-state-marco-rubio-at-the-munich-security-conference.

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