

Religious States

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WHAT'S COVERED

This lesson talks about countries that have religion as the foundation of their civil law. It will also mention countries that have a clear distinction between the life of civil affairs and religious life.

Specifically, this lesson will cover:

1. Holy Rule
2. Modern Theocracies
3. Secular States

1. Holy Rule

A **theocracy** is a form of government in which God is the civil ruler. Official policy is governed by immediate divine guidance or by officials who are regarded as being divinely guided. The word theocracy means “rule from God” or “rule of God.” It comes from two Greek words, “theos,” meaning “God,” and “krateo,” meaning “to rule.”

From the perspective of the theocratic government then, God himself is recognized as the head of the state. The idea of a holy ruler can be traced back quite a long time. You can see it in civilizations as old as ancient Egypt. The ruler was understood to be divine and thus worshipped as a God or the incarnation of a God.

Theocracy was also the rule of the Byzantine Empire, beginning with the first Christian Emperor, Constantine, in the 4th century of the Common Era. The emperor was God’s representative on earth, overseeing all civil and ecclesiastical affairs. His rule was considered to be supreme and ultimate. Today, many see the role of the pope in a similar light, as a theocratic ruler directly under God and divine justice.



DID YOU KNOW

The Church of England began when Henry VIII broke with the papacy of Rome and declared himself to be the head of the Church in England. This eventually led to the formal separation of church and state.



TERM TO KNOW

Theocracy

Government led by religious leaders who are considered to be divinely guided.

2. Modern Theocracies

The nation of Iran is the clearest example of an Islamic theocracy because the Supreme Leaders are religious clerics who are considered to be divinely guided. Many other Muslim-majority nations, such as Saudi Arabia, Yemen, Somalia, Mauritania, and Oman, recognize Islam as the official state religion and follow a code of law based on Islam and its mandates known as Sharia.

In these countries, **Sharia** constitutes the basis for official state law. Sharia law can generally be sourced to the belief in the truth of the Qur'an and to tribal customs that, in a sense, precede Islam. It can also be sourced to the habitual beliefs, practices, and actions of the prophet Muhammad, or the Sunnah, and the traditions and the sayings of Muhammad, or the Hadith.

The received wisdom is applied in different ways by the different countries, but in nearly all cases any civil authority given to the state is understood to be based on sacred law. These nations may also have elected and administrative government officials, but Islam is recognized as the official state religion.



TERM TO KNOW

Sharia

In Islam, the religious code of ethics and moral conduct that informs the law of the state to a greater or lesser extent depending on the country.

3. Secular States

Many countries with large Muslim populations, such as Turkey, have opted for a separation of religious affairs from state or civil issues. In other words, these countries can be described as secular despite the religious makeup of their population. Other kinds of secularism include countries with strong religious histories but with populations that are generally either atheistic or non-practicing.

France is a country where there is a strong separation of church and state, called Laïcité. The majority of the population is non-practicing. China is another country that has a rich history of religiosity, particularly during the Han Dynasty in the 3rd century of the Common Era. At that time, Confucianism was followed as a state religion and ideology. Today, however, most people are considered non-practicing.



SUMMARY

Theocracy is a form of government by religious authority. Previous civilizations and cultures that function under **holy rule** include certain civilizations of ancient Egypt; Byzantine culture under the Holy Emperor; and the papacy of Rome, which continues today as a theocracy. An example of a **modern theocracy** is Iran, and some other Muslim-majority nations, such as Saudi Arabia, Yemen, Somalia,

Mauritania, and Oman, base their law codes on Sharia. Sharia, in Islam, is the religious code of ethics and moral conduct, and informs the law of the state to a greater or lesser extent, depending on the country. In contrast to theocracy is the notion of separation of church and state. Countries such as Turkey, France, and China are rich in religious culture and history, yet, for the most part, they are non-religious, or **secular states**.

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TERMS TO KNOW

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