

## Abstract

Islamic politics through the prism of globalization and its effects, have been transcending national borders and the spatial limitations of formal politics. Islam itself has also been undergoing a serious evolution with the new forms of Muslim identity and the so-called emergence of “post-Islamism”. Different types of Islam have shown greater accommodating capacities to modernity and compatibility for peaceful co-existence with other religions, political pluralism and democratic values. Notwithstanding, the paper makes a compelling case for the separation of state and religion with clear and well-defined boundaries.

The paper initially explores the millennium-long tradition of intertwining politics and religion from prehistoric times and the genesis of statehood to the modern concept of secularisation. The critical enquiry further engages with the roots of Islam and its proliferation to a phenomenon akin to a commonwealth - infusing religious, political, cultural and societal development dialogise with the projection of religious trends. One conclusion that resurfaces in the research in relation to “Islamic fundamentalism” is the complex correlation between governance, religion and forms of extremism. The paper next refers to the positive example of Indonesia in terms of embracing its inborn diversity and actively engaging with re- inventing an identity that can serve as a balancing mechanism for different ethnicities, religions, cultures and languages. Finally, a case for Kyrgyzstan’s development is made. Factors of formal and informal nature are put under scrutiny and legislative, educational, media and civil society recommendations are put forward.

## Islam and Politics<sup>1</sup>

There is a millennium-long tradition of intertwining politics and religion. The ancient civilizations of Egyptians, Persians, Chinese, Greeks and Romans had their assortment of polytheistic gods. Israel, Europe, North America, most of contemporary Africa and South America are devote monotheists. To this day the Middle East is predominantly Muslim, while the Far East can be characterised by a variety of religions including Hinduism, Buddhism, and Taoism. Western Europe shows an express preference for Christianity despite declining trends. Africa is a mix of Christian, Islamic and tribal religions.

Thus, in confronting the genesis of statehood from prehistoric times, it is important to note the role religion has played in the development of increasingly stratified and organised societies, alongside the “techno-economic and socio-political variables”<sup>2</sup>. Archaeologists, historians and political scientists alike trace the religious input of fostering greater interregional trade and connectivity, largely due to its cohesive nature. It can be stipulated that religious organization has enabled the facilitated transition to economic and state redistributive systems, while claiming control of strategic resources and Weberian sanctions<sup>3</sup>. Therefore, the separation of religion and state in contemporary political systems is much more than a philosophical dilemma or daily conversation - it is a jurisprudential concept that serves to existentially change the power balance in a society. The disentanglement of religion and state is indeed a complex and dynamic process in the making.

Ever since its origins in the 7<sup>th</sup> century, Islam has gradually and consistently been becoming more than a movement or statistically second largest religion in the world (with some 1.8 billion adherents). In effect, Islam has evolved into something akin to a commonwealth-infusing religious, political, cultural and societal development. Some may argue, fostering the

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<sup>2</sup> [https://books.google.be/books?id=vOHS-UVTy2oC&pg=PA172&lpg=PA172&dq=religion+and+statehood+intertwined&source=bl&ots=NEOm\\_wuPhX&sig=JRmdGG575F1sUPCr0UdJ-wmiuVM&hl=en&sa=X&ved=0ahUKewiU4MjQgrPWAhXM7hoKHSvMAHAQ6AEINTAC#v=onepage&q=religion%20and%20statehood%20intertwined&f=false](https://books.google.be/books?id=vOHS-UVTy2oC&pg=PA172&lpg=PA172&dq=religion+and+statehood+intertwined&source=bl&ots=NEOm_wuPhX&sig=JRmdGG575F1sUPCr0UdJ-wmiuVM&hl=en&sa=X&ved=0ahUKewiU4MjQgrPWAhXM7hoKHSvMAHAQ6AEINTAC#v=onepage&q=religion%20and%20statehood%20intertwined&f=false)

<sup>3</sup> Textbook example of what Max Weber coined to be the state “monopoly of violence”

creation of a global empire of sorts.<sup>4</sup> Religion is indeed integral to state and society, strengthening the most basic social bond of solidarity. Much like the tribal affiliation became the basis of Islamic society, similarly religion bolsters a sense of belonging.

Despite the Islamic world seeing a lot of rapid changes, Islam has continued to play a crucial role in Muslim politics - whether in North Africa or Asia. Islamic movements that are getting institutionalized oftentimes protrude in the political, as well as the social development of diverse states throughout the Muslim world. This gives us no room for doubt in terms of the importance of Muslim politics in contemporary world affairs, particularly considering that researches have already calculated projections for population and religions half a century from now. Islam has been estimated to become the world's largest religion by 2075. While the data analysis indicates the Muslim and Christian populations remain on the rise (Figure 1 & Figure 2), another rather disturbing projection resurfaces. Numbers of non-adherents and worshippers of less widespread religions appear to be shrinking (Figure 3).<sup>5</sup> This revelation begs the inquiry why certain religions like Islam are rising fast, while the religious “nones” (the non-affiliated) and the representatives of the “other” category will manifest a diminishing share in the world's population. Exactly what pressures are bringing this about, or rather is it a question of interloping of personal beliefs, societal norms and the official?

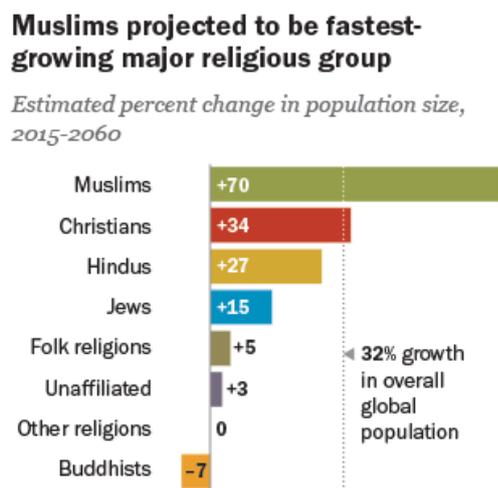


Figure 1

Source: Pew Research Center

<sup>4</sup> [http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/isla/hd\\_isla.htm](http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/isla/hd_isla.htm)

<sup>5</sup> [http://www.pewforum.org/2017/04/05/the-changing-global-religious-landscape/?utm\\_source=adaptivemailer&utm\\_medium=email&utm\\_campaign=17-04-05%20projections%20update&org=982&lvl=100&ite=929&lea=199751&ctr=0&par=1&trk=](http://www.pewforum.org/2017/04/05/the-changing-global-religious-landscape/?utm_source=adaptivemailer&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=17-04-05%20projections%20update&org=982&lvl=100&ite=929&lea=199751&ctr=0&par=1&trk=)

## Size and projected growth of major religious groups, 2015-2060

	Projected 2015 population	% of world population in 2015	Projected 2060 population	% of world population in 2060	Population growth 2015-2060
Christians	2,276,250,000	31.2%	3,054,460,000	31.8	778,210,000
Muslims	1,752,620,000	24.1	2,987,390,000	31.1	1,234,770,000
Unaffiliated	1,165,020,000	16.0	1,202,300,000	12.5	37,280,000
Hindus	1,099,110,000	15.1	1,392,900,000	14.5	293,790,000
Buddhists	499,380,000	6.9	461,980,000	4.8	-37,400,000
Folk religions	418,280,000	5.7	440,950,000	4.6	22,670,000
Other religions	59,710,000	0.8	59,410,000	0.6	-290,000
Jews	14,270,000	0.2	16,370,000	0.2	2,100,000
<b>World</b>	<b>7,284,640,000</b>	<b>100.0</b>	<b>9,615,760,000</b>	<b>100.0</b>	<b>2,331,120,000</b>

Figure 2

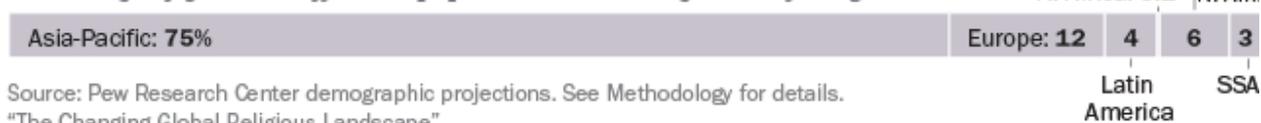
Source: Pew Research Center

## The majority of the global unaffiliated population lives in Asia and the Pacific

Population by region as of 2015



Percentage of global unaffiliated population in each region as of 2015



Source: Pew Research Center demographic projections. See Methodology for details. "The Changing Global Religious Landscape"

Figure 3

Source: Pew Research Center

What has however brought the merger of politics and religion in the spotlight of the international community's governmental and public scrutiny are the recent negative developments in relation to violence attributed to faith radicalization around the world. Religious intolerance-driven violence has been erupting around the globe: notice the Rohingya escalation in Myanmar, the domestic governmental coping mechanisms have been challenged (powerful military, nationalist parties and undemocratic constitutions) and the role of the international community put into question. Notice also the role of Islam in the Arab uprising - with governments in Egypt, Tunisia, Syria, Libya, and Yemen making use of Islamic beliefs to justify the suffocation of pro-democratic protests. Governments have been known to place a tight grip over and acutely subordinate the predominant religions in order to further their political agendas. This kind of abuse of religion is also essential for the functioning of terrorism. The sharia has been invoked by radical, militant Islamist groups to exonerate the barbarous and highly anti-humane acts of psychologically and physically terrorizing the Western world as well as other Muslims under the guise of Jihad (Figure 4).



Figure 4

Source: Institute for Economics and Peace

Reverting back to the Arab Spring, the phenomenon that swept over the Middle East states set the tone for a new relationship between state and religion. However now this raises the concern of reverse threats - religion attempting to dominate the state in a post-Assad Syria, for instance.

How to thwart negative developments and avoid the negative cycles of instability, escalations due to authoritarianism and the violent spiral of extremism?

As much as some politicians and academics raise the issue of the threatening nature of political Islam or “Islamic fundamentalism” there is actually no ground for a rational, arguments-based thread of an impending clash between the Muslim world and the West. What’s more, Huntington’s civilizational fatalism is severely outdated and dangerous in terms of policy-making dynamics. Somehow kept low key is the legacy left by sensible Islamic scholars who have made their decisive contribution to the secularization debate. One of those enlightened Islamic scholars is Mohammad Abduh<sup>6</sup> who engaged with notions as reason as a virtue, morale vs. dogma, justice and consultative governance. Ali Abdel Raziq, a 20<sup>th</sup> century Islamic scholar, argued in his writings the, at the time, very controversial notion of the need to separate religion from state. In his treatise “Islam and the Foundations of Governance”, he argued against the role of religion in politics, the prescriptive nature of religious texts in the political debate and civil institution building, as well as the chimerical notion that Islam suggest a particular type of government.<sup>7</sup>

The above made circumscriptions for the very understanding of Muslim politics despite being extensively discussed and deliberated can to some extent be attributed to the complexity of comprehension. This complexity partly stems from competing voices claiming to speak on behalf of Islam. What needs to be taken as ground zero is the inherent pluralism and diversity of Muslim politics. Furthermore, secularism is a factor that is a deeply embedded Western notion and does not fit in the narrative of local Islamic societies. Are religion and community faith truly incompatible with modernity, rationality and the drive for empirical enquiry?

Consequently, in terms of religion and statehood, it would rather be the better choice to keep them separate and in full constructive capacity rather than diminishing their potential to foster a safer and more developed civil society. This also constitutes the case made for the secular state that embraces all religions. Now is the best time for academia to get involved in finding the solutions and looking for best practices for the management of the dynamic duo-politics

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<sup>6</sup> Egyptian Islamic jurist, religious scholar and liberal reformer, regarded as one of the key founding figures of Islamic Modernism. Wikipedia

<sup>7</sup> [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/alon-benmeir/arab-spring-and-revival-ob\\_1015512.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/alon-benmeir/arab-spring-and-revival-ob_1015512.html)

and religion. Forthwith is the engagement with the policy-making process and agenda setting to make a practical difference.

Religion and political power prowess have acted as mutually infusing and inducing conflict and misbalance elements. However, certain countries of diverse nature have proved to oppose this notion. A positive example of a country that has been able to maintain a stable and prosperous state while thriving on religious tolerance and retaining civic prerogatives is Indonesia. Indonesia has earned itself the title of role model in religious peace of co-habitation and politics of inclusiveness of all spiritualities, all the while separating statehood from religion. This can best be understood in terms of the sensitive equilibrium of managing the relationship between state, religion and society. Indonesia has been exhibiting impressive capacity in terms of its society managing inter-cultural and inter-religious conflict, boasting a decidedly pluralistic society of tolerance and peaceful co-existence. What Indonesia has largely flourished on is the careful addressing of attempts to politicize religious factors and the established importance of freedom of religion. The significance of increased interaction between members of different religions has definitely contributed to the largely thawed radicalization of segments of society with a comparatively miniscule proportion of Islamic state recruits for a state of its size and population (Figure 5).

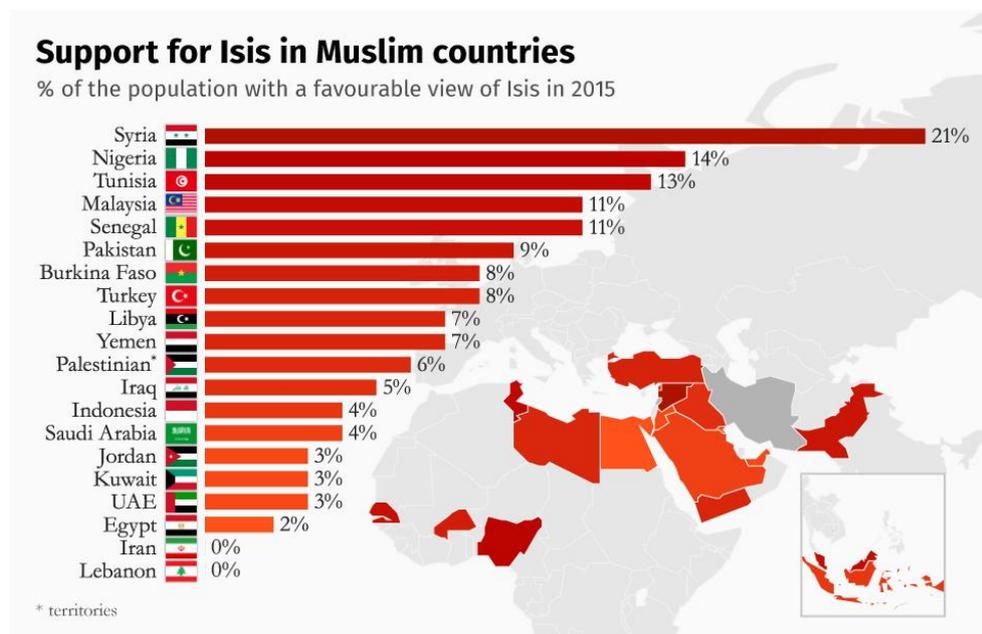


Figure 5

Source: Pew Research Institute

In more concrete terms, Indonesia has set a positive example in the following aspects:

- The spirit of unity in diversity enshrined in the 1945 Constitution which ensures freedom of religion for all
- Existence of a horizontal Ministry of Religious Affairs<sup>8</sup>
- Existence of diverse dialogue mechanisms—preventive tools for countering extremism and mellowing intolerance trends while budding. Nationally, every single province is host to religious Harmony Forums.<sup>9</sup>
- Importance of having active representation be it in governments or different religious groups. The impetus falls not only to secure this practice in the capital-region or big cities but ensure equal development and opportunities for distant rural areas as well
- Indonesia has through time found a way to transfer its inter-religious harmony from paper to practice. e.g. peaceful neighbouring houses of worship and co-usage of facilities<sup>10</sup>
- Managing of media output<sup>11</sup>. The importance of addressing the counter-productive and damaging nature of journalistic pieces cannot be underestimated. These pieces might not be fake news per se, but are taken out of context and devoid of nuance, only hunger- driven for “buzz”, ratings and re-tweets
- Exchange programs for religious scholars and leaders
- University programs that take into account the inter-religious nature of Indonesian society and incorporate this reality into the curriculum

A guiding consideration that needs to be taken into account for the above arguments is that whatever the de jure framing of the issue, the de facto reality at the grassroots level is what defines the effectiveness in the handling of the disputes. People tend to prefer to keep antagonisms or the resolution of them at a local level rather than take them up with authorities higher up. This requires deeper understanding of the policy-making process and the consequences of particular initiatives. Tolerance, mutual respect and pluralism are a day to day

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<sup>8</sup> 11 units- General Secretariat, GD of Islamic Education, GD of Hajj and Umrah, GD of Islamic Community Guidance, GD of Christian Community Guidance, GD of Catholic Community Guidance, GD of Hinduism Community Guidance, GD of Buddhist Community Guidance, GD of Confucian Community Guidance, General Inspectorate and Agency of Research, Development, Education and Training

<sup>9</sup> Indonesia- led inter- faith dialogues have also gained a mandate abroad- Indonesia as a regional and global role model

<sup>10</sup> St Mary of the Assumption Cathedral and the Istiqlal mosque in Jakarta, Puja Mandala complex in Bali housing 5 places of worship, etc.

<sup>11</sup> Not censorship, but rather responsible management of content for the greater good and prosperity

exercise. A useful projection of the religious trend in 2010 and for 2050 illustrates the stability of religious disparity within Indonesia (Figures 6 & 7).

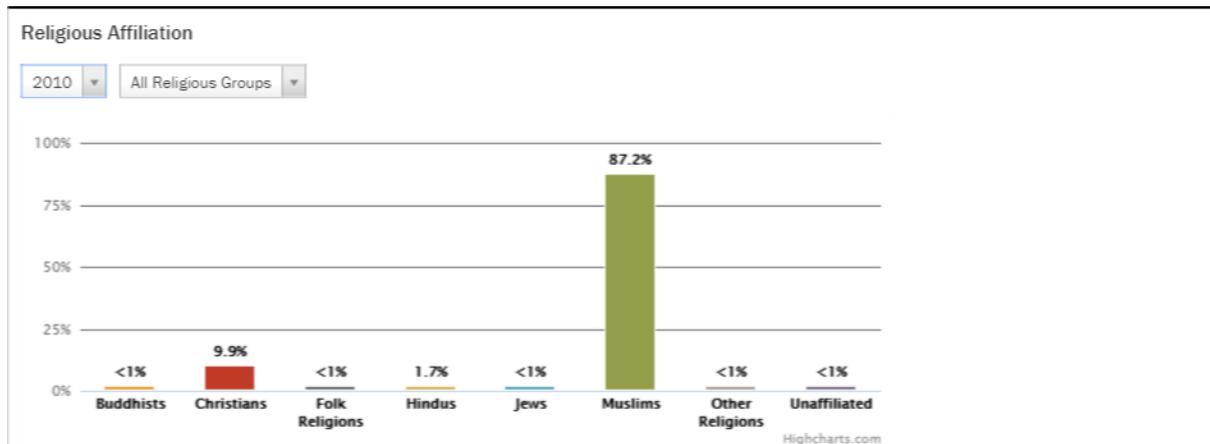


Figure 6

Source: Pew Research Center

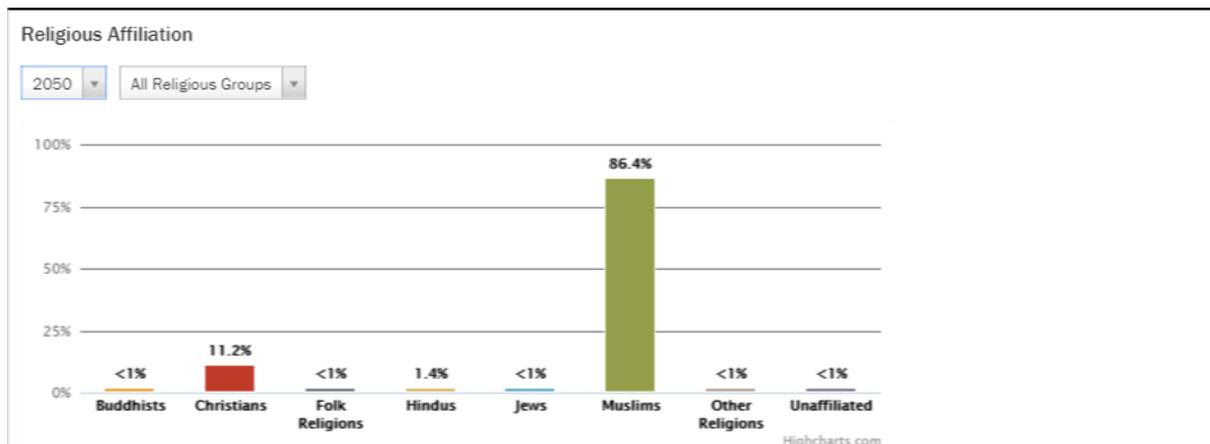


Figure 7

Source: Pew Research Center

Like in the case of Indonesia, it is essential to quickly grasp and come to terms with one state's diversity and actively engage with re-inventing an identity that can serve as a balancing mechanism for different ethnicities, religions, cultures and languages. Thus, great importance is to be attached to the robustness of civil societies because ruptures and cracks to the peace and stability are inevitable. However, the leading principle would be seeking de-escalation. Religion is a living and breathing element of statehood however is not to be confused with it or much less substituted with it.

## A case for Kyrgyzstan's development

The merging of politics and religions can lead to extensive aggravations. Firstly, religion is given power that might not exactly be balanced with other powers to keep it in check. Secondly, religion does not in general tolerate doubt, exposing scrutiny or its dogmatic approach being put in question. Thirdly, marginalized groups that do not belong to the political elite's religious affiliation would suffer twice the marginalization - social and civic outcasting. Pushing people into a corner does not generally yield the most positive results. Finally, majority groups would feel even more entitled, which on its part may lead to rise of unhealthy domination paradigms. The above can further lead to an acute crisis of identity or sentiments of delusional belonging. The people would become more vulnerable to outside influences and susceptible to destructive behavioural patterns that erode the very foundations of just and progressive societies.

A solution that to some extent has the characteristics of a universal ideal type, as well as a good fit for Kyrgyzstan, would be to officially strive to institutionally place all religions on the same footing within a given society. This can viably come about through the introduction of a new civic system that receives the full and de facto support of the official authorities, including those on a regional level to promote and formalize religious respect and tolerance. At a later stage why not grow into something much deeper – that is to say, true unhinged understanding of different religious beliefs by their diverse adherents.

The proposed approach would be the secular one - separation of state and religion. The aim of secularization could be best pursued by embedding tolerance for all religions or lack of thereof in the formal and informal dimensions of a country's life. All modern-day constitutions need to make clear that all religions and the choice not to have a religion would have equal footing in a given society, enframed by an environment of full tolerance. Religion needs to be experienced in private rather than becoming a social exercise empty of content and causing tensions within one country's population. Religious practices as far as society is concerned need to be actively managed by the state if different religions are to peacefully co-exist in the closed confines of a single state, or even region. In other words, if Kyrgyzstan is to succeed in the integration of its people it would need to actively engage in the organization of religions.

One of the main obstacles however remains the type of civil society that is exclusively devoted to a particular religion e.g. Islam. Some beliefs and lifestyle norms are so profoundly rooted in

a particular population's upbringing and are such a direct reflection of their surrounding traditional environment that anything that does not fit in their societal narrative is perceived with suspicion, fear and oftentimes violence (whether psychological or physical). There is scarce space for religions that rigidly and evidently deviate from what is perceived as normal and what should be.

Furthermore, there emerges yet another negative externality of the above phenomenon of merging religion with politics - the higher degree of difficulty to resist radical forms of religious attachments. A particularly affluent concern in this respect is the difficult resistance to the radical forms of Islamization as previously mentioned. Whether it is a question of religious "ghettos", or the so-called "compartmentation" of particular groups in society, the marginalization of such groups because of minority reasons or even ostracizing segments that do not adhere to particular religious affinities would all serve the purpose of radicalization.

One recommendation for further pacifying the relation between Islam and politics, without creating predispositions for harmful entanglement, would be related to education. "Tolerance" needs to become a key word. According to the behavioral school of thought - no one is born with particular tendencies. Herewith, populations need to have more exposure to educated tolerance so that they can become more tolerant. This is not to say that religious education of a particular nature should be put on the civic curriculum as mandatory. What is to be incorporated in the educational system should be tolerance and understanding of different people making different choices and showing them the due respect. It would start by the diminishing of the artificial, "imagined"<sup>12</sup> divide between students, due to their religious beliefs.

Universities are the bastion of developed societies, venues where not only knowledge is transmitted and multiplied but also the place where society's morale and ethics get re-invented on a regular basis. An idea that could result in positive trend-setting would be creating units in religious studies so as to nurture better understanding of the spirituality behind the religion and not mix it up with other social phenomena. Academia can well be institutionalized as a bridge between the spiritual, societal and stately, without smearing any margins that are needed for

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<sup>12</sup> Anderson, B. (2006). *Imagined communities: Reflections on the origin and spread of nationalism*. Verso Books.

society to stand strong. In this sense, a very viable option would be the further creation of particular university degrees in Islam in Kyrgyzstan.

Another element of an overarching approach to differentiate between the state and the religious beliefs and structures would be to engage with the media. Beyond any doubt social media has been having an ever more proliferating influence. Alongside the proper report of events and situations and analysis however come up Trump-coined fake news. The state of Kyrgyzstan is to achieve even greater progress in terms of religious integration should it execute further management and exert control over the dispersion of counter-factual notions that only serve to radicalize society. The effective usage of mechanisms of socializing to prevent the pushing forward of even more disastrous notions, active tool to even stop fanatics in their tracks. In the words of the Colombian president Santos at the UN General Assembly: “more than intelligence and anti-terrorist initiatives on a governmental level, grassroots respect and mutual solidarity are the basis for engaging on sincere cooperation and promoting world peace”.

Islam, more than a religion, needs to be perceived as a spirituality. Islam cannot and should not be employed as a politicizing tool. Islam cannot and should not become the main topic during election campaigns, for instance. Religious hatred and xenophobia should not be allowed to evolve into sated characteristics of society. Yet, it needs to be noted that all religions have gone through one or other type of violence throughout their history. Christians are no strangers to stern dogmas that have resulted in bloodshed - the Old Testament’s teachings, the justifications of the crusades, the antagonism between Catholicism and Protestantism, etc. Judaism's religious texts or precepts have been known to promote violence<sup>13</sup>. One of the most peace-loving religions – Buddhism - has become a source of great pain for persecuted Muslims in Myanmar. Even in the modern history of a country as democratic as Belgium, not so long ago, in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, ethnic, language and religious affiliations used to determine one’s career opportunities and development<sup>14</sup>.

The violence derived from misinterpretations of religions can only be countered and dispersed so that only the positive teachings remain through legislative stance on the part of authorities, religious education, facilitation of inter-faith dialogues between religions and within religions.

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<sup>13</sup> Horowitz, Elliott S. (2006). *Reckless rites: Purim and the legacy of Jewish violence*. Princeton University

<sup>14</sup> Witte, E., Craeybeckx, J., & Meynen, A. (2009). *Political history of Belgium: From 1830 onwards*. ASP/VUBPRESS/UPA.

In order for Kyrgyzstan to further propel in the integration of its citizens, the government would need to engage in greater organization of civic and religious affairs in a decisively secular style.

In conclusion, Muslim politics through the prism of globalization and its effects, have been transcending national border and the spatial limitations of formal politics. Islam itself has also been undergoing a serious evolution with the new forms of Muslim identity and the so-called “post-Islamism”. Different types of Islam have shown greater accommodating capacities to modernity and compatibility for peaceful co-existence with other religions, political pluralism and democratic values. Notwithstanding, the state and religion need to have clear boundaries.