

Religion, State, and Civil Society: Issues of Interaction

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ABSTRACT

The article examines the complex interactions between religion, state, and civil society across three regional contexts: Armenia, Russia, and Western Europe. Through a comparative political science and philosophical approach, the study analyses how historical and legal contexts shape church-state relations, contrasting models of identification, separation, and cooperation. It draws on constitutional provisions, sociological data, and academic literature to explore the roles of the Armenian Apostolic Church, the Russian Orthodox Church, and various European churches in public life. Results indicate that Armenia's constitution grants a privileged status to the national church, leading to both collaboration with and opposition to government, while Russia's quasi-symphony between the state and "traditional" religions consolidates power but marginalizes other faiths. Western European countries exhibit more secularized societies and diversified models, balancing religious freedom with public oversight. The discussion highlights how these differences influence civil society, secularization, radicalism, and social cohesion. The study concludes that a sustainable relationship between religion, state, and society requires maintaining secular principles while recognizing the positive social capital that religious institutions can contribute.

Keywords: Religion, State, Civil Society, Issues of Interaction

INTRODUCTION

The interaction between religious institutions, state structures, and civil society is a complex and multifaceted socio-political phenomenon. Historically, religion has played a key role in shaping the values and identity of people, simultaneously influencing the statehood. In the contemporary world, the nature of the relationship between religion, state, and civil society varies significantly across countries, reflecting unique historical experiences and current challenges. Particularly revealing is the comparison between post-Soviet states (Armenia and Russia), where, after a period of state-sponsored promotion of atheism, religious organizations are experiencing a rise in popularity, and Western European countries, which have undergone and are undergoing a lengthy process of secularization. Using the examples of Armenia, Russia, and Western European countries, this study analyzes the forms of cooperation and conflict between the state and religious associations/organizations, the role of the church in civil society, and the response of this triad to contemporary challenges—the secularization of the population, religious radicalism, and civil protests.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The study draws on a range of methods to analyze the interactions between the religion, the state, and the civil society. A comparative political science approach is used to compare the cases of Armenia, Russia, and Western European countries, identifying common trends and differences in state-confessional relations (Lasaria, A. O., 2022). A historical and philosophical analysis allows us to trace the evolution of the ideas and principles underlying

the relationship between state and religion, as well as the concept of civil society (Petrov, D. B., 2014). A content analysis of regulatory legal acts is used to identify institutional models of the state-Church relations and the legal foundations of civil society (Lasaria, A. O., 2022).

The philosophical and political science approaches utilize concepts of secularization, civil society theories, and models of state-confessional relations. Specifically, the classical distinction between models of identification (state or dominant religion), separation (strict separation of church and state), and cooperation (partnership under formal secularism) relations is considered (Shimanskaya, O.K., 2020); as well as the ideas of civil society with Hegel (1990) (a sphere of private interests separate from the state), de Tocqueville (2017) (voluntary associations as the basis of civil society, a counterweight to state tyranny), and Gramsci (1971) (civil society as part of the superstructure that ensures hegemony). Methodologically, the work relies on an interdisciplinary approach, combining political science and philosophical analysis. A comparative research method is used: the interaction between the religion, the state, and the civil society is examined through a comparison of three case studies (Armenia, Russia, and Western European countries), considering their historical and cultural contexts. The views of various researchers on the role of religion in the public sphere in the context of modernization and globalization are also considered.

Materials and Methods

The materials used in this study include legislative acts (e.g., constitutional provisions on freedom of conscience and the status of religion), sociological research data, reports from international organizations, and academic publications by Armenian, Russian and Western European authors. Particular attention is paid to the analysis of the Constitutions of Armenia and Russia, which regulate the role of the church, legislation on religious associations, and expert assessments of the dynamics of religiosity and church-state relations. The methodological focus is on a qualitative analysis of documents and texts: a literature review and content analysis of sources were conducted to identify key trends (e.g., the degree of secularization of society, the level of state cooperation with traditional religions, and instances of conflict between authorities and religious leaders). A comparative approach allowed us to identify similarities and differences in the three selected contexts. The validity of the findings is ensured by the use of sources from different countries and linguistic traditions (Russian, Armenian, and English), which contributes to a comprehensive coverage of the issue.

RESULTS

Armenia. Armenia has a rich historical legacy of interaction between the church and the state. It was the first country in the world to adopt Christianity as a state religion (traditionally dated to 301). The Armenian Apostolic Church (AAC) has served as the guardian of national culture and identity for centuries, especially during the period of statelessness. The modern Republic of Armenia is constitutionally a secular state (and has been so since 1922), but its constitution (Article 18) simultaneously enshrines the "**exclusive mission**" of the AAC as "the national church, in the spiritual life of the Armenian people, in the development of their national culture, and preservation of their national identity." This gives the Armenian Apostolic Church a special status in the socio-political system. After the collapse of the USSR, the church and state in Armenia had built a partnership: the church gained the right to participate in the education system and the army, and it regained its influence in society. For many years, the church supported the authorities, which contributed to the stability of this relationship. However, recent events have also revealed the potential for conflict. Thus, after the defeat in the 2020 war, the leadership of the Armenian Apostolic Church openly demanded the resignation of the Prime Minister (Mghdesyan, A., 2025), which the authorities regarded as church interference in politics. In the following years, the conflict between the government of N. Pashinyan and the Church escalated: several high-ranking clergy were arrested on charges of conspiracy and calls for regime change, and the Prime Minister publicly accused the Catholicos (patriarch) of ties to the "previous regime" (Vardanyan, A., 2025), as well as of violations of the internal church rules of the Armenian Apostolic Church by high-ranking members of the Apostolic Church, including the Catholicos (Furman, L., 2025). In response, the Church declared the inadmissibility of state interference in the internal affairs of a religious organization. These events caused a split in society: part of civil society supported the state authorities, while others defended the Church as a "national institution". Nevertheless, public trust in the church remains high (around 60% according to surveys), significantly exceeding trust in state institutions (Mghdesyan, A., 2025). Thus, the Armenian case simultaneously demonstrates elements of close cooperation (historically and institutionally entrenched) and a new conflictual dimension, as the church begins to emerge as an independent actor in civil society, capable of opposing state power.

Russia. The Russian experience of the relationship between state, religion, and society is also unique. Orthodoxy became part of national identity as early as the era of Kievan Rus' (baptism in 988), and during the imperial period, the ideology of "Orthodoxy, Autocracy, Nationality" ("Православие, Самодержавие,

Народность)" reflected the close ties between the church and the state. The Soviet 20th century brought a radical break: for over 70 years, state policies promoting atheism diminished the role of religion in society, which interrupted the church's open participation in public life. After 1991, a "religious revival" began: thousands of churches were returned to the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC) or reopened. According to the Constitution of the Russian Federation, Russia is a secular state; no state or obligatory religion may be established. Nevertheless, in recent decades, a pattern of close cooperation between the government and the major religions, primarily the ROC, has emerged. Approximately 71% of the population identifies with Orthodoxy (the overwhelming majority with the Russian Orthodox Church), approximately 5–10% profess Islam, and the rest adhere to Catholicism, Protestant denominations, Buddhism, and other faiths; the proportion of non-believers is estimated at 15% or more (Humanists International, 2023). State policy prioritizes so-called "traditional religions" – Orthodoxy, Islam, Buddhism, and Judaism – which receive support (tax breaks, funding for cultural initiatives), while new religious movements and undesirable sects are subject to restrictions (for example, the ban on Jehovah's Witnesses as extremist). In 1997, the Law "On Freedom of Conscience and Religious Associations" was adopted, establishing a distinction between "religious organizations" and "groups," effectively strengthening the position of the Russian Orthodox Church and other historical religions. The Russian Orthodox Church has assumed a prominent position in the public sphere, from the presence of priests in the army and schools (Orthodox culture courses) to its influence on legislators on moral issues. The rhetoric of the country's leadership increasingly appeals to religiously charged values: "the traditional family", spiritual and moral foundations. The rapprochement between the state and the church has intensified since the outbreak of the conflict between Russia and Ukraine (which led to a deterioration in relations between Russia and the countries of the so-called "collective West") in 2014, and especially against the backdrop of the events of 2022 (outbreak of a new phase of the Russo-Ukrainian conflict). A rise in clericalism as an instrument of social control, a deepening alliance between the state apparatus and the Russian Orthodox Church, and an increase in official statements and laws appealing to religion have been noted (Humanists International, 2023). The Patriarch of the Russian Orthodox Church openly supports many state initiatives, positioning Russia as a "stronghold of traditional religious values" against the "decadent secular West" (Humanists International, 2023). At the same time, secularization processes have not completely stopped: a significant portion of the population still rarely participates in church sacraments, limiting themselves to the cultural form of Orthodox identity. Civil society in Russia also includes religious organizations (Orthodox brotherhoods, Muslim associations, etc.), but their autonomy vis-à-vis the state is generally limited. The Russian Orthodox Church, as part of the historical core of civil society, more often acts as an ally of the state than as an independent channel of public oversight – which, according to some analysts, leads to "systemic religious privilege" and a deterioration in the situation of secular and liberal-oriented groups (Humanists International, 2023). Manifestations of religious radicalism remain a serious problem. In the Russian context, this is primarily extremism with an Islamist basis (the conflicts in the North Caucasus in the 1990s and 2000s, terrorist attacks, and the activities of underground jihadist cells). The state responds to these challenges by forcefully suppressing extremist groups, cooperating with loyal Muslim leaders, and legislating bans on radical organizations. This policy, on the one hand, strengthens security, but on the other, it challenges the balance between religious freedom and security measures. Overall, modern Russia is characterized by a model of "quasi-symphony" between the state and "traditional" churches: while formally proclaiming secularism, the authorities rely on religious symbols and institutions to maintain social cohesion and conservative values.

Western Europe. Western European countries exhibit a wide range of relations between state and religion, influenced by the Reformation, the Enlightenment, and social progress. Most European constitutions enshrine the principle of a secular state and freedom of conscience (Bondarenko, Yu. V., 2017). However, the implementation of this principle varies: there are states with official or state-privileged churches (for example, the Anglican Church in the United Kingdom, Lutheran churches in Scandinavia), states with a strict separation of church and state (laicism in France), and an intermediate cooperative model, where the state and religious communities interact based on agreements (concordats) or special legislation (Germany, Italy, Spain, etc.) (Shimanskaya, O. K., 2020). A general trend in the 20th and 21st centuries has been the secularization of society—a weakening of religiosity and a diminishing influence of churches. Empirical studies have recorded a significant decline in religious activity: for example, in Western Europe, attendance at church services, the proportion of church members, and the number of people calling themselves believers have significantly decreased (Schwörer, J., Romero-Vidal, X., (2020)). For many residents, religion has ceased to be a comprehensive "worldview framework" that determines their social position. However, secularization did not mean a complete break with religious heritage. "Christian values" and cultural traditions remain an important part of European identity, albeit in a secular, cultural expression. It is emphasized that the processes of secularization have not eliminated the commitment of European society to its "Christian historical heritage"; in some countries, this was even expressed in the inclusion of references to religion in the texts of laws or official documents (Shimanskaya, O.K., 2020). Western European states generally adhere to neutrality but are ready to cooperate with religious associations in achieving the public good. In practice, this

manifests itself in support of the socially significant activities of religions: the state often funds charitable initiatives of large churches, recognizes the right of religious organizations to teach religious ethics in schools (for example, the system of church tax and religious education in Germany), and consults with them when developing policies in the areas of morality, family, and migrant integration. At the same time, state control ensures compliance with the principles of tolerance and human rights: religious organizations must operate within the legal framework and not violate civil rights. Contemporary challenges in the region are primarily associated with the growth of religious pluralism and the presence of other faiths. Immigration from Asian and African countries has led to an increase in the Muslim population, which has exacerbated issues of integration and extremism. Some countries (France, Belgium, Germany) have faced the problem of Islamic radicalism and terrorist acts committed by jihadist groups. The response has been increased security measures, monitoring of religious sermons, legislative initiatives against the promotion of extremism, as well as attempts to support moderate Islam through state and public structures. (For example, the creation of a council of the Muslim faith in France). Another aspect is the participation of churches in public debates and protests. In more secular societies, such as France, churches take a cautious stance in politics, whereas in traditionally more religious countries (Poland, Italy), the Catholic Church actively influences debates on abortion and family policy, often mobilizing believers for protests. At the same time, civil protests can also be directed against religious institutions when they are perceived as violating secular values (for example, mass protests against the clericalization of education or scandals surrounding abuses in the church). Thus, the Western European model generally strives for a balance: by guaranteeing freedom of religion, states support the constructive role of religion in civil society but protect politics from the dominance of any one religion.

DISCUSSION

A comparison of three cases highlights several fundamental aspects of the interaction between the religious communities/organizations, the state, and the civil society. Historical context plays a key role. In Armenia and Russia, Orthodox Christianity has historically become part of national identity, and the era of state policies promoting atheism only temporarily interrupted, but did not destroy, this connection. In Armenia, the special status of the Apostolic Church is legally enshrined, creating the basis for a close alliance between church and state (a model close to the identification model). In Russia, a separate model has been legally proclaimed, but in fact, a quasi-cooperative model is developing, with elements of identifying Orthodoxy as the dominant cultural tradition. In contrast, Western European countries experienced the Reformation and the Enlightenment, developing strong secular institutions; there, the church lost its monopoly on "moral authority," becoming an institution of civil society. The level of secularization of the population today varies significantly: in Western Europe, it is high (most citizens are secularly oriented), while in Russia and especially in Armenia, a significant portion of society still identifies with religion. However, the nature of this religiosity varies: while in Armenia the church enjoys high trust and directly influences public opinion, in Russia, believers often share a cultural commitment to Orthodoxy but do not always adhere to religious practices. Civil society in democratic Western countries has historically included the church as a partner and a form of civic association (for example, networks of Catholic organizations, Protestant communities, and charitable foundations), while churches compete with other organizations on an equal footing. In authoritarian transitional conditions or young democracies, the church can become either a supporter of the regime or a hotbed of opposition sentiment. For example, in modern Armenia, the Armenian Apostolic Church has de facto become one of the centers of consolidation for the protest-minded segment of society, leading to its clash with the state. In Russia, the Russian Orthodox Church has chosen the role of a pillar of power and therefore does not function as an independent channel for articulating protest demands. State policy on religion also exhibits varying emphases: from legislative neutrality and religious equality (the model of most Western European countries) to selective promotion of "traditional" faiths (Russia) and the de facto fusion of national identity with the dominant church (Armenia). These differences also determine the specifics of responses to challenges. In the face of religious extremism, Western governments seek to prevent the stigmatization of entire communities, targeting radicals while simultaneously supporting the integration of moderate believers. The Russian state emphasizes forceful suppression and legislative and bureaucratic control of religious life. Armenia has so far encountered the problem of religious radicalism within the country to a lesser extent due to the homogeneity of the religious landscape; however, regional instability requires vigilance on its part. Regarding civil protests, in Europe, churches sometimes participate in social movements (as allies or opponents of various initiatives), but their participation occurs within the legal framework and on an equal footing with other groups in society. In post-Soviet cases, we see more personalized scenarios: religious leaders can become icons either for support of the government or for the opposition, and the state's response accordingly ranges from granting privileges to repression.

From a philosophical and political perspective, the interaction between religion, the state, and civil society can be viewed through the prism of the search for the common good and social trust. Religious organizations can strengthen social capital – trust and solidarity – if they act in harmony with civic values and remain open to dialogue. Where the state recognizes this positive role (as in many European countries), a sustainable model of partnership for solving social problems develops. However, when religious institutions lay claim to political power or clash with secular principles, tensions arise. The optimal model appears to be one in which the state maintains its secular character and maintains an equal distance from all faiths, respecting their contribution to society, while religion operates within the framework of civil society – that is, voluntary associations of citizens – and does not impose its norms on the entire population. It is precisely this balance and dialogue that help avoid both the clericalization of the state and the alienation of believers from the public life.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, we note that the interaction between the religion, the state, and the civil society continues to evolve under the influence of historical traditions and contemporary challenges. In Armenia, the historically established alliance between the state and the national church is currently being tested in a context of political change; the future of this relationship depends on the ability of both parties to find a new consensus in the name of national unity. In Russia, the strengthening of the alliance between the government and religious forces has given the regime ideological stability but has called into question the development of a pluralistic civil society; it remains possible that, in the long term, public demand for modernization will require a more balanced model of secularism. Western European countries demonstrate the advantage of an institutionalized separation of church and state, mitigated by cultural cooperation: although religion has lost its central place, it is not “exiled” from the public sphere, but is included as a partner and subject of dialogue. Common to all the cases examined is the understanding that neither the state nor civil society exists in a vacuum of values: religious traditions continue to influence moral principles, social solidarity, and political legitimacy. Therefore, developing an optimal model of relations is a dynamic process. Further monitoring of how states respond to the secularization of youth, how religious leaders adapt to the demands of transparency and human rights, and what role civil society will assign to faith in the public sphere is of academic and practical interest. The interaction between religion, state, and society remains at the center of both political science debates and real-world politics, requiring a balanced approach and respect for the diversity of social forces.

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Data Availability Statement

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Informed Consent Statement

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