From the earliest days of our nation, the debate over the role and scope of faith in public life has marked the development of our democracy. From English settlers seeking a greater freedom to practice their faith, to social movements seeking to eradicate slavery, enact temperance laws, and advocate for gender and racial equality, born out of sincerely held values have consistently been brought into the public square. Yet few ideals have also proven as divisive as the invocation of religious beliefs when advocating for public policies that affect all quarters of our society.

In recent decades, the role of religious groups has evolved as demographic shifts have dramatically changed the religious landscape. The rise of the “religious right” in the 1970’s saw an elevation of the debate over abortion and contraception as part of a broader effort to promote values that included the rejection of non-confirming lifestyles. More recently, the nation has also seen the growth of progressive voices within mainline Protestant denominations that have attempted to advocate for issues such as climate change, hunger, immigration reform, LGBT equality, and other pressing societal questions. As these shifts have occurred, newer voices have entered the national debate. Muslims, Hindus, Jains, Sikhs have grown increasingly active in seeking to have a proverbial “seat at the table” – each with their own set of priorities that overlap and diverge from the concerns of larger faith communities. Another major development has been the growth of the secular humanist community often referred to “the rise of the ‘nones,’” a reference to the growing class of Americans who ascribe to no particular faith tradition yet possess values grounded in morality.

The goal of this class is to gain knowledge about the background and contexts for issues of faith in current policy debates and develop the tools for understanding the beliefs and values of diverse faith-based public policy advocates, beliefs and values that may differ from our own.

Assignments include: PowerPoint presentations that develop public speaking and constructive argumentation skills; writing assignments; and a collaborative research project.

Readings include historical and contemporary sources that cover the role of faith and values in public policy, key U.S. Supreme Court and lower court decisions, and the work of public theologians such as Reinhold Niebuhr and Martin Luther King, Jr. We will also rely heavily on current news and research focused on pending litigation around the issues of federal health care legislation. We will survey a broad spectrum of opinions and beliefs on issues of concern to the American public.