Religion and politics are major aspects of life which affect the characters in the play Boris Godunov. The story follows the perceptions and viewpoints of the characters changing opinions on religion and politics. The two generally do not work in tandem which is reflected by many characters in the story. Perhaps the character that is affected the deepest by the stark contrasts of religion and politics is Grigory. Grigory has a harsh outlook on life and will do anything to achieve and maintain power. As represented in the story Boris Godunov starts off as a character that seems relatable and many readers may actually be supportive of him at the start of the play. As the story progresses and the plot begins to thicken it is clear that Grigory is actually quite a deceptive character who is power hungry and only cares about getting what he wants and will do whatever it takes to become the tsar of Russia. It is imperative to understand the relationship that politics and religion have in this story because of the meaning that these two values hold in Russian society. The citizens of Russia essentially praise the tsar as if he is their God but religion also has a high value to people considering the status that is placed on priests and other members of the church community. The juxtaposition and constant need to balance the two values out makes the characters in the play act certain ways and impacts them immensely. Considering the fact that Grigory was someone who was avidly involved in monasteries and grew up there, his desire for more power becomes overwhelming and he begins to reject his religious values to adopt a new set of values that correlate with political power.
Politics and religion are set up in the story to create an atmosphere that is perceived as negative. The two appear to struggle to work in tandem to create a better society and in turn actually form a hostile environment. Throughout the story the characters appear to understand that religion and politics are intertwined in ways that create a harsh environment filled with deception however nobody seems to try and fix these issues that people face daily. Instead, the characters actually do the opposite of solving the problems by going behind each others backs to get what they want and seek personal gain over collective gain. This is an environment that is clearly plagued by envy and greed which translates into people seemingly always doing the “wrong” thing and constantly getting away with it. For example, in the play Grigory is quoted with saying “But here in this dark cell, a hermit monk / Condemns you for a hideous transgression” (5.200-201). This scene highlights a pivotal point in the play where he begins to develop feelings of envy which marks the transition of his character. This scene represents him beginning to plot against the tsar and even all the people of Russia. Even though other characters begin to question his morals and see the real Grigory nobody seems to step up or even call him out. His eventual plan translates into him pretending to be Dimitry so that he can become the new ruler. Essentially, this scene in the monastery marks how he is changing as a character to become someone who is evil and will do anything to get power. It is ironic that he begins to have impure thoughts in a place where he learned right from wrong. In order to really understand the defining characteristics of Grigory it is vital to understand how he has transformed from
start to finish. In essence, this scene commences the start of Grigory’s transition from a religious person to a political person thus marking the stark contrasting personality traits of good versus evil. Many readers believe that Grigory is a good person with positive personality traits at first which by Russian standards would correlate with his religious background.

Throughout the play there are two characters, Marina and the Patriarch, who are involved in the political arena which causes the audience to have conflicting views on these characters. One pivotal scene in the play which emphasizes the roles of politics and religion especially in regards to Grigory is when Marina is talking to him and threatens to leave him unless he follows through with his initial intentions of taking over the kingdom of Russia. This scene not only correlates to Grigory’s personal life with Marina but also serves as a scene which reflects the views of society. In respect to Marina and Grigorys personal life it is vital to reflect on how demanding she is over what he does. It appears that she only really cares about whether or not he is the tsar and appears to have no true feelings of love for him. This is shown in scene 13 when she exclaims, “But coldly I rejected their entreaties, / And not, I can assure you, for some monk” (13.122-123). His confession is extremely unsettling to her because she is a social climber that is simply using him to become the next tsarina. Marina is caught up in the game of politics and is set on fulfilling her selfish goals of a potential future of riches and high status. She does not have to try and convince Grigory very much to follow through and pretend to be Dimitry because of how reprimanding she is over his
past life of living in the monastery. His personal life is becoming all about political gain as well which represents nearly everything wrong with medieval Russian society because people are more self absorbed and only consider themselves when doing anything. This scene is extremely important because it introduces the idea that politics can be toxic as it will consume your entire life, especially in this time period and this culture. It is fascinating to see how politics has affected Grigory and Marina as a pair. After this scene the audience changes their opinion on this entire relationship because it is clear that the “lovers” are in a symbiotic politically-gaining relationship than a true relationship which should hold a value system of love, honesty and commitment. Another person who the audience would expect to act in a more ethical way is the Patriarch in scene 15 when he is dishonest and is scheming with the tsar. He discusses who Grigory truly is and that he is pretending to be someone else. This is a perfect example of how politics and religion are intertwined intensely because it represents how the leader of church is not only aware but involved in decisions regarding politics. The Patriarch says, “This devil’s spawn, this cursed unfrocked monk, / Has made the people think that he’s Dimitry” (15.49-50). This quote is important because it proves how this religious figure has a dark side and is caught up in the political games of Russian society. Lastly, a final scene in this play that represents the relationship between religion and politics is when Maria and Feodor are killed by the Grigory. The murders of Boris’s old family members symbolize the death of who Grigory once was and Russia
before Grigory took over. When Mosalsky shouts, “People! Maria Godunova and her son Feodor have / taken poison. We have seen their dead corpses” (23.22-23) this marks the final stage in the character transition of Grigory. In essence, it means that Grigory is officially non-religious and the positive personality traits have vanished from his repertoire. Religion represents who Grigory used to be when his values were different. Now that he has ordered the execution of Maria and Feodor it shows how he has become a completely political person as the tsar. This new persona had to be marked with a drastic change in culture and killing anything that represents the old Russia and Boris is a way of showing that the Russian people are entering a new phase in their history with Grigory as the new leader. It is evident that the people of Russia are also entering a new way of looking at things as the crowd falls silent in the last scene once it is revealed that Maria and Feodor have been found dead. It is interesting to note the differing opinions of the commoners as they transition into Grigory as the new tsar. People appear to be shocked that things have gotten to be so bad in Russia and perhaps even experience regret that they did not try to stop things before they reached this level. The people’s reaction of speechlessness is very different from when Boris addresses them in early scenes because they recognize how malicious Grigory has been by committing the ultimate sin of murder.

Ultimately, this play highlights something deeper than just how religion and politics play a role in life in Russian life. Alexander Pushkin strives to showcase religion and politics in a way that connects with audience. The struggle between desire for
power and justifying your morals is part of the human experience even today. The play is timeless in a sense that it has many morals and lessons such as the intrinsic difference between right and wrong, losing your values because of status, and how religion and politics can change specific people and society. Pushkin makes it clear that Grigory has gone through a character change which has made him different than who he was at the start of the play. The result of his changing personality is because of his desire and quest for power and what he thinks would be a more enticing lifestyle. Not only does he want to feel the power but so do the characters that he engages with such as Marina which pushes him to gain power. Grigory’s lifestyle change is clear by the end of the novel and the ways that politics has forced him to abandon his old ways of being religious make the story unique for readers everywhere.
Works Cited