

Introduction: The Rise of Religious Nationalism

“There is a desperate need for religion in public life,” the dean of Egypt’s premier school of Islamic theology told me.¹ He meant, he went on to say, that there should be not only a high standard of morality in public offices but also a fusion of the religious and political identities of the Egyptian people. From his point of view, the Islamic religion is “a culturally liberating force,” which Egypt as a nation urgently needs in order to free itself from the last vestiges of its colonial past. “Western colonialism has gone,” the dean explained, “but we still have not completed our independence. We will not be free until Egypt becomes a Muslim state.”²

In interviews I conducted in half a dozen troubled countries during the late 1980s and early 1990s, I found that his point of view is not idiosyncratic. The longing for an indigenous form of religious politics free from the taint of Western culture has been expressed by many in countries that have become independent in this century: not only by Egyptians, but by Central Asians and other Muslims from Algeria to Indonesia, and by Ukrainians, Sri Lankans, Indians, Israelis, Mongolians, and intensely religious persons of a variety of faiths throughout the globe. In fact, what appeared to be an anomaly when the Islamic revolution in Iran challenged the supremacy of Western culture and its secular politics in 1979 has become a major theme in international politics in the 1990s. The new world order that is replacing the bipolar powers of the old Cold War is characterized not only by the rise of new economic forces, a crumbling of old empires, and the discrediting of communism, but also by the resur-

gence of parochial identities based on ethnic and religious allegiances. Although Francis Fukuyama, among others, has asserted that the ending of the old Cold War has led to an “end of history” and a world-wide ideological consensus in favor of secular liberal democracy, the rise of new religious and ethnic nationalism belies that assertion.³ Moreover, proponents of the new nationalisms hold the potential of making common cause against the secular West, in what might evolve into a new Cold War.

Like the old Cold War, the confrontation between these new forms of culture-based politics and the secular state is global in its scope, binary in its opposition, occasionally violent, and essentially a difference of ideologies; and, like the old Cold War, each side tends to stereotype the other. According to the major Islamic political strategist in Sudan, the post-Cold War West needs a new “empire of evil to mobilize against.”⁴ Similarly, he and other religious politicians need a stereotype of their own, a satanic secular foe that will help them mobilize their own forces. Unlike the old Cold War, however, the West (now aligned with the secular leaders of the former Soviet Union) confronts an opposition that is neither politically united nor, at present, militarily strong. For that reason, it is often not taken seriously. This attitude, I believe, is a mistake.

For instance, these new forms of cultural nationalism are sometimes dismissed as historical aberrations or as misguided applications of religion. In an introduction to an article by Conor Cruise O’Brien on the Punjab crisis in 1988, an editor of the *Atlantic Monthly* described as “one of the grimmer and more ironic developments of the late twentieth century” the manner in which religion had inflamed the Third World. He claimed that religion is “on the whole a benign force in Western societies”; but in the non-Western world it “often combines combustibly with nationalism to fuel political murder.”⁵ The underlying assumption was that something is seriously wrong with religion in the non-Western world.

In this book, I have adopted a different approach. I have tried to see the points of view of the activists that the *Atlantic* editor derided. From their perspectives it is secular nationalism, and not religion, that has gone wrong. They see the Western models of nationhood—both democratic and socialist—as having failed, and they view religion as a hopeful alternative, a base for criticism and change.

Why has secular nationalism failed to inspire them? Why has religion been raised as an alternative? Why has the religious rejection of secular nationalism been so violent? And what ideology and political organization will come in its place? In searching for answers to these questions, I have sought the opinions of politically active religious leaders in various parts of the world. Some I interviewed in person; others I encountered through their published interviews, transcripts of their speeches, and their writings. I have tried to make sense of their positions, determine what they have in common with their counterparts in other parts of the globe, place them in a wider context of political and cultural change, and see why they are so optimistic about their role in what one Algerian Islamic nationalist described as “the march of history.”⁶

My interest in this topic began with the Sikhs. Having lived in northern India from time to time and written on religion and politics in the Punjab, and having known the Sikhs generally to be delightful and sensible people, I was profoundly disturbed to witness the deadly spiral of violence involving militant Sikhs and the Indian government that began there in the early 1980s and in which the Punjab is still terribly mired. In trying to make sense of this situation, I turned to the recorded sermons and transcripts of one of the leaders of the militant movement, Sant Jarnail Singh Bhindranwale.⁷ His message seemed to be one of despair about the present state of society: he saw it characterized by an absence of a sense of moral community and led by politicians incapable of being anything but corrupt. The despair, however, was tempered by a radical hope: he felt that a religious crusade could bring about a political revolution, one that would usher in a new politics and a new moral order.

The rhetoric of Bhindranwale—at once critical and hopeful, oriented both to modern needs and to traditional values of the past—was not unique, I found, as I began to compare it with other cases. Turning first to the language of Buddhist monks in the militant Sinhalese movement in nearby Sri Lanka and to the rhetoric of India’s Hindu nationalists, I soon expanded my interests from the discourse of politically active religious leaders in those two countries to the ideological language of their counterparts in Egypt, Iran, Israel, Israeli-occupied Palestine, Mongolia, Central Asia, and other parts of the world.⁸ The differences among these reli-

gious leaders are considerable—their religious values and goals, their political and historical settings—but many of their concerns are surprisingly similar. They are united by a common enemy—Western secular nationalism—and a common hope for the revival of religion in the public sphere.

While urging that they be taken seriously, however, I do not want to exaggerate their importance. Although some religious nationalists have already achieved a great deal of political influence in their countries, others have not and never will. Many will forever remain members of a strident minority. I include them in this study, however, because they fit into a larger, virtually global pattern. In what is admittedly an unsystematic sampling, I have singled out members of religious groups that actively criticize the secular political order and attempt to replace it with one founded on religious principles. Even when the voices of these religious activists are relatively insignificant in their own countries, they are worth considering, for they add to what is a major counterpoint to the dominant secular nationalism of our time.

The religious type of nationalism that they advocate receives more attention in the American and European press—and is probably more difficult for Westerners to comprehend—than any other form of cultural nationalism, including those based on ethnicity, race, and a region's legendary past. In many parts of the world, however, religious and ethnic identities are intertwined. The nationalist aspirations of Muslims in China and Central Asia have been rightly described as "ethnoreligious."⁹ But even in these locales, the crucial symbols and ideas of the regions' cultural heritages are most often the religious ones. Perhaps for that reason religious activists there, as elsewhere in the world, have become secular leaders' most formidable foes.

It would be easy to characterize these religious activists as *fundamentalists*, but I hesitate to do so for several reasons. First, the term is pejorative. It refers, as one Muslim scholar observed, to those who hold "an intolerant, self-righteous, and narrowly dogmatic religious literalism."¹⁰ The term is less descriptive than it is accusatory: it reflects our attitude toward other people more than it describes them. By implication such persons should not be taken seriously as thoughtful political actors, and that characterization

does not fit most of the people whom I encountered in this study, either directly or through their writings.

Second, *fundamentalism* is an imprecise category for making comparisons across cultures. The term stems from the attempt of a group of conservative Protestants early in this century to define what they held to be the "fundamentals" of Christianity, including the inerrancy of scripture, and it is unclear how they can be compared with those who adhere to other forms of revitalized Christianity, much less to religious activists of other faiths in other parts of the world.¹¹ The only thing that most religious activists around the world have in common, aside from their fervor, is their rejection of Westerners and those like us who subscribe to modern secularism. For that reason, a better comparative category would be *antimodernism*, the term Bruce Lawrence uses to define fundamentalism as a global concept, for it suggests a religious revolt against the secular ideology that often accompanies modern society.¹² One of the advantages of this term is that it allows one to make a distinction between those who are *modern* and those who are *modernists*—that is, between those who simply accept modern society and those who go further and believe in the secular ideologies that dominate modern cultures.¹³

This distinction is important because in most cases religious activists, while opposing the values of modernism, are themselves very modern persons. The dean of Islamic theology in Cairo, to whom I referred in the opening paragraph of this Introduction, lived in London for a number of years and appreciated its modern efficiency. Rabbi Meir Kahane, a right-wing Jewish nationalist in Israel, ran his movement like a political campaign and loved to discuss American baseball. The most politically active mullah in Tajikistan has a fax machine and a cellular telephone. Such religious nationalists are modern in the sense that they are organization-minded and empirical in their outlook.¹⁴ Yet their modernity is such that it also allows them to embrace traditional religious values and reject secular ones.

My third objection to the use of *fundamentalism* in this study is the most salient: it does not carry any political meaning. To call someone a fundamentalist suggests that he or she is motivated solely by religious beliefs rather than by broad concerns about the

nature of society and the world. The religious activists I met and studied are politically astute and deeply concerned about the society in which they live. No doubt many of them have friends who are not: these friends may be fixated exclusively on religious matters, and they may rightly be called conservatives, fundamentalists, or simply antimodernists. But when such people fuse their religious perspective with a broad prescription for their nation's political and social destiny, one must find an inclusive term. For that reason, I call them religious nationalists.

By characterizing the activists in this study as religious nationalists, I mean to suggest that they are individuals with both religious and political interests. To understand their perspective is an exercise in both comparative religion and comparative politics, for they appear—at least from our point of view—to be responding in a religious way to a political situation. Many of them, however, agree with the observation of a Palestinian leader, Sheik Ahmed Yassin, that there is “no clear distinction between religion and politics” and that the distinction itself is a mark of Western ways of thinking.¹⁵ Rather, articulators of religious nationalism see a deficiency in society that is both religious and political in character, one that requires a response that is religious as well as political.

Although they reject secular ideas, religious nationalists do not necessarily reject secular politics, including the political apparatus of the modern nation-state. To show how this can be possible, I must explain how I use certain terms. By the *state*, I mean the locus of authority and decision making within a geographical region. By the *nation*, I mean a community of people associated with a particular political culture and territory that possesses autonomous political authority.¹⁶ A *nation-state* is a modern form of nationhood in which a state's authority systematically pervades and regulates an entire nation, whether through democratic or totalitarian means. The modern nation-state is morally and politically justified by a concept of *nationalism*, by which I mean not only the xenophobic extremes of patriotism but also the more subdued expressions of identity based on shared assumptions regarding why a community constitutes a nation and why the state that rules it is legitimate.¹⁷

The new religious revolutionaries are concerned not so much about the political structure of the nation-state as they are about

the political ideology undergirding it. They are concerned about the rationale for having a state, the moral basis for politics, and the reasons why a state should elicit loyalty. They often reject the European and American notion that nationalism can be defined solely as a matter of secular contract.¹⁸ At the same time, however, they see no contradiction in affirming certain forms of political organization that have developed in the West, such as the democratic procedures of the nation-state, as long as they are legitimized not by the secular idea of a social contract but by traditional principles of religion.

As a bhikkhu in Sri Lanka explained to me, what he despised was “not democracy, but your idea of nationalism.”¹⁹ He and others like him reject the notion that what draws people together as a nation and what legitimates their political order is a rational compact that unites everyone in a geographical region through common laws and political processes. Such secular nationalism underlies both the parliamentary democracies of Europe and the Americas, and the socialist bureaucracies that once characterized Eastern European countries and the formerly Soviet republics of the Commonwealth of Independent States. This way of thinking about nationalism comes naturally to most Americans and Europeans, but it contains assumptions about the universal and secular nature of a moral social order that many religious people in the rest of the world simply do not take for granted.

I find it striking that the religious-nationalist point of view so strongly dismisses secular nationalism as fundamentally bereft of moral or spiritual values. How shocking this rejection would have been to some of the Western social scientists and other observers of global politics who proclaimed two or three decades ago that the advent of secular nationalism in the Third World was not only a triumph of Western political influence but also one of the West’s finest legacies to public life throughout the world.

I begin, in the first part of this book, with this sense of promise that so buoyed the spirits of proponents of Western nationalism earlier in this century. I examine how the promise faded and how secular nationalism began to be disdained in many parts of the world. I then turn to the underlying issue: the competition between religion, in its various forms, and the European and American model of secular nationalism. The second part of this book

provides case studies from the Middle East, South Asia, and formerly socialist countries. Although this book is largely about the discourse of religious activists, it is important also to look at the particular movements with which they have been associated and to try to discern patterns that indicate how and why religious revolutions develop. The third part of the book looks at several concerns that have been raised about religious nationalists: their proclivity toward violence and their apparent disregard for democracy and human rights. The Conclusion is devoted to the question of where we go from here: how secular nationalists can live in a world increasingly populated with religious nationalists and whether religious nationalism can be made compatible with secular nationalism's great virtues: tolerance, respect for human rights, and freedom of expression.