

# Religious Politics and Secular States

*Egypt, India, and the United States*

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The Johns Hopkins University Press  
*Baltimore*

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# Rethinking the Secular State

On October 6, 1981, Anwar Sadat stood on a ceremonial platform and observed a military procession commemorate Egypt's victory in the 1973 war with Israel. In what was known as the Great Crossing, the Egyptian army seized the Israeli military positions on the east bank of the Suez Canal and pushed into the Sinai Peninsula. Although the conflict ended inconclusively, the 1973 war was Sadat's finest hour. The "Hero of the Crossing" redeemed, to some extent, the 1967 military defeat that had so tarnished the legacy of his predecessor, Gamal Abdel Nasser. It also helped to confer legitimacy upon Sadat's rule. It was ironic, then, that, just as Egypt's leader was marking the 1973 victory with foreign dignitaries and other government officials, his presidency was about to come to an abrupt end. During the parade, as jets roared overhead, an army truck veered out of line and stopped abruptly in front of the presidential entourage. Four soldiers leapt out, hurling grenades and firing automatic rifles. Sadat was killed almost instantly. As the presidential security scrambled to react, the lead assassin shouted: "I am Khalid Islambouli. I have killed Pharaoh, and I do not fear death."<sup>1</sup>

Three years later, in October 1984, a similar event transpired a continent

away. Indira Gandhi, the prime minister of India, walked from her official residence toward an office on the grounds of the ministerial estate. She was scheduled to give a television interview to the British actor and documentary producer, Peter Ustinov. As she proceeded through the gardens, two of her Sikh bodyguards drew their weapons and fired at the leader they were charged to protect. She was hit by more than thirty bullets and mortally wounded. Other members of Mrs. Gandhi's security detail responded to the gunfire. One of the assassins was killed at the scene; the other was wounded and subsequently tried, convicted, and hanged, along with a co-conspirator. In the days that followed the assassination, Hindu mobs rampaged through Delhi and other cities, attacking Sikhs and burning their homes and businesses. More than three thousand Sikh men, women, and children were killed in the course of a week, and their property destroyed. Tens of thousands were forced to flee their homes.

The conventional explanation for these events reflects a common understanding of religious politics writ large. Both Sadat and Gandhi are typically seen as secular leaders gunned down by religious fanatics. The assassinations, moreover, are said to reflect a broader struggle between religious opposition groups and secular state elites. At issue is not just a competition for power but also a fundamental conflict between tradition and modernity, between religion and secularism.<sup>2</sup> Similarly, the attack on the Sikh community in the aftermath of Mrs. Gandhi's assassination is attributed to the communal passions latent in traditional society. The religious nature of traditional populations, it is argued, predisposes them to the kind of collective violence—and irrationality—not typically associated with modern political life. At face value, this interpretation of events appears self-evident. Sadat's assassins were members of Islamic Jihad, an underground militant group that had penetrated the Egyptian army. They were committed to the establishment of an Islamic state and were critical of Sadat's overtures to both the West and Israel. Similarly, the assassination of Mrs. Gandhi was retribution for a bloody encounter that had transpired a few months earlier in the Indian state of the Punjab. A militant group led by Sikh fundamentalist Sant Bhindranwale had barricaded itself in the Golden Temple of Amritsar, the Sikh religion's holiest shrine. The militants were only expelled—and killed—after a bloody assault by the Indian army acting under orders from Mrs. Gandhi.

The reality behind these events, however, differs in significant ways from the account offered above. In the case of Egypt, the policies of Anwar Sadat were far from secular. His tenure in office was defined by the active promotion of

Islamic fundamentalism through the institutions of the modern state. He greatly expanded religious education, increased Islamic programming on state-run television, and built mosques with government funds. The regime also cooperated with—and actively sought to coopt—Egypt’s Muslim Brotherhood. In the same vein, Sadat’s domestic intelligence services throughout the 1970s supported an array of Islamist student groups on Egypt’s university campuses. On the one hand, the goal of these policies was to provide a new basis of authority for the regime, one rooted in religious tradition, not Arab (or secular) nationalism. On the other hand, the effort to coopt Islamic ideas and activists was intended to provide a counterweight to the continuing influence of the secular left in Egyptian politics. It was the unreconstructed Nasserists and communists that Sadat feared, not the fundamentalists. The regime’s ability to control the forces it unleashed, however, was limited. After Sadat’s historic trip to Jerusalem in 1977, the Islamists turned on the “believing president” with deadly results.

Similarly, Indira Gandhi’s assassination was an unintended consequence of her own manipulation of religious politics. Gandhi’s son, Sanjay, and other Congress Party officials (most notably Zail Singh, the future president of India) had supported the militant Bhindranwale in an effort to isolate more moderate Sikh leaders in the Punjab. These moderate Sikhs, affiliated with the Akali Dal political party, were Mrs. Gandhi’s main rivals in the region. In an effort to split the Sikh vote and undermine the Akali Dal, Congress Party operatives supported Bhindranwale and turned a blind eye toward his many excesses. Whatever control they had over the militant sant, however, was gone by the time that he and his followers barricaded themselves in the Golden Temple. This instrumental manipulation of religious politics was also linked to the Congress Party’s own communalist tendencies and its efforts to use religion to court the Hindu vote. The anti-Sikh violence that followed Mrs. Gandhi’s assassination, for example, was not a spontaneous outpouring of grief; rather, it was a coordinated response by Congress Party leaders who sought to remind the Sikh community of their subordinate position in Indian society. Similarly, the party used the threat of terrorism and minority separatism for much of the following decade to mobilize Hindu support behind their continued rule. Fear, religion, and a thinly veiled Hindu nationalism came to define the Congress Party’s electoral strategy throughout this period.

What is particularly interesting about this history is that the events in question are not anomalous, nor was the promotion of religious ideologies by modern states limited to the cases discussed above. On the contrary, the conscious

manipulation of conservative or illiberal religion by state elites throughout the 1970s and 1980s was widespread.<sup>3</sup> In countries as diverse as Malaysia, Pakistan, Turkey, Israel, Sudan, Sri Lanka, Algeria, and the United States,<sup>4</sup> ostensibly secular state actors consciously sought to coopt the ideas and activists associated with religious fundamentalisms.<sup>5</sup> In each of these cases, illiberal or exclusive interpretations of religion were used to provide a “priestly” affirmation for existing patterns of social and political power and provide a popular basis for politically conservative governments. In this context, theologically conservative interpretations of religion were a central feature of the ideological debates of the period and were used to challenge liberal visions of social order.<sup>6</sup> Religious “fundamentalisms,” in short, were invoked by state elites to sanction a new era of conservative politics.

Although it is not surprising that state actors would appeal to religion—politicians rely on a variety of means to secure and maintain power—it is significant that they consistently gravitated toward an illiberal rendering of religious tradition. This is counterintuitive, for a variety of reasons. First, it was state elites who, during the mid-twentieth century, had been the lead proponents of a secular vision of national development. In this earlier period, leaders such as Nasser in Egypt and Jawaharlal Nehru in India had vehemently opposed the kind of illiberal religious ideologies that were later taken up in the 1970s and 1980s. It is not that religion was absent from the politics of the mid-twentieth century but rather that state actors tended to eschew the more intolerant interpretations of religion that later became so prevalent. Second, the trend contradicts the widely held assumptions that states—and modernity—were fundamentally secular in nature and that the influence of religion was irrevocably on the wane. As the events above illustrate, religion remained not only relevant to modern politics but was also central to the construction of an alternative vision of modernity. It is ironic, then, that it was secular elites who so readily embraced this religious vision of modern social life.

The following chapters examine this trend in comparative perspective. The book reviews the resurgence of religious politics in the context of three ostensibly secular societies: Egypt, India, and the United States. In each case, commitments to secular norms were embedded in the institutions of nation and state during the mid-twentieth century and disembedded in later decades. The particular focus of the cases, though, is on the role of state actors in facilitating this transition and their contribution to the emergence of an exclusive religious politics. The central argument of the book is that the changing orientation of state

elites toward religion had an enormous, and yet largely overlooked, impact on the ideological transformation that defined this period.<sup>7</sup> The book also examines the consequences of the instrumental manipulation of religion. By abandoning earlier commitments to secular norms—and consciously invoking exclusive religious themes—state actors reopened longstanding debates over the nature and basis of the national community. They also privileged conservative religious activists at the expense of their liberal counterparts. It was mainstream political elites, in short, who helped to normalize illiberal religious ideologies and brought these ideas into the political mainstream.<sup>8</sup>

## Religious Politics Reconsidered

### *The Rise and Fall of Secularism*

A defining feature of the post–Cold War period has been the resurgence of religious politics in countries and regions around the world. The Bosnian genocide, the rise of the Christian Right in the United States, and the dominance of Hindu nationalism in India are all examples of this broader phenomenon. So, too, is the spread of Islamic fundamentalism throughout the Middle East and South Asia. Explaining this phenomenon, however, has remained a challenge. The enduring relevance of religion to contemporary politics contradicts the basic assumptions of modernization theory and its corollary, the secularization thesis.<sup>9</sup> These theories argued that the influence of traditional belief systems would diminish with the onset of economic and political development. As the secular institutions of states and markets came to dominate modern life, many assumed that traditional influences such as the church would be simply less relevant. Similarly, as science and reason became intellectually predominant, the salience of religion for individuals would decline. It was secular norms and ideas that would shape the future, not religion.<sup>10</sup>

The three cases examined in this study reflect this paradox. In each instance, the post–World War II period was defined by a commitment to a secular vision of modernity and an inclusive national identity. These commitments, however, were displaced in subsequent years by a wave of illiberal, and communal, religious politics. In Egypt, the modernist ideas of Nasser gave way to a conservative or *salafist* interpretation of Islam during the tenure of his successors, Anwar Sadat and Hosni Mubarak.<sup>11</sup> In this latter period, the vernacular of political discourse came to be defined by an austere interpretation of Islam influenced by Saudi Wahhabism.<sup>12</sup> In India, the inclusive norms of Indian nationalism that

characterized the post-Independence period were similarly replaced by the more assertive and chauvinistic ideals of Hindu nationalism. This was accompanied by an increase in violence against religious minorities. Similarly, the rise of the religious right in the United States marked an ideological retrenchment in American public life and an end to the secular consensus of the post-World War II period.

The question, then, is how does one explain the resurgence of religious politics in these three cases, particularly given the marginalization of illiberal religious ideologies in the mid-twentieth century? In other words, why has religion—and particularly a conservative and often illiberal rendering of religious tradition—remained so influential in the politics of these three ostensibly secular societies?

The answer to these questions can be found in four interrelated issues. To begin with, religion remains relevant to modern politics because of its close association with communal identities and moral legitimacy. Even if religious *institutions* are less central to modern social life, religion remains enormously influential in the construction and mobilization of collective identities. This is especially relevant for modern nationalisms and other forms of political communalism. By communalism I am referring to a belief that those who share a common religious or ethnic identity have similar economic and political interests (despite class or other considerations), while those of different ethnic or religious groups are assumed to have divergent “secular” interests. Hence, the satisfaction of one community’s interests is seen as necessarily coming at the expense of another. (In the West, this ethic normally goes by the name *sectarianism*.) Nationalist ideologies draw on religious motifs and symbols in order to reinforce this type of social solidarity and mobilize populations along communal lines. Within this context, religion becomes deeply intertwined with patriotism and is invoked to demonstrate cultural authenticity. Second, the moral language inherent in religious tradition makes it a uniquely effective means of sanctioning modern political views and policies. By linking human existence to a transcendent realm, religion provides a framework for interpreting political events and articulating moral purpose. In this way, religion provides a normative language for public life and helps to legitimize—and sacralize—political authority or claims to authority.

Third, political actors of all stripes regularly manipulate religion (and religious identities) for political ends. This includes modern state elites. Although religion is commonly used to critique the status quo (in what is called the “pro-



phetic” function of religion), state actors have never been reluctant to appropriate religion for their own purposes. On the contrary, state actors have long used religion to sanctify political power and to imbue relationships of dominance with an aura of legitimate authority. The intent of this “priestly” function of religion is to situate an ephemeral set of power relations within a broader, and enduring, moral framework. In either instance—prophetic or priestly—the ultimate goal is to link the narrow political interests of a particular group with a broader vision of moral, national, and religious purpose.

Although these first three issues help to explain the continuing relevance of religion to modern politics writ large, the question remains why a conservative or illiberal rendering of religious tradition has been so prominent, and not a more inclusive or liberal interpretation. The explanation for this can be found in the particular historical context, specifically in the changing orientation of state elites toward an exclusive vision of religion and society. It is this last aspect of contemporary religious politics that is the primary focus of this book.

As I demonstrate in the following volume, the attitude of state elites toward religion in the second half of the twentieth century fluctuated dramatically. In the 1950s and 1960s, state actors were the articulators of a progressive conception of national development. They promoted an inclusive vision of religion and society and sought to embed secular norms in the institutions of nation and state. Government policy during this period was commonly associated with such issues as poverty alleviation, state-led economic development, and social justice. It was this historical moment that informed modernization theory and the belief that modernity was, by its very definition, secular and progressive. Secularism in this context did not necessarily entail the removal of religion from the public sphere (although many advocated this alternative). Rather, secularism in the mid-twentieth century was seen as providing a basis of citizenship that was not rooted in a particular religious identity. Secular norms and identities were thus perceived as an important mechanism for integrating diverse populations into a common political framework. Conservative social forces, on the other hand, and the illiberal religious ideas they espoused were typically associated with a reactionary past and seen as an obstacle to the kind of economic and political reform promoted by modern states.

In the 1970s and 1980s, however, the commitment of state elites to social change diminished, and along with it their dedication to a secular vision of national life. State leaders and other mainstream political actors subsequently abandoned their support for a liberal vision of religion and society in favor of

conservative or illiberal religious ideologies. During this period, illiberal interpretations of religious traditions were used to counter leftist politics and legitimize hierarchical patterns of social order. Exclusive visions of national identity were also used to heighten communal loyalties and appeal to a homogenized notion of group identity. This was an important means of diminishing the salience of class in national politics and of generating popular support for a conservative political agenda. It was also an important part of the Cold War dynamic. In this context, state elites either took a weak stand against religious communalism—not wishing to oppose conservative cultural forces—or actively sought to coopt such forces for their own purposes. This changing attitude of state actors toward illiberal religion marked a sharp break from previous practice. Although conservative religious activists had long advocated an explicitly religious vision of social life, their influence had been curbed by the repression of state leaders in the 1950s and 1960s. This changed dramatically, however, in the 1970s and 1980s, as state elites came to see conservative religious actors as a constituency to be courted, not a movement to be suppressed. The subsequent embrace of exclusive religious ideas thus reflected a new set of priorities. Rather than serve as an agent of social change, state policy sought to reify existing patterns of social hierarchy. In this new era, state and religion would be used to maintain the status quo, not transform it.

### *Competing Visions of the Nation*

What is at issue in each of these cases is a struggle *not* between tradition and modernity—nor between secular elites and a religious opposition—but rather between competing visions of modern social life. In other words, it reflects a continuing struggle to define the nation. As the ideological conflicts of the twentieth century illustrate, modernization was never, by definition, rational, individualist, or liberal. On the contrary, the competing modes of social organization—fascism, liberal democratic capitalism, communist totalitarianism—were defined by an ongoing struggle between “open” and “closed” conceptions of society.<sup>13</sup> None of these represented a retreat into tradition; rather, each embodied a different vision of modern social life. The open society was committed to the Enlightenment values of individual freedom, reason, and the rule of law, while the closed society was characterized by hierarchical patterns of social order and the centralization of political authority. Whether it was fascism, communism, or ethnic nationalism, *political unity* from this perspective was premised on a high degree of *cultural uniformity*. Although this illiberal vision of

social life may be antithetical to the Enlightenment norms of a liberal society, it was nonetheless a product of the modern era.

The debates between these inclusive and exclusive visions of social life had a powerful impact on the religious politics of the last fifty years. In each of the cases of this study, debates over social order have hinged on the question of whether the nation ought to be defined in secular or religious terms. In other words, should one religion be given precedence in the institutions of nation and state, or ought these institutions be nondiscriminatory in regard to matters of faith? On its face, this appears to be a religious dispute over the compatibility of secular and religious norms. As such, it taps into longstanding disagreements over the relative merits of creating an autonomous space in the public sphere where organized religion does not intrude. Those who support a more central role for religion in public life—and argue against an autonomous public sphere—believe that religion is essential for the self-actualization of the dominant community. Religion is perceived as a source of morality and a symbol of the community's commitment to a transcendent moral order. Opponents of such an expansive role of religion in public life worry about the corrupting influence that politics will have on religion and believe that secularism is an important means of protecting religion from the negative effects of politicization. Similarly, religious minorities tend to oppose a close association of religion and government because they fear marginalization, the chance that they will become second-class citizens. Hence, the argument is made that only a secular order—one that delinks religious identities from civil status—can provide a nondiscriminatory basis to the governance of multiethnic, multireligious societies.

At a deeper level, however, this debate over religion in public life reflects the aforementioned division between liberal and illiberal conceptions of society. Like the open society, civic conceptions of nationalism are premised on a nondiscriminatory cosmopolitanism that extends membership to all within the territorial boundaries of a given nation-state. Ethnic nationalism or religious communalism, on the other hand, explicitly links political standing to membership in one faith community or another. As such, it gives priority to the dominant religious or ethnic communities at the expense of minorities. What is ultimately at issue in these debates, then, is whether the society (and, hence, the nation) ought to be defined by the values of inclusion and tolerance, or whether the will (and ethnic motifs) of a particular segment of the majority population ought to be predominant. In other words, must the dominant community—and its religious identity—be given preference in the political realm, or is there an

obligation for state authorities to protect minority rights and cultural diversity? Should public life, in short, be governed by the majoritarian tendencies of the closed society, or ought it be tolerant of diversity and thus reflect the Enlightenment values of the open society?

Religion is central to these debates because it provides a moral basis to *both* of these differing visions of community. This paradox reflects what Appleby calls religion's fundamental ambiguity: the continuing tension between competing interpretations of a given religious tradition and the pattern of social life that each envisions.<sup>14</sup> Liberal or "modernist" interpretations of religion, for example, provide a foundation for civic forms of nationalism and other forms of inclusive social life. By tolerating diverse peoples and opinions, it provides the basis for the kind of primordial compromise essential to the smooth functioning of multiethnic, multireligious societies.<sup>15</sup> In this context, each individual (and community) forsakes its right to religious and ethnic preference in exchange for others relinquishing similar claims. Conversely, illiberal interpretations of religion (or fundamentalisms) commonly inform ethnic nationalism and other exclusive visions of social life. Those who support an explicit religious nationalism argue that collective self-actualization requires a public sphere defined by the ethnic and religious motifs of the majority community. From this perspective, freedom is a collective affair that requires a more central role for *their* religion in public life. The tolerance of diversity, then, is neither meritorious nor expedient if it comes at the expense of majority interests or contradicts God's will.

The struggle to define the nation, then, is in essence a debate over how to construct modernity: inclusive or exclusive, liberal or illiberal. As such, it reflects both religious and political differences over how to interpret a shared tradition. What is particularly surprising about the cases in question is the changing role of the state on precisely these issues. Although state leaders were the primary defenders of pluralist conceptions of social order in the mid-twentieth century—and embraced the liberal or modernist religion prevalent at the time—this changed in subsequent decades when state actors abandoned their opposition to communalist ideas and embraced a more explicit religious nationalism. Liberal and secular norms were subsequently delegitimized, and an illiberal vision of society became embedded in state institutions. Although the competition between state elites and conservative religious activists reemerged in the 1980s and 1990s, there was little difference in their respective visions of the nation (at least in Egypt and India). Rather, these opposing political interests vied with one another for the mantle of cultural legitimacy, with each side

appealing to the communal tendencies of the majority population as a basis of its claim to rule. As a result, illiberal interpretations of religion benefited enormously from the changing orientation of state elites, while advocates of liberal religion (and pluralist secularism) were relegated to near-obscurity. The instrumental manipulation of religion by state actors, in short, had an enormous impact on popular perceptions of religious and cultural authenticity and, hence, on the prevailing definition of the nation.

### *The Framework of the Study*

The purpose of this study is twofold. First, it seeks to get the story straight. It reexamines the religious politics of Egypt, India, and the United States and highlights elements of the historical record that are not commonly known or are otherwise disregarded as anomalous. The promotion of illiberal religion by state actors is a largely overlooked phenomenon, and yet it is central to understanding the resurgence of religious politics in recent decades. The empirical chapters, consequently, rely on thick description to provide a comprehensive account of the events in question and include material not readily found elsewhere. As such, the study tells a side of the story that is not typically accounted for in the conventional narratives about the rise of religious fundamentalisms. This emphasis on the historical narrative is evident in the methodological approach of the study. It uses a comparative historical analysis, which focuses on several cases that are defined by a common sequence of events from roughly the same time period.<sup>16</sup> The cases were selected, moreover, to highlight religious and cultural diversity, thus making common trends more significant.

A second goal of this project is to provide a more nuanced theoretical framework for interpreting modern religious politics.<sup>17</sup> This is the basis of chapter 1. The first part of the chapter explains the continuing relevance of religion to modern political life and institutions. Its central claims are that religious politics occur within the ideological context of the nation-state and that religion is fundamentally intertwined with nationalist or communal identities. As such, religious ideologies (and fundamentalisms) reflect not a return to tradition per se but rather an ideological reconstruction of tradition for a modern context.<sup>18</sup> A second theme of this chapter is the complexity of modern religious politics. Although the symbols and rhetoric of religious tradition may be a common feature of contemporary political life, the variable nature of religion means that both the interpretation of religion and the ends to which it is used are varied. In other words, differing interpretations of religions inform competing visions

of society and hence are alternatively mobilized in support of, or in opposition to, an existing social order.

Although most explanations of contemporary religious politics tend to focus on the social movements associated with religious fundamentalisms, the key variable in this analysis is the changing orientation of state elites toward illiberal religion. As I argue in this book, the ideas associated with religious fundamentalisms were not new, nor were many of the organizations. Although these movements were using new means to promote their message after 1970 or so, the underlying vision and rhetoric had not significantly altered from earlier decades. What did change, however, was the context. Specifically, the attitude of state leaders (and other mainstream political actors) toward exclusive visions of religion and society changed dramatically in the 1970s and 1980s. This is not to argue that state actors *created* religious fundamentalisms or that other factors are unimportant. Rather, the central claim is that the efforts to draw on—to exploit—illiberal interpretations of religion had an enormous impact on the political fortunes of the ideas and activists associated with them. Religious fundamentalisms, in short, were greatly abetted by the modern state and the secular elites who sought to coopt religion for their own purposes.

The focus of the empirical chapters, then, is on the ideological transformation that characterizes each case. As such, the emphasis is on the differing interpretations of religion and how these inform differing visions of society. The chapters also highlight the changing attitude of state elites toward illiberal conceptions of religious politics and its impact on the debates over how to define the nation. Each case is subsequently broken into two parts that are addressed in separate chapters. The first chapter of each case study examines the embedding of a liberal, secular vision of modernity in the immediate post-World War II period and the subsequent disembedding of the secular vision. This first part of the historical narrative emphasizes the connection between state policy toward religion and the corresponding rise and fall of the secular order. The second chapter of each case study examines the fallout from these policies. In each instance, the effort of state elites to coopt an exclusive vision of religion and society—and otherwise to fan the flames of sectarianism for political gain—undermined earlier efforts to build an inclusive national identity. It also contributed to the communalization of public life and the corresponding polarization of society. What emerges is a deeply divisive politics, with religious differences informing the fault lines of political conflict.

Chapter 2 is the first of the empirical chapters. It traces the origins and the

subsequent downfall of Egypt's secular nationalism. The central focus of the chapter is the long-running dispute over whether a secular vision of social order ought to predominate in Egypt, or whether religion—specifically Islam—ought to govern both state and nation.<sup>19</sup> During the Nasser era, state institutions promoted a liberal variant of Islam that supported the regime's secular vision of Arab nationalism and socialism. This liberal rendering of Islamic tradition was used to support a program of social revolution and to discredit political rivals who advocated a more *salafist* or literal reading of Islamic tradition. These competing interpretations of Islam were subsequently enmeshed in the political (and ideological) struggle between the Arab nationalists and their opponents in the Muslim Brotherhood, Saudi Arabia, and other bastions of religious and political orthodoxy. Nasser's control of the state greatly influenced the outcome of this debate and helped to embed a secular vision of nationalist development in Egyptian public life.

Egypt's defeat in the June 1967 war with Israel greatly damaged the credibility of the Nasserist project. It also sparked a reevaluation of the ideals of the 1952 Egyptian revolution. Although the underlying issues were economic and political, the vernacular was religious. It was in this context that the secular-Islamist debate was resurrected. This time, however, the outcome was different. Nasser's successor, Anwar Sadat, and other state leaders abandoned the secular position in favor of a Saudi-influenced *salafist* Islam. Sadat's "Corrective Revolution" sought to coopt, not confront, the Islamist vision and used it to build a new basis of state power. This strategy entailed alliances with those who had opposed Nasser in earlier years, such as the Muslim Brotherhood, Egypt's landowners, and the leaders of Saudi Arabia. It also involved the use of conservative religion to stigmatize the political left and to mobilize popular sentiment behind state authority. These policies marked a significant break with the Nasserist legacy, an abandonment of the secular orientation of Egypt's 1952 revolution.

Chapter 3 examines the long-term consequences of Sadat's policies. Although Nasser had promoted an inclusive variant of Islam, a more illiberal interpretation became pervasive under Sadat. Along with it came an exclusive vision of social life that stigmatized Egypt's Coptic Christian minority, denigrated secular norms, and precipitated a backlash against the societal progress secured by women. These changes were due in large measure to the influence of Saudi Arabia in the post-1967 era. It was also due, however, to the inability of either Sadat or his successor, Hosni Mubarak, to control the forces they had unleashed. Although the Mubarak regime has been more nuanced in its approach to reli-

gion, it has never challenged the centrality of Islam in Egyptian public life. On the contrary, the regime has sought to portray itself as the authentic defender of religious orthodoxy in Egyptian society. Moreover, Mubarak's alliance with the official religious establishment in the 1990s further entrenched an illiberal interpretation of Islam in the institutions of the Egyptian state. In an effort to counter the ideological challenge of Islamist militants, the Mubarak regime granted a high degree of autonomy to religious clerics whose vision of society differed little from that of the Islamist opposition. The result was a cultural milieu in which assaults on intellectual freedom, minority populations, and creative expression occurred with official sanction. As one analyst put it, the regime became "a prisoner of Islam."<sup>20</sup>

Chapter 4 examines the rise and fall of Nehruvian secularism in post-Independence India. A central feature of this case is the manner in which different interpretations of religion have historically informed competing visions of politics and the nation. This was evident in the tensions between the inclusive interpretation of Indian identity advocated by Mahatma Gandhi and the exclusive Hindu nationalism of the Rashtriya Swayemsavek Sangh (RSS) and other communal organizations. Each perspective embodied a fundamentally different rendering of Hindu tradition and a correspondingly different vision of social order. Gandhi, for example, viewed tolerance and nonviolence as central to Hinduism, and this was the basis for his inclusive vision of Indian society. Nehru's secular nationalism built on these ideas, despite his own religious differences with Gandhi. Both, however, advocated extending membership of the nation to all who lived within the territorial boundaries of the country. The RSS, on the other hand, rejected both Gandhi's conception of Hindu tradition and his inclusive vision of the nation. From the perspective of the RSS, Hinduism needed to be reformed and reshaped as a more militant, assertive, and unitary tradition. Similarly, members of the RSS and later organizations advocated an ethnic nationalism that limited membership to Hindus. These differences over religion and society formed the fault lines of Indian politics for much of the twentieth century.

Although the historically dominant Congress Party was largely committed to a secular political order—and opposed Hindu communalism during the Nehru era—this changed in the post-Emergency period (1977 onward). During this latter period, Indira Gandhi, and later her son Rajiv, sought to coopt the discourse of Hindu nationalism as a basis of populist mobilization. This was evi-



dent in the party's majoritarian electoral strategy of the 1980s, which exploited the fear of minority separatism and appeals to religious identity to garner support among Hindu voters in the "Hindi Belt," the Hindi-speaking heartland of north and central India. This politicization of religion by Congress Party operatives also entailed an abandonment of the secular vision of Indian nationalism. By coopting Hindu communalism, however, Indira and Rajiv Gandhi effectively ceded the ideological debate to their political opponents in the Sangh Parivar (a family of Hindu organizations that included the RSS) and helped to disembody secularism as a norm of the Indian state.

Although the Congress Party's manipulation of religious politics was effective in the short term, there were unintended consequences that undermined its utility in the long term. The assassination of Mrs. Gandhi was one such side effect. So, too, were the rise in communal tensions and the normalization of Hindu nationalism as an ideological discourse. This is the focus of chapter 5. As a competing ideology, the notion of *Hindutva* (literally, Hindu-ness) had been in retreat since Mahatma Gandhi's assassination by a Hindu extremist in 1948. Although this communalist ideology retained support at the grassroots level—even among Congress Party activists—a secular Indian nationalism was dominant at the national level. The Congress Party's effort to coopt these themes in the 1980s was important in bringing the communal ideas of Hindu nationalism into the ideological mainstream. The main beneficiary of this transformation, however, was not the Congress Party but rather the Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and other elements of the Sangh Parivar. This changing ideological context helps to explain the BJP's precipitous rise in the early 1990s, which went from near-obscurity to the heights of state power in just ten years.

Chapter 6 examines similar trends in the context of the United States. Like the other cases of this study, the resurgence of religious politics in the 1980s and 1990s occurred in the context of longstanding debates over the proper role of religion in public life. Although the founding of the United States was rooted in a basic commitment to religious tolerance, American history is replete with examples of religious discrimination and messianic visions of American nationalism. This reflects the fact that American nationalism is rooted in a religious narrative, albeit one that exhibits competing tendencies. At its best, America's "civil religion" has been based upon an interpretation of Christian belief that is nonsectarian and compatible with America's secular tradition.<sup>21</sup> However, an exclusive and often chauvinistic religious nationalism has also been a common

feature of the American experience. This interpretation of American nationalism is tied to an illiberal rendering of Christian tradition and an exclusive understanding of American identity.

Similarly, the role of state actors in facilitating the rise of an exclusive vision of religion and society at the expense of a liberal alternative was considerable. This was evident during the tenure of Richard Nixon, who used a thinly veiled religious politics as part of his 1968 and 1972 presidential campaigns. Nixon's cultural politics was part of a broader effort—the so-called Southern Strategy—to split the Democratic Party's New Deal coalition and form a new conservative majority by reaching out to Southern and working-class whites. This majoritarian electoral strategy relied on a mix of religion, patriotism, and race to appeal to traditionally Democratic constituencies. By blurring religion and nationalism into an amorphous "idea of America," Republican strategists sought to stigmatize liberal norms, minorities, and dissent as unpatriotic. It was also intended to use religion and "cultural issues" to displace economic considerations as a basis of voting among working-class Americans.

The success of Nixon's majoritarian strategy set the stage for the Reagan Revolution of the 1980s and came to define Republican electoral campaigns in the following decades. This is the focus of chapter 7. In a manner similar to Egypt and India, the political fortunes of illiberal religious ideas and activists were greatly aided by the support of key state elites from Ronald Reagan to George W. Bush. Republican Party operatives, for example, helped to bring individuals like Jerry Falwell and other members of the Christian Right into the party and into the ideological mainstream. In doing so, however, they changed the nature of their party as well as the tenor of American politics. The realignment that started under Nixon came to fruition in later years, fundamentally transforming both the Republican *and* the Democratic parties in the process. Although Democrats lost their support among conservative Southerners, liberal Republicans were marginalized, as the center of gravity in their party shifted to religious conservatives.

The emphasis on communal—and majoritarian—politics that defined the Reagan-Bush era also affected longstanding divisions between the cosmopolitanism embodied in the social contract origins of the American republic and the Christian nationalism of the Puritan tradition. These tensions between inclusive and exclusive conceptions of both faith and nation were embodied in the culture wars of the 1990s. The religious politics of this era, however, was not simply

the reaction of a traditional population to secular modernity but also reflected the continuing effort by political operatives to polarize the American electorate for partisan gain. It was in this context that the liberal-conservative divide in America took on strong religious overtones, as Republican Party activists invoked conservative religion to claim the mantle of God and Country as their own. As in the Indian case, however, the excesses associated with this strategy bred its own demise. The Bush presidential victories in 2000 and 2004 may have appeared to vindicate his party's religious turn, but it ultimately led to a dangerous overreach. Empowered by the electoral victories and a misguided religious certitude, the Bush administration pursued a set of policies—including two failed wars—that proved disastrous for the party and the nation alike. The election of Barack Obama in 2008, then, represented a repudiation of the Bush administration and a return to a more centrist vision of both religion *and* politics. The ability of the Obama administration to reverse the legacy of messianic nationalism and return America to its Enlightenment roots, however, is far from assured. Nonetheless, it remains a key challenge. The resurrection of a more tolerant public sphere is essential for the well-being of the American political system and is a prerequisite for healing the deep social divisions created during the culture wars of recent decades.