The rise of fundamentalist movements in the Middle East, Africa and South Asia is one aspect of religion’s global resurgence. How will this affect U.S. foreign policy?

by R. Scott Appleby

In recent months, religion has made its way to the top of the congressional agenda. Stirred by the persecution of religious believers by the governments of China, Iran, Sudan and others, Congress is considering legislation that would impose sanctions on such countries. Whether sanctions would achieve the desired objective and how they would affect U.S. foreign policy goals are just two of the issues raised by the debate.

Religious persecution is one manifestation of religion’s powerful but little understood dual role in international affairs: inciter of deadly conflict and humanitarian peacemaker and defender of human rights. During the period when Muslim and Jewish extremists were disrupting the Middle East peace process with suicide bombings and assassinations, for example, King Hussein of Jordan called for a convocation of Muslim and Jewish leaders committed to non-violent means of resolving the Arab-Israeli conflict. Elsewhere around the world, religions and religious actors pose both threat and opportunity to the cause of stability, economic development and peace. If religious zeal is part of the problem, it is also an essential part of the solution.

The complexity and changing character of religion’s role in world affairs often force the U.S. to walk a tightrope in its relations with the dozens of countries that forbid religious activism and, in some cases, even the free exercise of religion. The governments of Algeria, Egypt and Saudi Arabia, for example, are committed in varying degrees to the suppression of “political Islam,” while Jordan has sought to contain Islamic activists by integrating them into the political process. Should the U.S. subordinate its values regarding freedom of religion and democratization in the interest of good relations with governments that it considers of strategic importance? Or should it uphold those values at the expense of other interests?

Finally, how should the U.S. respond to the growing number of religious non-governmental organizations (NGOs) that are playing influential roles in me-
RELIGION’S ROLE

Fundamentalisms and religious nationalisms

Religious fundamentalisms and religious nationalisms are two closely related but disparate phenomena. Both types of movements draw on traditional religious myths, symbols, rituals and doctrines. Both seek to define politics and peoplehood on the basis of religious identity. Both thrive in societies where the institutions of civil society (i.e., independent political parties, voluntary associations, free press, labor unions, etc.) are weak and where social and economic inequalities and deprivations, corruption and governmental incompetence are acute. Both reject genuine religious pluralism—the coexistence of different communities and traditions of religious belief (and unbelief)—as a violation of the divine will.

These two types of intolerant religious movements agree on the symptoms of diseases afflicting society but differ in diagnosing their causes. Religious fundamentalists in the Middle East, Africa and South Asia are concerned primarily by what they see as the corruption and shunting aside of their religions. They blame the ills of society—widespread poverty, economic displacement, military weakness, political corruption, a growing culture of drugs and violence—on the lukewarm members of their faith who have adopted secular lifestyles and values. At the root of social decay, argues fundamentalists, is the abandonment of the true religion, the erosion of “traditional” family and kinship bonds and the accompanying weakening of morality. The solution lies in restoring religion and religious values to prominence, even decisive, public role in shaping culture, law and social life.

By contrast, religious nationalists are concerned with protecting or strengthening the bond between religion and the people. Like religious fundamentalists, they wish to extend the political influence of the religious tradition. They see other ethnic-religious blocs as the primary enemy, and they are more willing than fundamentalists to collaborate with politicians in building a coalition against outsiders. The religious nationalist’s solution to conflict and social inequality is to draw the circle of citizenship and civil rights tightly around the true believers and to arouse popular sentiment in favor of a constructed or imagined link between one religion and the nation.

Islamist pursuit of power
The people of the Book—Jews, Christians and Muslims—claim fidelity to a covenant between God and Abraham first recorded in the Hebrew scriptures. In the late 20th century, each of the traditions of Abraham—Judaism, Christianity and Islam—generates fundamentalisms among a highly visible minority of its adherents. The three religions are rich in resources for fundamentalism. They share the notion of a God who is above history but directing it toward some definite end; the fundamentalists build on this expectation, believing themselves to be specially chosen agents of the divine plan. Each tradition, further, boasts a highly developed system of religious or ecclesiastical law that is the foundation for theocratic societies; the fundamentalists would restore the sacred law to its former prominence in the larger world.

Islam has produced more vital and influential fundamentalist movements than Christianity and Judaism combined. Muslims who think politically conceive of themselves collectively not as a nation but as the umma, a transnational community of believers governed by the sharia (Islamic law) revealed in the Holy Quran and the traditions of the Prophet Muhammad. Islamic fundamentalist (or Islamist) movements and parties seek to bring Muslim societies under stricter obedience to the sharia. Their rise and proliferation throughout the Muslim world thus present a formidable challenge to secular or moderate Islamic regimes.

Do Islamists also represent a serious challenge to the West, in general, or to U.S. interests? Or do Turkey, Saudi Arabia and Egypt, to mention three key regimes currently under pressure by Islamists, exaggerate an “Islamic threat,” as some observers maintain, to solidify friendly diplomatic relations with the U.S.? If that is the case, they may be obscuring the legitimate claims of Muslims who are oppressed or ignored by their own political leaders. Islamist terrorism is a serious concern for all governments touched by it, but most Islamists have not resorted to violence to achieve their political goals. Nonetheless, these Middle Eastern countries, among others, repress even the nonviolent Islamists because the latter reject the regimes’ legal and political-philosophical foundations. This policy forces the U.S. to choose between loyalty to its official allies and support for opposition movements.

TURKEY. On June 18, 1997, the Islamist Necmettin Erbakan resigned the office of prime minister of Turkey under pressure from the country’s military. (See Topic 7.) The generals accused Erbakan of, among other things, failing to close Islamic schools, which, they charged, had become training grounds for fundamentalists who seek to impose an Islamic state. Erbakan appealed to Western countries to help prevent his Welfare party from being banned, but U.S. officials did not rush to defend him. While he was prime minister, Erbakan had visited Iran and Libya, which the U.S. considers “rogue states” that sponsor terrorism, and apparently he had sought to move Turkey away from its traditional identification with Europe. By ignoring the Islamists’ petition, the U.S. government accepted what it considered the lesser evil: it provided ample propaganda material for Islamists who claim that the U.S. has a double standard when it comes to Muslim societies in transition from autocratic or military regimes to democratic forms of government.

EGYPT. The Islamist “movement” is
The Community of Sant’Egidio: Mediators for peace

One of the first fruits of Roman Catholicism’s renewal of the 1960s was the birth of an independent, primarily lay movement of young Italian Catholics who wanted to live and work together in the spirit of the Second Vatican Council (1962–65), as expressed in Pope John XXIII’s dictum: “Let us stress what unites us, not what divides us.”

The movement had modest origins. In February 1968, a group of students at Rome’s Virgil High School agreed to form a voluntary charitable organization through which they could express their Christian commitment to ecumenical and interreligious dialogue and social concern for the poor. A few years later, the Vatican provided a headquarters by donating the 16th-century Carmelite convent of Sant’Egidio, located in the ancient Roman district of Trastevere. The Italian government subsequently renovated the convent, transforming it into a labyrinth of meeting rooms, offices and reception areas. Thereafter the group took the name the Community of Sant’Egidio.

Among the founders was 18-year-old Andrea Riccardi, who has been the president of Sant’Egidio for the first two decades of its existence. In 1980 Riccardi became the youngest full professor in Italy, specializing in ecclesiastical history at Rome’s Sapienza University. Another key figure was Matteo Zuppi, a younger student at the high school, who joined the community in 1971, became a priest and was assigned to Santa Maria. Feeling a special vocation to the neediest of the needy and to immigrants from the developing world, Zuppi befriended the poor, Gypsies, addicts, orphans, AIDS victims and the handicapped. He led Sant’Egidio’s outreach to countries as diverse as Albania, Argentina, Ethiopia, Guatemala, Mexico, Mozambique, Somalia and Vietnam.

The Community of Sant’Egidio now has more than 10,000 members worldwide and 300 local groups in numerous Italian cities, other European countries, Latin America, and Africa. Community members provide social services to children at risk, immigrants, the poor, the old and the infirm. They staff schools and clinics in the Third World. They are the foremost provider of assistance to the homeless in Rome.

In the international community, Sant’Egidio is best known for its successful (some would say spectacular) work in the arena of conflict resolution. Perhaps Sant’Egidio’s most celebrated accomplishment was its successful mediation of the negotiations that led to the end of the civil war in Mozambique. The first direct contact between the leadership of the insurgent movement (Renamo) and the Frelimo government party took place at Sant’Egidio in July 1990. Not long thereafter Riccardi and Zuppi were enlisted as primary mediators, and they served in that capacity for the 10 rounds of peace talks held at Sant’Egidio headquarters in Rome. In concert with the Italian and other governments, including the U.S. which provided crucial logistical, financing and intelligence support to the community, Sant’Egidio maintained a momentum for peace between the two parties until the signing of the general peace accord on October 4, 1992.

This diplomatic solution to the conflict, however, was only the beginning of peace. The challenge after 1992 was to maintain the cease-fire while rebuilding the nation’s economic infrastructure. Reconciling erstwhile enemies and ministering to a brutalized generation were the necessary first steps in implementing the peace. Most observers predicted the breakdown of the peace accord due to ill will, inefficient bureaucracy and the difficulty of mobilizing resources. The members of Sant’Egidio, by contrast, believed in the capacity of local people and institutions to sustain the framework for the cease-fire, and worked to bring Renamo and Frelimo supporters together for events aimed at reconciliation and the rebuilding of communities. After the war, for example, local churches served as mediating institutions. They facilitated the reintegration of Renamo soldiers into Mozambican society. The churches’ relief agencies then expanded their operations into areas previously occupied by Renamo. Representatives of Sant’Egidio also helped sponsor the training of “social integrators” to bring the reconciliation process into local communities.

Defusing the desire for revenge and encouraging repentance and forgiveness are essential to breaking the cycle of violence set in motion by a civil war. Yet only local individuals and institutions can accomplish these tasks. Incorporating the citizenry into the reconciliation process is one of the lessons of the Mozambique experience, and religious communities proved themselves to be the best facilitators of this process.

The key to Sant’Egidio’s success is what one of its leaders, Andrea Bartoli, has referred to as the “disciplined friendship” of the community—its willingness to welcome and listen to all sides in a dispute, not only without prejudice but in a spirit of tolerance, quiet discernment and compassion, virtues that accompany their own simple but profound spiritual “ministry of reconciliation.”

There is also political will—and a bit of political muscle—supporting Sant’Egidio’s conflict-resolution initiatives. Sant’Egidio’s leaders have extensive contacts with Italian politicians and officials, with the Vatican and, increasingly, with government officials and civil society in a variety of European and African nations. Its members organize—at times with other civic bodies such as labor unions—conferences and demonstrations to mobilize public opinion against racism, anti-Semitism and intolerance.

Religious groups such as Sant’Egidio, while still rare, are growing in number. They offer a modest but substantial contribution to the ongoing efforts to build new structures of peace and justice in the post-cold-war world.
actually several disparate movements, united only by the common goal of bringing Muslim societies under the encompassing rule of Islamic law. Experts debate the actual degree of coordination among these movements. On one side are those who insist that the level of international cooperation is quite impressive for a polyglot faith that spans five continents and is divided into two major branches—Shiite and Sunni—that have historically been bitter rivals. Advocates of this view point to reports that Shiite Iran has for over a decade provided arms, technology and training not only to fellow Shiite radicals in Lebanon’s Hezbollah (Party of God) but also to Sunni Islamists in Sudan, in Israel’s occupied territories, in the conservative Islamic kingdom of Saudi Arabia and elsewhere in the Arab world.

Skeptics respond that there is very little hard evidence of an international Islamist network beyond the existence of a coterie of Muslim guerrilla fighters trained by the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) to fight the Soviets in Afghanistan from 1979 to 1989. (They are now roving the Islamic world as “terrorists for hire.”) Proponents of this view portray “the Islamic awakening” as primarily a cultural and religious revival, the major political expressions of which are organized political parties operating openly and within the law. They point to the aforementioned Welfare party in Turkey or to Egypt’s Labor party. According to this line of analysis, the Sunni underground terrorist cells such as the Islamic Group are frustrated splinter groups not connected to the mainstream Islamic revival.

In Egypt the debate over Islamist intentions and level of coordination is mirrored in the two-track (and seemingly contradictory) policy of its president since 1981, Hosni Mubarak. His regime has sought to portray the armed insurgents who have been waging war against the government since 1992 as non-Muslims or “bad Muslims,” unrepresentative of ordinary Egyptians. This strategy of isolating the extremists has coincided with a cautious political liberalization. The government has allowed Islamists to join political parties, campaign for seats in the parliament and publish their own newspaper. The Egyptian judicial system, often against Mubarak’s wishes, has also made extraordinary concessions to Islamist sensibilities. For example, Egyptian courts declared a happily married academic couple divorced on the grounds that the husband is not a practicing Muslim.

Yet the Mubarak regime has been frustrated by the persistence of the extremists, who operate mostly in upper Egypt but have carried their attack on the tourist industry to the streets of Cairo, the capital, in the hope of crippling the tourist-dependent national economy. In November, the militant Islamic Group claimed responsibility for the murder of 58 foreign tourists at the Hatshepsut Temple in Luxor. Two months earlier a tour bus was attacked outside Cairo’s Egyptian Museum, killing nine German tourists, and the Mubarak regime retaliated by rounding up and arresting “moderate” Islamists, seizing their assets and shutting down their operations. As in Turkey, the Islamist politicians in Egypt protest such action as indiscriminate punishment of the many for the sins of a few.

From politics to terrorism

The debate over Islamist intentions has produced dire consequences in Algeria and Afghanistan as well. In those two countries, ironically, fear of radical Islam has allowed extremist Muslims to gain the upper hand over their moderate counterparts, with appalling results.

ALGERIA. In 1991 an Islamist political party, the Islamic Salvation Front (FIS), garnered popular support for political reform in Algeria, a nation rich in oil but plagued by corruption and mismanagement on the part of the ruling National Liberation Front (FLN). The oil bonanza had ended in the 1980s while a population explosion continued: by the early 1990s more than 50% of the Algerian population of 25 million was under age 20. The ensuing economic crisis, punctuated by shortages of food and consumer goods and rising unemployment (which had reached nearly 30% by the early 1990s), led to a series of bread riots. The FIS promised moral reform and political renewal as the path to greater efficiency and economic productivity, and it surprised the political experts by winning the first round of free parliamentary elections in 1991.

Shortly thereafter, the secular generals, along with anxious FLN politicians citing FIS’s own rhetoric, warned that the medieval fundamentalist vanguard was poised to launch a jihad (holy war) against fellow Arab Muslims as well as European foreigners. Anticipating another FIS victory in the second round, the military government canceled the 1992 elections, outlawed the FIS and imposed martial law on the nation. (The U.S. government, its Middle East policies dictated by the needs of the Arab-Israeli peace process, was silent.)

Pushed to the brink of extinction, the Islamist movement eliminated moderate voices within it and splintered into terrorist cells, the most powerful of which is the Armed Islamic Group (GIA). Since 1992 the GIA has enlisted up to 10,000 underground fighters in campaigns to expel the remaining French presence as well as the secular Arab middle class. GIA extremists carried out a series of assassinations of for-
eigners, slit the throats of Croatian techni-
cians and shot unveiled Algerian women. Meanwhile, the government stepped up its activities against the insurgents, and independent secularist forces armed themselves, creating anti-
Muslim militias without central command.

For the past several years the vio-
lence has reached the level of civil war; assassinations and the burning of trains, buses, farms and schools have become routine. Some reports estimate that by 1997 terrorists had killed 60,000 people.

**AFGHANISTAN.** The case of Af-
ghanistan is different. The Soviet-sup-
ported secular government was driven
out by Islamist forces in 1989. The civil
war that ensued has become a competi-
tion between various fundamentalist factions. The fiercest of these is a move-
ment known as the Taliban, led by pre-
viously obscure members of the ulama,
or doctors of Islamic law, from the ru-
nal south. In September 1996 it seized
control of approximately two thirds of
the nation by capturing Kabul, the capi-
tal, from the forces of the more moder-
ate Afghan Muslim leader, Ahmed
Shah Massoud. In May 1997 the Talib-
an occupied the northern city of
Mazar-i-Sharif and began the rigorous
enforcement of Islamic law there. “Ev-
everything that is opposed to Islamic
sharia we will stop,” said Gul
Mohammed, a Taliban fighter.

By thus defeating the “Northern Al-
liance” of relatively moderate Muslim
leaders, the Taliban surprised and
alarmed Russia and the nations that
were once part of Soviet Central Asia,
delighted Islamic hard-liners within the
Pakistani government, angered hard-
liners within the Iranian government,
and presented the Clinton Administra-
tion with a difficult situation. Russia
and the Muslim nations of Kazakhstan,
Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan and
Turkmenistan feared that the Taliban
might export extremist fundamental-
ism. The Clinton Administration de-
ployed the Taliban’s chauvinistic
treatment of women and their viola-
tions of human rights: the Taliban pen-
al code, drawn from the sharia, pro-
vides for the amputation of thieves’
hands and the stoning to death of adul-
ters. Yet the Administration saw the
Taliban victory as an end to a costly
civil war, a counterweight to Shiite

The hope for a complete Taliban vic-
tory was short-lived, however. The
forces of Massoud staged a comeback
in the summer of 1997, aided in part by
ethnic groups in the north who reject
the Taliban version of Islam and resent the
imposition of the Taliban’s Pashtun
way of life. (The Pashtuns are an east-
ern and southern Afghan tribe of 7 mil-
ion to 8 million people.)

The Afghan story illustrates the
tension between realpolitik, or practical
politics, and “moralpolitik”—two
world views that sometimes compete
for the hearts and minds of U.S. foreign
policymakers. Human-rights groups
and the politicians who support them
favor the latter approach, which empha-
izes the importance of punishing re-
gimes or movements, such as the
Taliban, that systematically violate hu-
mans rights as defined by international
law and by the United Nations Universal
Declaration of Human Rights
adopted in 1948. By contrast, those
politicians, diplomats and other U.S.
State Department officials who em-
brace realpolitik exclusively oppose
subordinating the shorter-term Ameri-
can economic and geopolitical interests
to humanitarian and idealist aspirations.

**Iran’s fundamentalism waning?**

Religious fundamentalists face a seem-
ingly insurmountable paradox: their occa-
sional success in winning power in
modern industrial and postindustrial
societies entails almost certain failure in
wielding that power—as fundamental-
ists. Such societies are complex and di-
verse, with generational, class, ethnic,
gender and religious cleavages that are
prepared to reassert themselves once
the revolutionary dust has settled. Poli-
tics is the art of compromise; funda-
mentalist hard-liners denounce compre-
promise as moral weakness, however, and
would restrict it to peripheral matters. It
is exceedingly difficult, in short, to gov-
ern a heterogeneous nation while stay-
ting true to hard-core fundamentalism.
Recent events in the Islamic Republic of
Iran demonstrate the truth of this
maxim.

The Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini
came to power in 1979 on the crest of a
revolutionary wave borne of Shiite
Muslim zeal and cultural self-assertion.
Khomeini’s Islamic state proceeded to
persecute its internal enemies, includ-
ing recalcitrant Shiite leaders and
groups as well as the “infidels” of the
Bahai faith. The new government
quickly discarded the shah’s hated
modernization plan along with his at-
tempt to revive elements of Iran’s pre-
Islamic Persian culture. Social as well
as political life in the new Islamic re-
public reflected the policy of “Islamiza-
tion from above”: women wore the veil,
Muslim clerics took seats in the Majlis
(the Iranian parliament), and Islamic
law became the standard by which Ira-
nian policies were to be judged. “The
system of bureaucracy, the result and
product of Godless forms of govern-
ment, will be firmly cast away,” de-
clared the preamble to the fundamental
law of 1979.

Even during Khomeini’s reign, how-
ever, the requirements and pressures
of governance compromised the purity
of Shiite revolutionary ideology. By 1989,
constitutional amendments, as well as
Khomeini’s conciliatory statements to
various factions within his government,
had undermined his governing prin-
ciple—the Rule of the Supreme Jurist.
The political sociologist Said Arjomand
argues that the practical (and ironic)
consequence of the political divisions
within Iran’s ruling clerical elite was
the strengthening of the bureaucratic
state at the expense of the actual author-
ity of the Shiite leader. “The state,
which Khomeini intended to see
wither,” he writes, “has not only grown
enormously in size but has expanded in
the legal sphere too and has emerged as
the unintended victor of the Islamic
revolution, making its clerical masters
also slaves to its logic.”

After Khomeini’s death, the pressure
mounted to sacrifice Islamist priorities
to the demands of a struggling econ-
omy, the survival of which de-
depended on Iranian participation in glo-
bal markets and the curtailment of iso-
lationist policies. The dilemma was
captured by a banner draped above the
entrance to a prominent hotel in Tehran,
Iran’s capital, and a sign at the front
desk. The banner carried the obligatory
revolutionary slogan, “Death to the
Great Satan,” but a sign at the check-in
desk notified customers in English,
“We accept American dollars.”
On May 23, 1997, the Iranian people surprised the world by electing as president the moderate Shiite religious scholar Mohammed Khatami, a vote widely interpreted as a mandate to ease the social restrictions in place since the revolution. In the election, Khatami received significant support from Iranian youth, women and the middle class, all of whom welcomed his campaign promises of a new direction in Iran’s foreign relations and his support for an independent press and formal political parties, which have not been allowed by authorities since the revolution.

In August the drama continued with a nationally televised debate on President Khatami’s nominations for a 22-member cabinet. Hard-line members of the Majlis voiced their strongest opposition to the nomination of Ayatollah Mohajerani to head the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance. In 1990 Mohajerani had advocated direct talks with the U.S., and he favors greater freedom for the media and less censorship of books and films. President Khatami also nominated several politicians who have lived in the West, and he promised to appoint as a vice president a woman educated in the U.S.

In light of the fact that many U.S. foreign policymakers consider Iran to be enemy No. 1—they point, for example, to Iran’s support of terrorism and to intelligence reports that China and Russia have given Iran vital matériel and expertise to develop long-range missiles—the election of Khatami seems to be a significant development. In the months since his swearing-in ceremony, President Khatami has developed his own version of the double-edged political discourse employed by Islamist political leaders in Lebanon, Palestine, Egypt, Sudan, Algeria and elsewhere in the Muslim world. For the hard-liners, that is, he emphasizes the necessity of Iran forging its own path in cultural affairs, economic development and international relations. For his more progressive constituency, Khatami quotes Khomeini to different effect. The late ayatollah often invoked the Iranian constitution, the new president reminds his audiences, in a way that underscored the individual freedoms enshrined there.

If President Khatami succeeds in interpreting the legacy of Khomeini according to a moderate rather than an extremist fundamentalist world view, the politics of the Middle East, and the world, will likely be transformed.

**Fundamentalists in the ‘Holy Land’**

In the Holy Land, fundamentalism is an equal-opportunity employer: Jewish, Christian and Muslim fundamentalists battle for control. All are enemies of the peace process initiated in 1993 by Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) chairman Yasir Arafat and then Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin. After a council of Zionist rabbis pronounced Rabin a traitor for signing the peace accords, he was slain by a young zealot, Yigal Amir, who had internalized the “sacred rage” of the Jewish fundamentalists.

The Jewish settler movement has been an abiding adversary of Israelis who seek peaceful coexistence with their Arab neighbors. Its organizational nucleus, Gush Emunim (the Bloc of the Faithful), emerged in the late 1960s under the guidance of Rabbi Zvi Yehuda Kook. Kook and the other rabbis who provided spiritual guidance to the movement selected one of the 613 Torah mitzvot—the command to conquer and settle “the whole land of Israel”—and elevated it into “fundamental” status, placing it above the remaining 612 religious duties. They justified this obvious manipulation with the slogan, “the commandment to settle the land is tantamount to all other commandments.” This is classic fundamentalism: the selection and reinterpretation of a politically charged religious doctrine or injunction, around which an entire movement is built.

Today, the extremist Jewish settlers seek to obstruct the peace process by provocative means such as their controversial move into an Arab neighborhood of East Jerusalem in September 1997, just when tension between the Israeli government and the Palestinian Authority had reached a critical point following a spate of suicide bombings conducted by members of the Palestinian Islamist movement, Hamas.

Hamas and Gush Emunim are twin sons of different mothers. Bitter enemies, they share the common goal of subverting the peace process. Both fundamentalist movements exploit and are exploited by Palestinian and Israeli secular conservatives, respectively, who find the fundamentalists alternately useful and inconvenient (because uncontrollable). Finally, each fundamentalist movement expects to win in the long run, not only over the other but also over its secular rival for political power—for Hamas, the PLO; for Gush Emunim, the secular government of Israel.
Christian fundamentalism is relatively rare in the Holy Land with the exception of the International Christian Embassy (ICE) in Jerusalem. Jan Willem van der Hoeven, president of ICE, like other Christian fundamentalists, is convinced that Israel will be the site of Armageddon, the final battle prophesied in the Book of Revelation, and that Jews must regain every inch of the Holy Land in order for the events of the Last Days to unfold. Thus the ICE provides funding and other forms of support for Israeli politicians who endorse—or at least do not oppose—the efforts of Jewish activists who seek to reclaim the whole land of Israel.

**Manipulation of Hinduism**

The Indian subcontinent is currently the home of the most intensely competitive religious nationalisms, with Hindus, Sikhs and Muslims vying for cultural space and title to land. The Hindu nationalists would restrict the full rights of citizenship in India to those accepting the precepts of Hindutva—"Hinduness"—an identity fabricated out of bits of Hindu mythology, a nationalist ideology honed in battles against the Congress (I) party, and concepts and principles borrowed from Western religions and from political parties of the far right.

The banner of Hindu nationalism is carried by three organizations dedicated to forging an artificial but powerful bond between a reconstructed and exclusivist Hinduism and the sacred nation: the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS, or National Volunteer Corps), a highly organized "brotherhood" established through a network of local paramilitary cadres; the Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP, or World Hindu Council), a cultural organization which stages huge religious processions designed to arouse popular fervor and to intimidate Muslims and other "outsiders"; and the Bharatiya Janata party (BJP, or Indian People’s party), which contests nationwide elections. In the 1996 national elections, the BJP won the largest bloc of seats (161) in parliament, thereby helping to topple the Congress (I) party from power for only the second time in the 49 years of Indian statehood. In May 1996 the BJP attempted unsuccessfully to form a minority government to rule the nation's 950 million people.

These Hindu movements combine fundamentalist-style religious reaction to secularism (represented by India under Congress party governments) and pluralism (represented not only by the many religions of the subcontinent but especially by affirmative-action measures for Muslims and lower-caste Hindus) with an ideology that employs the rhetoric and imagery of blood, soil and birth.

Like Hinduism itself, Hindu nationalism is a construct. It has borrowed from the traditions of Abraham the concept of ultimate destiny: "Hindustan"—the Hindu nation—is the realization of the mythical Kingdom of the Lord Ram (Ram Rashtriya). It represents Ram as both Man and God, and applies the imported religious notion of "the elect" to the Aryan race—and especially to the celibate and highly disciplined core of the RSS and VHP, many of whom are Brahmans, Indians of the highest caste.

Religious nationalisms seek platforms for disseminating their ideology and they create "events" that publicize their cause. Characteristically they redefine sacred land and sacred space in a controversial way, as a means of grabbing attention and mobilizing followers. The most notable recent episode of this sort was the destruction of the oldest Muslim shrine in India by a Hindu mob.

The VHP claimed that the site of the mosque, the Babri Masjid, in Ayodhya is also the birthplace of Ram and the site of a temple in his honor that had been destroyed in 1528. In 1985 the VHP announced its intention to have Hindus conduct regular worship in the Babri Masjid mosque. Subsequently the VHP demanded that the mosque be replaced with a temple.

To rally public support, L.K. Advani, then president of the BJP, embarked on his famous _rath yatra_ (pilgrimage on a chariot). He left Somnath in the state of Gujarat for Ayodhya, a distance of more than 5,000 miles, on September 25, 1990. Prior to his scheduled arrival in Ayodhya on October 30 (the date for the construction of the proposed temple), Advani was arrested. But thousands of Hindu activists approached the grounds of the disputed shrine on two separate occasions, provoking the security forces to fire at the crowd, leaving 50 dead and thousands injured.

Advani’s widely publicized pilgrimage paid rich dividends in the 1991 general elections, when the BJP received an unprecedented 23% of the national vote and won 117 new seats in parliament. Emboldened by their political success and convinced that Hindu organizations now had a public mandate to dismantle the Babri Masjid, BJP leaders prepared for a final showdown. On December 6, 1992, over 200,000 Hindus descended on the tiny city of Ayodhya and in less than five hours razed the mosque. Thousands of Indian citizens, the majority of whom were Muslims, died in

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*Great Decisions 1998*
the subsequent rioting and the Hindu-Muslim communal violence throughout the country.

Indian national politics has not recovered from this episode. The BJP continues in its role as the leading opposition party; and the hatreds manufactured by religious nationalism continue to haunt the subcontinent 50 years after India and Pakistan achieved independence.

**Focus on the Balkans**

Religious faith and a number of religions played a role in the rise and growth of the competing nationalisms in the former Yugoslavia, in their embrace of violence and in the genocidal war that raged in Bosnia from 1992 to 1995. During the war, Serbian Orthodox and Croatian Catholic soldiers tortured, raped and murdered Bosnian Muslims, mocking their victims as “Turks” and “traitors” to their Slavic Christian heritage. Both sides invoked religious justifications, including fear of “rising Islamic fundamentalism” in Bosnia, for their policies of “ethnic cleansing.” Official propaganda of the warring parties made ubiquitous appeals to religion; Catholic, Orthodox and Muslim leaders inflamed homicidal passions in their followers; and religious feasts, pilgrimages and rallies became occasions to inflame ultranationalist passions.

Contending groups used religion to serve their ethnic and nationalist goals. (Fundamentalists, by contrast, attempt to manipulate secular politics to religious ends. The ingredients for fundamentalism were lacking until foreign Islamists came to Bosnia’s aid during the war.) Most Bosnian Muslims were secularized, and few Serb and Croat nationalist leaders were devout or practicing Catholics or Orthodox, respectively.

Religious leaders entered the conflict in order to protect their religious and cultural traditions from rival ethnic groups. Each ethnic group wielded an age-old religion in its defense; indeed, religion was a more distinctive and vivid marker of difference than ethnicity, given the common language and racial heritage of “the Southern Slavs.” In sanctifying ethnic particulars and thereby justifying all manner of atrocities in their defense, secular nationalists found religious myths, symbols and communal identities extraordinarily useful. Thus universal and inclusive world religions—Roman Catholicism, Islam and Christian Orthodoxy—were reduced to “ethnic religions.”

Yet the situation in the former Yugoslavia also demonstrates the potential of religion to play a positive role in resolving conflicts, in that case through education and interreligious dialogue and cooperation. In response to the need for popular religious education in the discipline of tolerance and peacemaking, Muslim, Jewish, Roman Catholic and Serb Orthodox religious leaders created a permanent Inter-Religious Council in Bosnia and Herzegovina in 1997. The major purpose of the council is to promote religious cooperation in Bosnia and Herzegovina by identifying and expressing the common concerns of the religious communities in a politically independent way. A Statement of Shared Moral Commitment, previously signed by the leaders, serves as the initial framework for that effort. The signatories hope that the council will eventually develop a working relationship with related religious bodies in neighboring and other countries; produce an interreligious magazine and a manual about the religious communities in Bosnia and Herzegovina; establish an interreligious library and organize interreligious seminars and conferences; propose procedures to encourage freedom of movement within the country, to facilitate the return of refugees, and to process and verify complaints concerning human-rights violations, with particular attention to religious freedom and equality; set forth guidelines to enable religious ministers to live in and serve their local congregations; work for the restitution of the property of the religious communities; and propose
plans for improving the reporting of religious news in the general media and in religious publications.

The council was formed with encouragement and support from representatives of the World Conference on Religion and Peace, Mercy Corps International and the U.S. Institute of Peace. It offers perhaps the first real hope for the effective religious peacebuilding that will be necessary if the divided ethnic-religious communities are to live once again in harmony.

Religion as peacemaker

Overlooked in the commentaries on religion’s often troubling role in international affairs have been the contributions of religious activists for peace. These activists, emerging from the world’s major religious traditions, are “extremists” of a different sort. In religion’s name, and inspired by religious practices and beliefs, they sacrifice their time, energies, fortunes—and sometimes their lives—in the cause of nonviolent peacemaking. The contributions of a few prominent religious figures are well known, among them Pope John Paul II’s role in rallying Polish Catholics and other Eastern Europeans to mount a mostly nonviolent revolution against the Soviet Union; the Dalai Lama’s passionate crusade to end Chinese repression of Buddhism in Tibet; Anglican Archbishop Desmond Tutu’s leadership of South Africa’s Truth and Reconciliation Commission, which employs religious concepts to help heal the terrible wounds inflicted on people during the apartheid era; and the late Mother Teresa’s tireless efforts on behalf of the poorest of the poor in Calcutta and elsewhere in the world.

Unheralded, however, are the less glamorous but significant “militants for peace” who are developing new and peaceful means of negotiating pluralism and resolving conflict. These include Muslim jurists, theologians and activists, such as Malaysia’s Chandra Muzaffar, who oppose fundamentalism and defend the integrity and priority of Islamic law while demonstrating its adaptability to the needs of contemporary Muslim societies; international Christian relief and development agencies, such as the World Council of Churches or Catholic Relief Services, which have recently embarked on education and training programs in community peacebuilding; Jewish, Buddhist, Hindu, Islamic and Christian scholars and religious leaders who have plumbed and “translated” their respective traditions of wisdom and cultural values in an effort to establish cross-cultural norms of religious human rights; transnational lay religious communities, such as the Community of Sant’Egidio, that have engaged in successful conflict resolution through the provision of good offices, mediation, education and social services in nations gripped by civil or regional wars; and local religious leaders, such as those in Bosnia, who are working for genuine reconciliation among aggrieved parties.

Related to these efforts and operating on a global level are a host of religious and secular NGOs, some hailing from the early years of the UN and working under its auspices, others acting independently. Organizations and agencies such as the World Conference on Religion and Peace, Pax Christi and the Just World Trust (headquartered in Malaysia) foster ecumenical cooperation in communities riven by ethnic and religious violence, conduct workshops and courses in religious resources for conflict solving, and facilitate communication and dialogue between communities historically divided over competing ethnic and/or religious claims.

Religion, human rights and U.S. foreign policy

Legal scholars, religious leaders, policymakers, diplomats and other professionals concerned with international law and human rights have come to recognize that religious freedom is one of the basic human rights. In recent years scholars and religious leaders from around the world have convened to explore and discuss common understandings of human rights and to identify theological, moral and legal resources within the world’s religious traditions for developing an international cross-cultural discourse on the topic. Emory University’s Law and Religion Program recently produced two thick volumes of essays on the topic as part of a larger international project on religion, democracy and human rights.

Freedom of religion and the persecution of religions are closely related issues in many parts of the world. In 1995 Michael Horowitz, a senior fellow at the Hudson Institute, a think tank, published a prominent article in The Wall Street Journal calling attention to the religious persecution of Christians in China and in several Muslim countries, including Ethiopia, Sudan, Pakistan, Egypt and Iran. Mr. Horowitz, a Jew, succeeded in generating a coalition that included conservative evangelical Christians, Roman Catholics and secular conservative politicians and activists in the U.S. In 1997 the U.S. Congress debated legislation sponsored by Representative Frank R.Wolf (R-Va.) and Senator Arlen Specter (R-Penn.) that was designed to monitor and penalize governments that persecute, or allow the persecution of, religious minorities. The Wolf-Specter proposed Freedom from Religious Persecution Act of 1997 would establish an office of religious-persecution monitoring in the White House to determine which governments practice religious persecution and then submit a report to the Congress. If Congress agreed, guilty governments would be subject to sanctions and barred from receiving certain kinds of U.S. exports, nonhumanitarian foreign aid and loans.

Opponents of the Wolf-Specter legislation include business lobbies that reject any type of sanctions against China, some church groups worried about a backlash against their missionaries and relief workers in hostile lands, and liberal Christians and Muslims who believe that the bill is discriminatory because it makes no reference to the persecution of Jews and speaks only of...
harassment of “moderate Muslims.” Some adversaries of the Christian right in the U.S. charge, more darkly, that the bill is actually an attempt to make the world safe for aggressive and unwelcome evangelical recruiting. If the bill became law, it would give such groups the U.S. “seal of approval.”

The debate over Wolf-Specter points up a number of issues and questions about the role of religions and religious actors in international affairs. What is the best combination of policies for undermining disruptive religious movements? Should governments support directly or indirectly local religious movements, organizations and actors who oppose acts of violent intolerance by the fundamentalists? Should the State Department place greater and more consistent emphasis on the importance of religious freedom as a basic human right in formulating foreign policy? (See Topic 3.) Such a shift might have major implications for U.S. relations with Saudi Arabia, Turkey, Algeria, Russia, China and several other nations.

Finally, how should the U.S. interpret and react to developments within the Islamic Republic of Iran? The Clinton Administration insists that Iran end its support for subversive Islamist movements and anti-Western terrorists. Should the U.S. continue to attempt to isolate the Iranian government or should it attempt to engage it? Has the election of Khatami presented an opening that the U.S. might do well to exploit?

**U.S. policy options**

1. **The U.S. should use its influence, in the form of rewards or sanctions, to encourage Muslim countries to liberalize the political process and include Islamists and Islamist political parties as full participants.**

   **Pro:** Power-sharing is the wisest way to domesticate political Islam and curtail the appeal of terrorist cells. The U.S. should be prepared to risk the temporary alienation of Saudi, Egyptian or Turkish allies to demonstrate that its support of democracy and religious freedom is more than rhetorical.

   **Con:** Islamic fundamentalists are theocratic in ambition and will not be satisfied with the compromises that come with power-sharing. If Islamist political parties were to win power through local and national elections, they would suspend the democratic process.

2. **The U.S. should abandon its present policy of isolating Iran in favor of a policy of engagement.**

   **Pro:** The policy of isolating Iran has been a failure. Washington’s allies no longer support it and consequently it is the U.S., not Iran, that is isolated. The election of a moderate Islamist as president offers the U.S. an opportunity to open a dialogue.

   **Con:** The election of a “moderate” in a state ruled by the clergy changes little. Until Iran renounces its support of terrorism and desists from its present military buildup, the U.S. has no alternative but to continue to try to isolate it.

3. **The U.S. should apply sanctions, as provided in the Wolf-Specter proposed legislation, against governments that persecute religious minorities.**

   **Pro:** If the U.S. is serious about supporting open societies and defending religious freedom, it cannot ignore systematic government violations of the right to worship and practice religion. If the carrots—economic and trade incentives to governments that strengthen legal protection for religious minorities—fail to work, the U.S. should apply the stick.

   **Con:** The Wolf-Specter provisions are discriminatory: they penalize governments that persecute Christians but not Jews and Muslims. By imposing sanctions to protect religious minorities, the U.S. risks undermining other policy objectives. U.S. influence with offending governments would wane, leaving religious minorities without a powerful advocate. The U.S. should not impose sanctions on other countries whose cultural norms differ from its own.

4. **The U.S. should provide financial, logistical and intelligence support to NGOs engaged in mediating conflicts or peacebuilding.**

   **Pro:** As in the case of the Mozambique peace accord, nongovernmental groups can sometimes succeed where governments fail. Transnational, ecumenical and interreligious groups with a proven track record merit U.S. support.

   **Con:** The U.S. should use its resources to advance initiatives over which it has control. If Washington supports nongovernmental initiatives, it risks discrediting the NGOs as U.S. “lackeys.” If the initiative fails, the U.S. will be blamed.
DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Is “extremism” an attribute of religion? Religious zeal has produced suicide bombers, on the one hand, and Mother Teresas, on the other. How do you explain this?

2. Do religious fundamentalists, whether Muslims, Christians, Jews or Hindus, use secular politics to advance religious goals? Or do they manipulate religion to attain political power? Do they differ from religious nationalists, for example those in the former Yugoslavia?

3. Do you agree that Gush Emunim and Hamas are “twin sons of different mothers”? Should any and every religious group or organization enjoy the right to recruit converts here and abroad? What limits, if any, should be placed on religious freedom?

4. U.S. foreign policymakers frequently have to choose between realpolitik and “moralpolitik.” In your opinion, does Administration policy err too much in one direction? If so, what changes would you recommend?

5. Do you think the U.S. government should give financial, logistical or intelligence support to nongovernmental organizations such as Sant’Egidio? Why, or why not?

6. Should the Wolf-Specter bill or similar legislation be directed primarily at protecting Christians abroad or should it be expanded to cover all groups subject to religious persecution? Are sanctions the best way to redress religious persecution? Why, or why not?

7. How can religion be a source of both hatred and healing?

READINGS AND RESOURCES


Mazrui, Ali A., “Islamic and Western Values.” Foreign Affairs, Sept./Oct. 1997, pp. 118–32. The scholar-writer contends that the distance between the West and Islam is not all that great; all would benefit from Islamic values.


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CENTER OF CONCERN, 3700 13th St., NE, Washington, DC 20017; (202) 635-2757; Fax (202) 832-9494. The center develops social analysis, theological reflection, policy advocacy, research and public education on global development and social and economic issues. Publishes books and quarterly newsletter. Center Focus. www.coc.org/coc/

CUSHWA CENTER FOR THE STUDY OF AMERICAN CATHOLICISM, 614 Hesburgh Library at The University of Notre Dame, IN 46556; (219) 631-5441; Fax (219) 631-8471. The center seeks to promote and encourage the scholarly study of the American Catholic tradition through instruction, research, publications and the collection of historical material.

PAX CHRISTI USA, 532 West Eighth St., Erie, PA 16502; (814) 453-4955; Fax (814) 452-4784. The organization contributes to the building of peace and justice by exploiting and articulating the ideal of Christian nonviolence and by striving to apply it to personal life and to the structures of society. www.nonviolence.org/pcusa
Religion in the United States is diverse with Christianity being the majority religion. Various religious faiths have flourished within the United States. A majority of Americans report that religion plays a very important role in their lives, a proportion unique among developed countries. Freedom of religion in the United States is guaranteed in the First Amendment to the United States Constitution.