

Islam, Secularism, and Liberal Democracy

Toward a Democratic Theory for Muslim Societies

Nader Hashemi

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*Toward a Democratic Theory for
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NADER HASHEMI

OXFORD
UNIVERSITY PRESS
2009

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Oxford New York
Auckland Cape Town Dar es Salaam Hong Kong Karachi
Kuala Lumpur Madrid Melbourne Mexico City Nairobi
New Delhi Shanghai Taipei Toronto

With offices in
Argentina Austria Brazil Chile Czech Republic France Greece
Guatemala Hungary Italy Japan Poland Portugal Singapore
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Published by Oxford University Press, Inc.
198 Madison Avenue, New York, New York 10016

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
Hashemi, Nader, 1966–
Islam, secularism, and liberal democracy / Nader Hashemi.
p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 978-0-19-532124-1

1. Islam and secularism. 2. Democracy—Religious aspects—Islam. 3. Secularism—
Islamic countries. 4. Democracy—Islamic countries. 5. Islam and politics—Islamic
countries. 6. Islamic countries—Politics and government—20th century. I. Title.

BP190.5.S35H38 2009

297.2'72—dc22 2008026682

To My Parents; for All Their Sacrifices

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We should not . . . conclude from this that politics and religion have a common object among us, but that in the beginning stages of nations the one serves as an instrument of the other.

—Jean-Jacques Rousseau

Men make their own history, but they do not make it just as they please; they do not make it under circumstances chosen by themselves, but under circumstances directly found, given and transmitted from the past.

—Karl Marx

And, topping democracy, this most alluring record, that it alone can bind, and ever seeks to bind, all nations, all men, of however various and distant lands, into a brotherhood, a family. It is the old, yet ever-modern dream of earth, out of her eldest and her youngest, her fond philosophers and poets. . . . For I say at the core of democracy, finally, is the religious element. All the religions, old and new, are there.

—Walt Whitman

Christianity has functioned for the normative self-understanding of modernity as more than a mere precursor or a catalyst. Egalitarian universalism, from which sprang the ideas of freedom and social solidarity, of an autonomous conduct of life and emancipation, of the individual morality of conscience, human rights, and democracy, is the direct heir to the Judaic ethic of justice and the Christian ethic of love. This legacy, substantially unchanged, has been the object of continual critical appropriation and reinterpretation. To this day, there is no alternative to it. And in light of the current challenges of a postnational constellation, we continue to draw on the substance of this heritage. Everything else is just idle postmodern talk.

—Jürgen Habermas

Throughout the nineteenth century, theorists of democracy found it quite natural to discuss whether one country or another was “fit for democracy.” This thinking changed only in the twentieth century, with the recognition that the question itself was wrong: A country does not have to be deemed fit *for* democracy; rather, it has to become fit *through* democracy.

—Amartya Sen

Secularists are wrong when they ask believers to leave their religion at the door before entering into the public square. Frederick Douglass, Abraham Lincoln, William Jennings Bryan, Dorothy Day, Martin Luther King—indeed, the majority of great reformers in American history—were not only motivated by faith, but repeatedly used religious language to argue for their cause. So to say that men and women should not inject their “personal morality” into public policy debates is a practical absurdity. Our law is by definition a codification of morality, much of it grounded in the Judeo-Christian tradition.

—Barack Hussein Obama

Preface

This book was written during difficult times. While the basic parameters and arguments were first conceived in the aftermath of 11 September 2001, the critical questions that spawned my interest in this topic have been percolating in my mind for most of my adult life. They were given greater impetus in the lead up to and aftermath of the United States-led invasion and occupation of Iraq and Afghanistan. The new American foreign policy thrust to promote, at least rhetorically, liberal democracy in the Muslim world also gave this project a pressing new relevance.

Fundamentally, this is a study about the relationship between religion and democracy. The principal goal is to promote a rethinking of this relationship by challenging long-standing premises, paradigms, and conceptual models against the backdrop of what Fernand Braudel called the *longue durée* (the study of history as a long duration). The focus, therefore, is not on the immediate social conditions that can generate reconciliation between the claims of religion and the demands of liberal democracy but on the connection and the coherence of a set of ideas—specifically, how we can study the connection between religion and democracy with fresh eyes, with a sense of history and free from the unexamined assumptions that have often clouded an understanding of this subject.

In pursuit of the same objective, Fred Dallmayr has observed that one of the main goals of comparative political theory is to “rekindle the critical élan endemic to political philosophy since the

time of Socrates and Plato but likely to be extinguished by canonization.” Challenging the received wisdom on any subject, Dallmayr suggests, can “help restore the sense of ‘wondering’ (*thaumazein*) that the ancients extolled as pivotal to philosophizing.”¹ One of my key objectives, therefore, in writing this book is to challenge the received wisdom on the relationship between religion and democracy—especially in the context of Muslim societies—that dominates the scholarly and public debate on this topic in the West. A new paradigm is urgently needed today that is firmly rooted in the comparative study of history, religion, and political theory.

While writing this book, I had several audiences in mind. First, this study has been significantly shaped by many conversations and (often heated) debates with close friends and colleagues who consider themselves part of the “political left.” From the moment I began to think seriously about the relationship between religion and politics, it struck me that much (but not all) of this commentary and analysis—while rightfully critical of religion and laudatory of secularism—was ahistorical, unnuanced, and elitist. This contrasted quite sharply with my own study of history. It also clashed with my personal observations on the sociological aspects of religion based on time spent living and teaching in the Middle East and several field trips to Egypt, Turkey, Iran, Lebanon, Israel/Palestine, and Indonesia, where I interviewed human rights activists, students, feminists, religious leaders, reformist thinkers, political dissidents, and—most important—ordinary people.

The political analysis of my left-of-center friends was particularly unhelpful in understanding the complicated politics of Muslim societies where today religion is a key marker of identity, secularism has few supporters, and social movements whose participants self-identify with Islam are gaining in popularity and are important players in emerging social and political debates. As events over the past decade in Turkey have demonstrated, the binary division between secularists-equals-good guys and Islamists-equals-bad guys is simplistic and distorting. While it may be intellectually soothing and familiar to us to think in these terms, it fundamentally fails to contribute to a deeper understanding of the complex role religion plays in emerging democracies within the Muslim world. Such labels and categories also fail to provide any illumination on the important moral and political questions facing Muslims at the dawn of the twenty-first century. A more nuanced, historically rooted, and comparative perspective is needed to arrive at a more balanced comprehension of the multifaceted, complex, and interweaving relationship between religion and politics both within the Muslim world and beyond.

Part of this analytical failure is due to an intellectual framework that has been demarcated on the one side by Karl Marx and his ideological successors in

terms of social theory and on the other side by the French Revolution as a paradigmatic political event that shapes an understanding of the role of religion in society. As an alternative, as I argue in this book, if one wanted to look to Western political theory and history to shed light on the contemporary politics of Muslim societies, the seventeenth century is a better place to turn, where the political ideas of Thomas Hobbes, Baruch Spinoza, and John Locke are particularly relevant. As a seminal event, the English Revolution (1640–1660) not the French Revolution provides a more useful reference point for comparative historical analysis than my friends and colleagues on the political left have generally appreciated.

Second, this book is a partial response to a group of writers who believe in the “Islamic exceptionalism” thesis. Often identified as Orientalist scholars they subscribe to an essentialized conception of Muslim politics and history and have long argued that Muslims societies are uniquely resistant to secularism and liberal democracy due to an inner antimodern, religiocultural dynamic that has few parallels with other religious traditions or civilizations. Their writings attracted a larger audience in the early 1980s after Ayatollah Khomeini and his Islamist followers seized the Iranian state. Not only did this event represent a dramatic sea change in modern Middle East politics but it also signified a renewed interest among social scientists more broadly in the general theme of the resurgence of religion in politics. Existing social science theory was at a loss to explain the Iranian revolution and the concomitant rise of political Islam across the Muslim world. The confident predictions of modernization theorists and the assumptions of liberal philosophers and dependency theorists with respect to secularization failed to predict the vitality and popularity of the religious opposition in Iran.²

The most plausible explanation came from the pens of Orientalist scholars. Their emphasis on Islam’s inner problem with modernity, and on secularism in particular, seemed like a perfectly rational explanation for the rise of Islamist politics, in part because it confirmed long-standing Western prejudices and stereotypes about Muslim societies. According to Bernard Lewis, the 1979 Iranian revolution could be explained by “Islamic history [which] provides its own models of revolution; its own prescriptions on the theory and practice of dissent, disobedience, resistance, and revolt.” He added in the same essay that it is “now a truism that in Islam there is no distinction between church and state,” unlike “Christendom [where] the existence of two authorities goes back to the founder of Christianity, who enjoined his followers to render to Caesar that which is Caesar’s and to God that which is God’s.”³

Ernest Gellner advanced a similar but more sophisticated thesis about Islam and modernity. He drew a distinction between the “high culture” of the

urban clergy, which was characterized as scriptural and puritanical and which Gellner claimed was normative for the urban life of the entire Islamic world, versus the “low culture” of the tribe and village life where folk Islam was practiced. Under modern conditions, Gellner argued, the puritanical Islam of the urban clergy is appropriated at the mass level due to political centralization, urbanization and the development of mass communications and education. The rise and appeal of Islamic fundamentalism is thus an attempt to realize the norm of the “high culture” among the new urbanized masses.⁴ This explanation of Muslim politics, argued Gellner, is compatible with the requirements of political modernity where contrary to the previously dominant assumptions of social theory modernity required secularization. Thus, Islam’s relationship to modernity is unique in that modernity strengthens religion’s hold over society, and this explains why secularism has not flourished in Muslim societies. In his last lecture before his untimely death in 1995, Gellner reaffirmed this perspective.⁵

While this book is not a comprehensive response to this body of scholarship, it does seek to provide an alternative to this widely influential perspective. I suspect that this narrative will gain new adherents in the coming years as the situation in Iraq and Afghanistan continues to implode and a search will begin for easy answers as to why Iraqis/Afghans could not seize the gift of freedom we so generously bestowed on them.

The final audience I have in mind are Muslim democrats. These are difficult days for democracy and human rights activists in the Muslim world. I think many of them would agree that the policies pursued by the great powers since 11 September 2001 have made their struggle more difficult. It is hoped, however, that notwithstanding the difficult environment in which they must operate and the many challenges that lie ahead, these individuals may derive some benefit from the arguments in this book, especially in making sense of the problem of Islamic fundamentalism, the question of secularism and its discontents in Muslim societies, and its relationship to democratic governance.

The topic of secularism has long been a fascination of mine for both political and personal reasons. Politically, it slowly became apparent that with rare exceptions, secularism was extolled in the West in an almost inverse proportion to how much it was disdained in Muslim societies. Trying to explicate this phenomenon has been a long-standing obsession of mine, and this book is a by-product of this fixation. Furthermore, as Abdelwahab El-Affendi has noted, “the tension between democracy and secularism . . . remains the dominant feature of Muslim politics to this day.”⁶ Reconciling this tension is vital to advancing a democratic theory for Muslim societies. I seek to contribute to this endeavor via a critical reading of key moments in the history

of Western political thought, with an eye to the lessons to be learned for the political development of Muslim societies. This analytical approach underpins and informs this study.

Finally, the work of C. Wright Mills is germane to this book. Critical of the prevailing modes of social inquiry that dominated early post-World War II American social science, Mills called for the revival of the “classic” tradition of social analysis. This form of analysis “stands opposed to social science as a set of bureaucratic techniques which inhibit social inquiry by ‘methodological pretensions,’ which congest such work by obscurantist conceptions, or which trivialize it by concern with minor problems unconnected with publicly relevant issues.”⁷

Mills viewed social science as a critical and historically rooted endeavor. He encouraged scholars to “use historical evidence and comparative reasoning to explore power relations and processes of social change. Scholars should debate hypotheses, theories and techniques, not for their own sake, but in close relation to important substantive inquiries.” The main audience for such a sociological inquiry should be “students and the thinking public, not managers seeking merely to make the status quo more efficient.” He was critical of research that was guided more by the requirements of administrative than intellectual concerns. Thus, his advice to future scholars was to pursue research and take up questions that were both morally compelling and relevant to the human condition, both past and present.⁸

This book seeks to live up to the intellectual standards Mills set out. For these reasons I have chosen to write about the theoretical and practical relationship between religion, secularism, and liberal democracy. Doing so, of course, has its pitfalls, especially during this polarizing moment in global politics where terms such as “Islam,” “Muslims,” “secularism,” “religion,” and “liberal democracy” are emotionally charged topics deeply embedded in a set of identities that are championed by individuals and groups on both sides of the Islam-West divide who sometimes are more interested in affirming an ideological position than in advancing human understanding. Nonetheless, it would be a betrayal of my own intellectual vocation to shy away from what Alexis de Tocqueville called the “great problem of our time” (i.e. the relationship between religion and democracy) and not engage it with as much intellectual rigor and stamina as I could muster. In the end, to borrow from Robert Frost, I took the road “less traveled by.” I hope it makes a modest difference.

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Acknowledgments

Writing acknowledgments for a book is always a risky endeavor. After it is too late one is bound to remember the name of a friend or colleague who deserves recognition but whose name does not appear on these pages. Let me begin, therefore, by apologizing in advance to those people whose names I should have listed but due to my own absentmindedness I have embarrassingly omitted. This book is a revised version of my doctoral dissertation, which I researched, wrote, and successfully defended while a graduate student in the Department of Political Science at the University of Toronto. As a result, I am indebted to Frank Cunningham for his unflinching intellectual support and for his excellent supervision of my work. He helped me narrow a very broad dissertation topic into a concrete one and helped crystalize my thinking on various aspects of democratic theory that pertained to the relationship between religion and liberal democracy. His graduate course on democratic theory, I fondly remember, was one of the most intellectually stimulating courses I took as a graduate student. It allowed me to both deepen my grasp of democratic theory as well as explore new ideas that eventually formed the foundation of this book. I would also like to thank the other members of my committee for their support and constructive criticisms: James Reilly, Paul Kingston, and Ronald Beiner.

Much of the rewriting of my dissertation took place during my stay at Northwestern University, where I was an Andrew W. Mellon Postdoctoral Fellow in the Department of Political Science. I am

indebted to Marie Jones, Hendrick Spruyt, and Elizabeth Hurd for their support and interest in my work. I would also like to thank the students at Northwestern who took my "Introduction to Middle East Politics" course and my seminar on "Islam and Democracy in the Middle East." They were the most impressive group of students I have taught. Their feedback and comments on my course material, much of it drawn from my doctoral research, assisted me in revising and rewriting this manuscript.

While teaching at Northwestern, I had the opportunity to live at the Northshore Retirement Hotel in Evanston, Illinois, where I delivered a weekly lecture on religion and democracy and sometimes on the politics and history of the modern Middle East. I am grateful for the residential scholarship I was awarded that facilitated the revising of this manuscript. I would like to thank all the wonderful people who attended my Thursday evening lectures; their enthusiasm for my ideas and their interest in my work helped in the refinement and completion of this book project. I would like to single out for special recognition Margaret Gergen, Phyllis Adams, Eduardo Shua, Mary Sorin, Addie Katz, Sid Cohen, Leslie Rubin, Sherwin Gaines, Sylvia Letterman, Goldye Rosenberg, Rita Stevens, Geraldine Freedman, and Evelyn Orsor.

During my stay in Chicago, I benefited immensely from Danny Postel's friendship and intellectual support. He is a gifted writer, a dedicated human rights activist, and a committed cosmopolitan public intellectual. In a truly just world, he would be teaching philosophy at a prestigious institution of higher learning. I have learnt much from him and deeply appreciate his solidarity and camaraderie. I look forward to future collaboration with him on projects of mutual interest.

Very few people can claim authorship of a truly original idea. I want to single out for special recognition, therefore, the work of Alfred Stepan, in particular his magisterial thesis, "The World's Religious Systems and Democracy: Crafting the 'Twin Tolerations,'" which inspired this book. On reading it, many scattered thoughts I had been struggling with on the relationship between religion and democracy began to make sense, and this book's broad outline started to take shape. On a related note, it was a huge honor for me to meet Professor Stepan in person and an even greater honor to be invited to Columbia University to present some of my work at his seminar series on religion and democracy.

I am also indebted to the work of Stathis Kalyvas. His scholarship on religion and democracy is a must read for any serious student of this topic. I draw on his idea that some forms of unsecular politics and democratic development, contrary to the dominant view in the social sciences, are indeed

compatible. I thank him for his prompt replies to my emails and for sharing with me some of his unpublished essays.

In the field of political theory, as readers of this book will discover, I draw on the work of Charles Taylor and Fred Dallmayr. In recent years, both have produced important new scholarship on the relationship between religion and politics that I eagerly consumed and significantly shaped my thinking on the topic. In November 2004, Professor Taylor taught an intensive course on secularization at the University of Toronto, which I managed to audit, and which formed the foundation of his massive work *A Secular Age* (Harvard University Press, 2007). I am grateful to him for reading an early draft of chapter 4 and for his constructive feedback. Professor Dallmayr's writings on political philosophy have made a lasting impression on me. He has been the chief theoretician of the emerging field of comparative political theory. I hope he will accept this volume as a small contribution to this new subdiscipline of political science. I have been especially drawn to and inspired by his more recent work on non-Western societies, India and the Middle East in particular. I am indebted to him for his interest in my work and his ongoing intellectual support. I hope to emulate in my own career the high intellectual standards that inform his writings. More important, however, what has greatly impressed me is the spirit of crosscultural understanding cosmopolitanism and ecumenism that underpins his scholarship. He is a true citizen of the globe and an important moral voice that our planet desperately needs during these difficult and trying times.

In the area of Middle East history, politics and Islamic studies, I draw on the scholarship of Khaled Abou El Fadl, Nikki Keddie, and Vali Nasr. These scholars have written insightfully and influentially in their respective areas of specialization. I thank them for their interest in my work, their time, and the feedback they have given me. The standards of academic excellence they have demonstrated in their careers serve as an excellent model to many younger academics just entering the field.

A project of this magnitude accrues many intellectual debts over the years. I would like to thank Salim Mansur for nurturing my interest in this general area of study. As a young undergraduate student at the University of Western Ontario without any direction or focus he took me under his wing and provided me with the first real intellectual mentorship that I yearned for. I remember his insistence that the study of history was much more important than political science, as a way of making sense of the human condition. The heavy dose of history in this book is in large part due to his influence. While our political views have diverged over time, my debt to him is in no way diminished.

John Sigler at Carleton University was my teacher and mentor during my formative years in Ottawa. His deeply ethical and ecumenical approach to the study of global politics, in particular to the problems and challenges facing Arab and Islamic societies, left a huge mark on my intellectual development. I recall fondly the many occasions I lined up outside of his door during his office hours. After consulting with him I always left his office with my intellectual batteries recharged. He had the unique ability to both inspire his students in their ability to change the world and to push them to reach their full intellectual potential. He is a gifted scholar and teacher and his example is with me every time I step into the classroom. Dr. Sigler's influence can be felt throughout the pages of this book, especially in Chapter 1. I am a better political scientist and person for having studied with him.

I interviewed many other scholars during the course of my research. Some of them were generous enough to read and comment on various chapters in draft form; others simply shaped my thinking during the course of our conversations and correspondence on the relationship between religion and politics in a myriad different ways. I am indebted to all of them, but in particular I would like to thank Seyla Benhabib, William Shepard, Michael Sells, Richard Bond, Shabbir Akhtar, Farid Esack, Ebrahim Moosa, Abdullahi An-Na'im, Azyumardi Azra, Amien Rais, Robert Hefner, Dadi Darmadi, Ulil Abshar-Abdullah, Sukidi, Fajar Riza Ul Haq, Raja Juli Antoni, Recep Sentürk, Nur Yalman, Mujeeb Khan, Ahmet Kuru, John Esposito, Haroon Siddiqui, Jareer Khouri, Richard Bulliet, John Keane, Eric Hooglund, Richard Falk, Noam Chomsky, Norman Finkelstein, Eqbal Ahmad, Gulzar Haide, Ramin Jahanbegloo, Houchang Chehabi, Ahmad Sadri, Farhang Rajaee, Abdulaziz Sachedina, Duncan Ivison, James Tully, and John Dunn.

Two research trips to Indonesia and Turkey helped solidify my understanding of these countries. I would like to thank the United States-Indonesia Society and the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation for their financial support of my work.

My parents, Esmat Hashemi and Mehdi Hashemi, deserve special recognition and praise. I am grateful to them for many things (the list is too long to give here), but in this context I want to especially thank them for instilling in me a love of education. This book is dedicated to them, for all their sacrifices, for putting up with their rebellious son and for their ongoing and unconditional love.

I would also like to single out my siblings, their spouses, and my nephews and nieces for their encouragement and love. They all deserve to be recognized by name: Fereshteh, Shahid, Noor, Ameer, Naseem, Firoozeh, Mehdi, Negean, Ameen, Namjoo, Armita, and Iman.

Many of the ideas that appear in this book were tested and first debated in front of a close group of friends affiliated with the Ottawa-based Second Generation Muslim Discussion Group (affectionately known as the “2nd gen”). The intellectual stimulation, laughter, and companionship they have provided me with over the years have been invaluable, and our email listserver has acted as an important sounding board for many of my thoughts and frustrations with the state of the world—the Muslim world in particular. I want to thank this group of people for their friendship, religiosity, solidarity, and camaraderie. Several people deserve special recognition.

Emran Qureshi has been my best friend for most of the past decade. He has been an important resource person for me over the years, keeping me on my toes intellectually and abreast of unfolding debates that are/were germane to this book. A subtext to our friendship has been the tension between secularism and religion. We have argued about this topic on many different occasions and in countless diverse political contexts, both in person and via email, to the extent that this book bears his imprint.

I would also like to thank Andaleeb Qayyum and Soraya Moghadam for their friendship, laughter, and the many camping trips, debates, and arguments over the years that indirectly contributed to my intellectual development. Over the years their solidarity, camaraderie, and religiosity has meant a lot to me. Afra Jalabi deserves to have a Ph.D. already. I have learned much from her and especially benefited from her moral reading of the Qur’an and early Muslim history and her ruminations on the philosophy and merits of nonviolence. I hope this book will inspire her to begin work on the twenty books I’ve been encouraging her to write since we first met. Alim Elliot Khan has been a loyal friend for the past fifteen years. I deeply appreciate his support and solidarity over the years. Other members of the larger 2nd gen family I would like to acknowledge are Nelofer Pazira, Alim Khan, Rafi Khan, Akram Bhatti, Majid Moghadam, Saied Moghadam, Alireza Rahbar Shamskar, Rahat Kurd, Yasmine Abou El Kheir, Noreen Majeed, Adnan Qayyum, Humera Ibrahim, Faisal Bhabha, Kim Elliott, Ayman Hassan, and, last but not least, the godparents of the 2nd gen, Uncle Murray and Alia Hogben. May they live long and prosper.

Other friends who contributed to this book include John Trumbour, for his scholarly references on Puritanism and early modern English history, Andras Riedlmayer, for his prompt and thorough replies to my numerous research questions, and Hakan Yavuz, for his interest in my work and strong intellectual support; my sincere thanks to all of them. Last but not least, I am deeply indebted to Ausma Khan for her editorial support and for reading most of the revised version of this manuscript. Without her love, patience, and understanding this book could not have been written.

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Islam, Secularism, and Liberal Democracy

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Introduction

This book analyzes the theoretical relationship between religion and democracy, specifically Islam's relationship with liberal democracy. The intent is to discuss the relationship between Islam, Muslim-majority societies, and liberal democracy in a way that will advance theory and practice regarding their relations. Though this relationship is the immediate focus of this study, the conclusions of this book have a much broader applicability in illuminating the theoretical relationship between religion, secularism, and democracy in general, and in contributing to the development of a liberal-democratic theory for Muslim societies in particular.

The central problematic this inquiry seeks to resolve is the following. Liberal democracy requires a form of secularism to sustain itself, yet simultaneously the main political, cultural, and intellectual resources at the disposal of Muslim democrats today are theological. A paradox thus confronts the democratic theorist. This study seeks to unravel this paradox. In the course of doing so, this book challenges the widely held assumption in the social sciences that religious politics and liberal-democratic development are incompatible.¹ Three key arguments are advanced:

(1) Liberal democracy requires secularism (properly understood). While this equation is not in dispute, two caveats are in order. First, religious traditions are not born with an inherent democratic and

secular conception of politics. These ideas must be socially constructed. In the context of an emerging liberal democracy, *how* secularism becomes indigenized as part of the political culture is an important—and often neglected—part of this debate. I argue that a secular consensus often emerges as a result of an engagement with and a transformation of religious ideas toward politics. Normatively, secularism should not be imposed by the state on society but should emerge bottom-up, from within civil society, based on democratic negotiation and bargaining over the proper role of religion in politics. In other words, in developing societies where religion is a key marker of identity, in order for religious groups to reconcile themselves with secularism, a religious-based theory of secularism is required.

Equally significant are the different models of secularism that liberal democracy might accommodate. The literature on democratic theory is particularly weak in clarifying the precise relationship and parameters of coexistence between religion and liberal democracy. How we define secularism is an important part of this conversation. I argue that there is greater room for flexibility on this topic than is generally acknowledged, and consequently, a rethinking of the relationship between secularism and liberal democracy is needed. This is especially important in the context of advancing a liberal-democratic theory for Muslim societies, given that religion is a key marker of identity for a significant percentage of the population and secularism has a troubled legacy.²

(2) In societies where religion is a marker of identity, the road to liberal democracy, whatever other twists and turns it makes, cannot avoid passing through the gates of religious politics. While mainstream social science theory has long maintained that religious politics and democratization/liberalization are antithetical, a critical reading of the historical record suggests otherwise. Historically, the development of liberal democracy in the West (especially in the Anglo-American tradition) emerged not in strict opposition to religious politics but often in concert with it. In many long-standing liberal democracies, debates over the place of religion in the polis were some of the most hotly contested and divisive issues. Democratic negotiation and bargaining over the normative role of religion in government were an inherent part of this development process. The prominence of religious politics—particularly in the public sphere—is an important part of the history and struggle for liberal democracy that has been underappreciated by democratic theorists (particularly when commenting on the politics of the Muslim world after 11 September 2001). The primary theoretical implication that flows from this argument that is relevant for the study of liberal democracy in Muslim societies is that the process of democratization and liberalization cannot be disconnected from debates about the normative role of religion in government.

(3) An intimate and often-ignored relationship exists between religious reformation and political development. The first typically precedes the second, although the processes are deeply interwoven and connected. This is particularly true in societies under the sway of an illiberal or undemocratic religiopolitical doctrine. Democratization and liberalization do not necessarily require a rejection or privatization of religion, but what they do require is a reinterpretation of religious ideas with respect to the moral basis of legitimate political authority and individual rights. By engaging in this reinterpretation, religious groups can play an important role in the development and consolidation of liberal democracy. This observation applies both to the historical development of liberal democracy in the West (especially in the case of Catholicism) and to Muslim societies today.

Overall, this book argues for a rethinking of democratic theory so that it incorporates the variable of religion in the development and social construction of liberal democracy. By approaching this topic historically and comparatively, a more nuanced and balanced treatment of this subject can be obtained.

From the Fall of the Berlin Wall to the Fall of the Twin Towers: The Intellectual Context

In the immediate aftermath of the Cold War, religious fundamentalism—in particular its Muslim variant—emerged as one of the greatest perceived threats to liberal democracy. The al Qaeda attacks on 11 September 2001 resolved a debate that had surfaced after the fall of the Berlin Wall about new and emerging threats to international peace and security. From the outset, Islamic fundamentalism was a leading candidate for the position.³ Influential journals such as the *Economist*, the *Atlantic Monthly*, *Time*, and *Foreign Affairs* were busy debating this subject, most certainly influenced by prominent Western politicians such as Jacques Chirac, Helmut Kohl, Daniel Quayle, and Yitzhak Rabin, who were warning that the “green peril” of Islam had replaced the “red menace” of communism as the chief threat to Western civilization.⁴

Public opinion in the United States was not far behind elite opinion on this issue. In 1993—almost a decade before the September 11 attacks—a comprehensive nationwide poll found that 42 percent of Americans agreed with the statement that there “should be restrictions on the number of Muslims allowed to immigrate to the U.S.,” and 43 percent concurred with the view that Muslims “tend to be religious fanatics.”⁵ Dramatic events from the Arab and

Islamic world in the last two decades of the twentieth century are arguably responsible for these attitudes.⁶

A partial list of the emotionally charged and defining images that have shaped public opinion, American foreign policy, and academic scholarship toward Muslim societies in recent decades includes the 1979 Iranian revolution and the concomitant seizure of the U.S. embassy in Tehran, the 1981 assassination of Anwar Sadat, the 1983 bombing of the U.S. embassy and Marines barracks in Lebanon, the 1989 fatwa against Salman Rushdie and *l'affaire du foulard* in France, the annexation of Kuwait by Saddam Hussein and subsequent Gulf War in 1991, the misogynist rule of the Taliban in Afghanistan throughout the 1990s, two Palestinian intifadas and a wave of suicide attacks against Israeli civilians in 2000, and finally and most dramatically, the coordinated attacks in 2001 against the Twin Towers in New York and the Pentagon in Washington, D.C. The chaos, mayhem, and bloodshed in Iraq, post-Saddam Hussein, have further solidified these views.

Intellectual debates prior to 11 September 2001 gave a stamp of respectability to this pejorative image of Muslim societies. From Francis Fukuyama's thesis on "the end of history" and Benjamin Barber's argument about "jihad vs. McWorld" to Robert Kaplan's suggestion about "the coming anarchy" and, most influentially, Samuel P. Huntington's essay and subsequent book on "the clash of civilizations," all have collectively reinforced, in different ways, the idea that the Muslim faith and Islamic civilization are incongruent with liberty, democracy, human rights, gender equality, and other emancipatory principles.⁷ Francis Fukuyama articulated a widely held belief when he said:

There does seem to be something about Islam or at least the fundamentalist versions of Islam that have been dominant in recent years, that makes Muslim societies particularly resistant to modernity. Of all contemporary cultural systems, the Islamic world has the fewest democracies (Turkey alone qualifies), and contains no countries that have made the transition from Third to First World status in the manner of South Korea or Singapore.⁸

The events of 11 September 2001 and their aftermath have erased any lingering doubt about the relevance and urgency of this topic, which now far transcends a concern about military security and terrorism.⁹ The question of Islam's compatibility with liberal democracy is at the heart of current debates about immigration, multiculturalism, citizenship, political community, the universality of human rights, the future of Algeria, Turkey's relationship with the European Union, the Israel-Palestine peace process, U.S. foreign policy, and the wars and reconstruction efforts in Afghanistan and Iraq—just to name a

few. This debate is subsumed by larger theoretical questions that have immense significance at the dawn of the twenty-first century: What are the core values and ideals of liberal democracy? Can they be found or promoted in non-Western societies? In what ways are the values and ideals of liberal democracy conflictual and problematic? For example, can the ideas of democracy and human rights take hold in cultures where ideas of personhood are based on values other than those of liberal individualism? Are some religious systems more compatible with liberal democracy than others? These are the broad questions that shape this inquiry.¹⁰

“The Great Political Problem of Our Times”: Religion and Democracy

In *Democracy in America*, Alexis de Tocqueville, writing in 1831 about life in the early American republic, discusses what he calls the “great political problem of our times.” Tocqueville’s primary audience, it should be remembered, were not Americans but rather the educated classes in his native Europe, whose political problems shaped his consciousness, especially in his native France.

According to Tocqueville, “the organization and the establishment of democracy in Christendom is the great political problem of our times.”¹¹ This observation, although 178 years old, reminds us that the problem of religion’s relationship with democracy is not an exclusively Muslim phenomenon but one that other religion traditions—Christianity in particular—have had to struggle with. To the extent that Tocqueville’s observation is correct, it could be extrapolated that in the same sense that the “great political problem” facing Europe in the nineteenth century was the question of democracy in Christian lands in the twenty-first century, arguably the great problem of our time is the establishment and organization of democracy in the Muslim world.

In the voluminous scholarly literature that is produced annually on democratic theory, there has been scant mention of religion’s relationship to democracy until recently. In three recently published “democracy readers,” edited by prominent scholars in the field, for example, one searches in vain for any mention of this topic in the table of contents.¹² Yet, on reflection, this omission is understandable. The question of religion’s relationship to democracy and its proper role in political society has been largely resolved in the West (the United States being an arguable exception). A broad secular consensus exists within and among Western liberal democracies on this question, and any remaining tension is negotiated via existing democratic processes and institutions that enjoy broad legitimacy. The same cannot be said for most Muslim societies