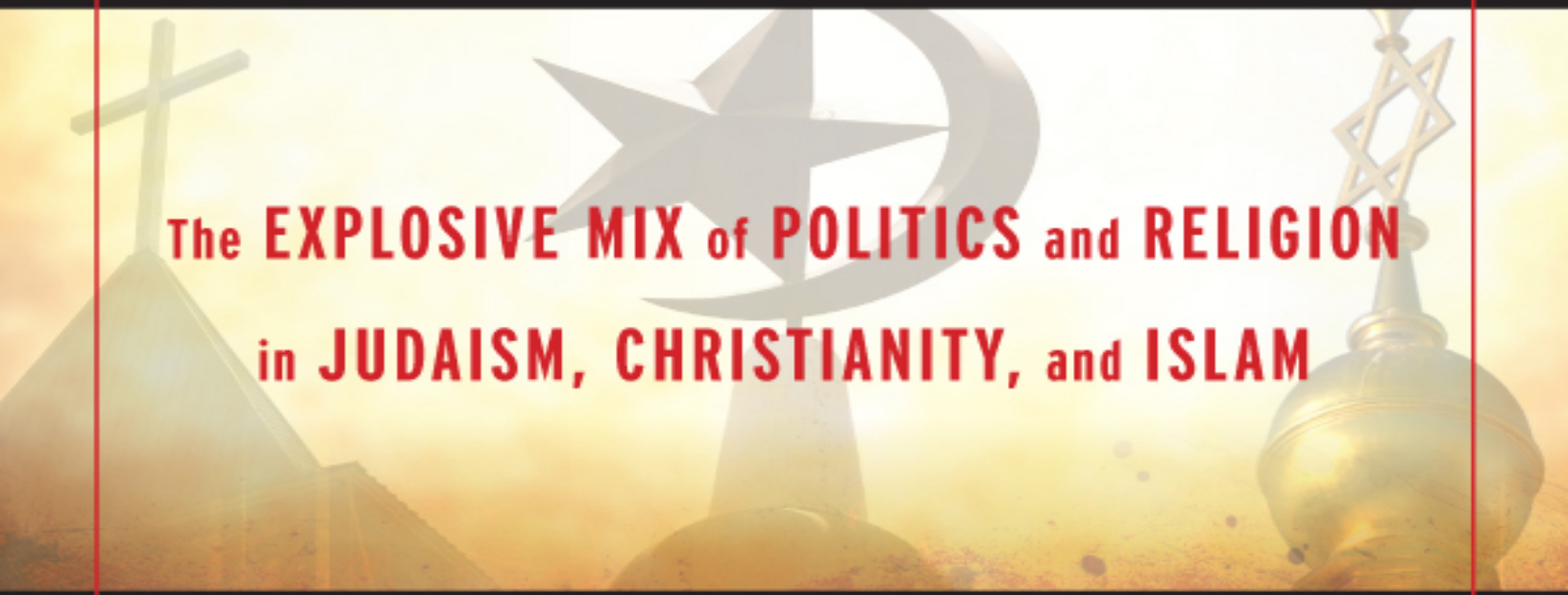
WHEN RELIGION BECOMES LETHAL



The EXPLOSIVE MIX of POLITICS and RELIGION in JUDAISM, CHRISTIANITY, and ISLAM

CHARLES KIMBALL

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Various perspectives advanced in this book have been shaped and modified over more than three decades. As is always the case, we all stand on the shoulders of and benefit directly and indirectly from predecessors, colleagues, friends, and people who see and interpret events differently. My indebtedness to many people is reflected in the text and notes. What I owe to a great number of others—from religious and political leaders and colleagues in religious studies and political science to people I have met in Tulsa, Tel Aviv, Tehran, and many points in between—will not be immediately visible. All have helped sharpen and refine my thinking. Among those who have offered valuable assistance and suggestions in the process of preparing this book, I am especially grateful to Chris Chapman, Jay Ford, Lee Green, Scott Hudgins, Jeff Rogers, and Cole Stephenson.

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adventures that shaped our lives for four decades. Nancy has been and remains my best friend, confidante, and loving critic.

Finally, I offer a brief word about my Jewish grandfather and Presbyterian grandmother. My paternal grandfather, Julius George Skelskie Kimball, was one of the most wonderful people I knew as a child. Despite the enormous challenges posed by a religiously mixed marriage a century ago, my grandparents remained within the traditions of faith in which they were raised. My grandparents, parents, and extended family members—both Jewish and Christian—modeled for me how religious diversity and religious commitment can illuminate and enrich our experiences as human beings and as children of God who share life in our community as well as on an increasingly fragile planet. With love and appreciation, I dedicate this book to the memory of my grandfather, whose gentle manor, love of laughter, and warm embrace helped set me on the journey of a lifetime.

In loving memory of my grandfather Julius George Skelskie Kimball

Chapter 1

CHRISTMAS WITH THE AYATOLLAH

THE VOLATILE MIX OF RELIGION AND POLITICS

Sitting less than five feet from the ayatollah khomeini in his modest home in Qom on Christmas Day of 1979, I was riveted not only by his words but also by his facial expression. In contrast to the fiery, defiant media images of the Ayatollah, his demeanor was warm and welcoming, his words softly spoken, his eyes alert and engaging. I found him both grandfatherly and charismatic. On that memorable Christmas Day in Iran, we talked about Jesus, the Iranian revolution, the U.S. hostages, and Christian-Muslim relations. On the many times after that when I saw Khomeini in person and live on television, my initial impressions were confirmed. Both inside and outside Iran, this intriguing, enigmatic man in clerical garb was fast emerging as an extraordinarily influential religious/political leader during the final quarter of the 20th century. I was not at all surprised when *Time* magazine named the Ayatollah Khomeini “Man of the Year” for 1979.

How had I, an American baby boomer from a middle-class family in Tulsa, Oklahoma, come to be here in Iran, in the very center of international media attention, spending Christmas with the Ayatollah Khomeini? Although I could not have predicted this scenario, it was far from accidental. A

long-standing interest in and engagement with the interplay between religion and politics combined with a decade studying Judaism, Christianity, and Islam—in college, seminary, at Harvard, and in Cairo—had led to this pivotal moment.

Seven weeks earlier, on November 4, 66 hostages had been seized when student militants stormed the U.S. embassy compound in Tehran. Fourteen people were subsequently released, while 52 Americans remained in captivity for 444 days. The hostage crisis had been the dominant focus of the world's political and media attention since that fateful day. The Iranian government was unwilling to meet directly with U.S. officials, in part because the deposed shah was in the United States at the time. Vivid memories of the CIA-led coup that had toppled Iran's popularly elected government of Prime Minister Mohammed Mossadeq and reinstated the shah in 1953 still fueled widespread fear and distrust.

In an effort to open talks and help resolve the standoff, Ali Agah, the Iranian ambassador to the United States, invited an ecumenical group of six clergy and one former Peace Corps worker[1] to travel to Iran for 10 days of meetings with Khomeini, other top religious and political leaders, and the students who were holding the hostages. Three other American clergy—led by the late William Sloane Coffin Jr., of New York's Riverside Church—also traveled to Tehran to conduct Christmas services for the American captives.

The distinctive interplay between religion and politics in revolutionary Iran signaled that something new, powerful, and unpredictable was unfolding in one of the most volatile and strategically important regions of the world. Nestled in the soft underbelly of the Soviet Union, Iran had well-trained and well-equipped armed forces funded by abundant revenues derived from its massive oil reserves. Henry Kissinger, former national security advisor and U.S.

secretary of state, had underscored the critical importance of Iran when he famously called Shah Muhammad Reza Pahlavi the “rarest of leaders, an unconditional ally.”

Iran was not the only country where political seismic shifts were taking place in an already unstable region. Lebanon was descending into a multisided civil war and fast becoming a proxy battleground for Israelis, Palestinians, and other regional powers; Saddam Hussein, who had just seized power in a coup in Iraq, would soon launch what would become a devastating 10-year war with Iran. In a harbinger of the deep rancor that produced Osama bin Laden and 15 of the 19 hijackers who carried out the attacks on the World Trade Center on September 11, 2001, heavily armed, militant Muslims from within Saudi Arabia stormed and then occupied the Grand Mosque in Mecca for two weeks late in 1979. Events in the new Islamic Republic of Iran added a potent and distinctively religious dynamic to the turbulent upheavals in the Middle East.

For those who were paying attention to events beyond the locked gates of the U.S. embassy in Tehran, shock waves from the revolutionary tsunami were being felt not only throughout the Middle East but also in faraway lands such as the Philippines, South Africa, and Guatemala. Under Khomeini’s influential leadership, the Iranian revolution was a major watershed event in the final quarter of the 20th century, a tipping point with powerful regional and global ramifications. Three decades later, the impact and consequences of these tumultuous events are still being felt in various parts of the world.[2] My direct involvement with many of the key actors during the course of the hostage crisis in Iran was life-changing, in several ways. I went back to Iran twice more; with John Walsh, one of the chaplains at Princeton in our initial group, I spent two months in Iran during three trips. As “trusted” clergy who were not U.S. government officials, we were invited to bring mail for the

hostages and facilitate communications with government and religious leaders as well as with the students occupying the American embassy. In this crucible, I saw and experienced the powerful new combinations brewing the volatile mix of religion and politics among the Abrahamic religions.

In the United States, this unique access to Iranian leaders under the white-hot spotlight of the hostage crisis led to scores of media interviews,[3] speaking engagements, and opportunities to write op-ed articles for major newspapers. Several Harvard professors—lawyers, Islamic scholars, Middle East and international affairs experts, and various others who specialized in conflict resolution—met regularly with me to help prepare for the next trip to Iran. My doctoral dissertation was put on hold. As George Rupp, the dean of Harvard Divinity School, said to me shortly after the hostages were released, “You have had about 20 years of experience crammed into the last 400 days.”

Looking back, I would say George Rupp was probably correct, most strikingly so when it came to the popular perceptions or conventional wisdom that informed most people on all sides. As a student of comparative religion, I was keenly aware of the long and often troubled history among the Jewish, Christian, and Muslim descendants of Abraham. As I found in my trips to Iran between late 1979 and early 1981, that history was further complicated by contemporary media images and sound-bite analyses that often led to simplistic and therefore misleading perceptions. The images projected daily for those 444 days created and reinforced narratives about militant Islam that continue to dominate our current understanding. The stunning attack orchestrated by radical extremists on September 11, 2001, reinforced and deepened the most threatening aspects of this narrative.

There were—and still are—major differences between popular Western views of religion and politics in Iran and the more complex realities within the Islamic republic, as we discovered with the massive worldwide attention directed at the protests during the Iranian presidential election of June 2009. The protests, demonstrations, and declarations by various religious and political leaders illustrated clearly that Iran is far from monolithic. There are multiple levels of religious and political organization as well as several visible centers of power in this predominantly Shi'ite Muslim nation.

Despite all the attention focused on Iran since the 1979 revolution, very few Americans—not to mention members of Congress—had moved beyond stereotyped images and conventional wisdom before the surprising events following the 2009 presidential elections. As major news organizations and cable TV networks gleaned information from Iranians and Iranian Americans (often via social networking sites), a more nuanced and accurate view of religion and politics within the Islamic Republic emerged. For several weeks, Americans and others around the world had an exceptional opportunity to push beyond monolithic perceptions of Iranian Muslims and venture into a vibrant, richly layered, and clearly diverse society in Iran. The episode underscored just how misleading popular perceptions and conventional wisdom can be.

In recent years, best-selling authors Malcolm Gladwell, Steven Levitt, and Stephen Dubner have all pulled back the curtain on various types of conventional wisdom to reveal how reality isn't what we think. Gladwell's number-one best sellers changed the way many of us think about the big impact of small things (*The Tipping Point,* 2000), how we think about thinking (*Blink*, 2005), and our understanding of success (*Outliers*, 2008). In Levitt and Dubner's 2005 book *Freakonomics*, readers were dazzled by revelations of what was boldly called "the hidden side of everything."

Investigating a more somber and grim phenomenon, Robert Pape's 2005 book *Dying to Win: The Strategic Logic of Suicide Terrorism* is a detailed study of every suicide attack since 1980. Pape demonstrates how suicidal terrorism is not primarily a product of Islamic fundamentalism; 95% of the attacks occur as part of coherent military campaigns with clear secular and political goals. Each of these books shows how a different way of looking at data can often dismantle conventional wisdom and raise many questions that cannot be answered accurately without a more reliable framework for understanding, one that transcends conventional wisdom.[4] An important distinction between Gladwell's books and Pape's research relates to the broader subject matter. Whether or not people are personally religious, it is more challenging for most of us to learn to think in new ways about religion and politics than to think anew about the types of economics presented by Gladwell.

At one level, this book fits the genre. At various critical points, our conventional wisdom is dangerously inadequate. My involvement with the Iranian hostage crisis opened numerous doors and facilitated opportunities to study and work amid settings where many Jews, Christians, and Muslims have been wrestling with issues of religion and politics for the past 30 years. In my experience and study, many popular perceptions of the relationships between religion and politics in the Middle East—and in the United States—often do not hold up under careful scrutiny. Far too few of us know or think about the rich history shaping the different religions. Far too few of us are considering the importance of on-the-ground realities that do not square with popular perceptions or media images. And far too few of us have come to terms with the world of the 21st century, a world where "other" religions are not simply "out there"; all religions are everywhere.

How can we hope to move forward constructively—locally, nationally, and internationally—in the exceedingly dangerous years ahead if decisions and actions are based on faulty assumptions and inaccurate perceptions? We need better ways to comprehend what is going on, and why. We need a new paradigm, a much more accurate framework for understanding and action.

The Volatile Mix of Religion and Politics

Throughout history, religion and politics have always been intertwined and interdependent, but today the volatile mix of the two is more lethal than ever. The Iranian revolution proved to be a catalyst for several militant Muslim groups in the 1980s and beyond. Several examples illustrate the point.

In Afghanistan during the 1980s, Muslim militants (*mujahideen*), supported by Osama bin Laden of Saudi Arabia and others who shared his puritanical Wahhabi[5] view of Islam, vigorously fought the Soviet troops and laid the foundation for what would become the government of the Taliban. In Lebanon, the Party of God (*Hizbullah*) was born among Shi'ites in the aftermath of Israel's 1982 invasion of that war-torn land. Supported by Iran, Hizbullah quickly became Israel's most powerful enemy and a major force in Lebanese and regional politics. Among the Palestinians, the Islamic Resistance Movement (HAMAS) emerged in the occupied Gaza Strip even as the political strength of militant Jewish settlers grew dramatically under the Likud governments of Menachem Begin and Yitzhak Shamir. Begin's 1977 election as prime minister, which ended three decades of Labor Party rule, was widely considered a fluke. However, the next two national elections revealed how

much the Jewish state had shifted to the right. Meanwhile, in the United States President Ronald Reagan embraced the Rev. Jerry Falwell's Moral Majority, the most visible face of a potent new force in U.S. politics, "the religious right."[6]

In the 1990s, the volatility of the interactions between religion and politics continued and the pace quickened as the Taliban seized the reins of government in Afghanistan and al-Qaeda became a formidable international, nongovernmental movement willing to use violent extremism to achieve its goals. The growing strength of these holy warriors was shockingly evident as their numerous attacks were aimed ostensibly at toppling Muslim regimes they deemed illegitimate and at fighting Israel, the United States, and any other Western power whose support or physical military presence enabled Egyptian, Saudi, and other Islamic governments to remain in power.

In the decade following September 11, even more explosive new combinations of religion and politics have become the focus of concern throughout the Middle East and in the United States. In our interdependent and religiously diverse world of nation-states, the intersections of religion and politics played central roles in the Iraq war, which began in 2003; the 2006 war between Israel and Hizbullah in Lebanon; and the virtual civil war that erupted among Palestinians in 2007. In a given year, we learn of many other groups whose grievances are usually coupled with a plan—sometimes violent—to rectify the perceived problems. Though not as overtly violent, there were many heated discussions about religion and politics during the 2008 U.S. presidential election, including hateful religious-based rhetoric aimed at President Barack Obama. On Election Day, reports showed how approximately 15% of the populace believed Obama was really a Muslim who was hiding his true beliefs. Two years later, an August 19, 2010, Pew Research poll showed the proportion had risen to 18%.[7]

Some religious zealots on the far right suggested he might be the ultimate wolf in sheep's clothing: the Antichrist.

In the decades since the Reagan presidency, various manifestations of the Christian religious right have been evident in the corridors of power. The depth of involvement and influence set off alarms during the presidency of George W. Bush as attention focused on several ill-prepared, fundamentalist Christians with high-level political appointments in the White House and the Justice Department. By the end of George W. Bush's second term, some probing journalists, authors, and former Bush administration officials were exposing the potential consequences of Christian zealots shaping U.S. policies. Michelle Goldberg's *Kingdom Coming: The Rise of Christian Nationalism* and Chris Hedges's *American Fascists: The Christian Right and the War on America* illuminate more visible manifestations of contemporary Christian leaders and movements determined to infuse American government with their radical vision of a Christian state. Kevin Phillips's 2006 best seller, *American Theocracy*,[8] goes further. Phillips identifies the perils looming where the politics of radical religion, oil, and borrowed money converge in the 21st century. His warnings about an impending economic debacle were validated shockingly in 2008. Phillips and others fear that empowered religious zealotry portends catastrophe. Articulating constructive ways to move forward, however, is more challenging.

Despite continuous media attention on developments in the United States, Israel, Iran, Iraq, and other nations during the first decade of the 21st century, many basic, unanswered questions still loom large: What drives religion into politics, and vice versa? Why are the turbulent religious forces seemingly more threatening than ever before? What do violent extremists operating in the name of Islam really want? Is (or should) America be a Christian nation? What is

a *Christian* nation? How does unwillingness or inability to understand what is going on in different religions increase the perils on a global scale? Is peace among Israel, the Palestinians, and neighboring Arab and Muslim states really possible? Why do some leaders say Israel will be the setting for the conflagration that ends the world, while others insist peace between Israel and its neighbors is both possible and essential? Where do we find sources of hope and answers in an increasingly interdependent world where people with vastly different worldviews often clash violently? These questions perplex many of us as daily headlines remind us all how even a small number of religious zealots can wreak havoc on a massive scale.

This book identifies and addresses these and other pressing questions. It focuses on the most urgent contemporary challenges visible in particularly influential and explosive settings, most notably Israel/Palestine, Iran, Iraq, and the United States. Now, more than ever, these challenges require urgent attention and thoughtful action. If we hope to mitigate the highly charged and explosive dangers looming before us, we must understand events and their causes.

The stakes are now far too high for deferential silence or casual indifference. Ignorance is not bliss; indifference is proving deadly. Although the urgent need for informed analysis and widespread public discussion is clear, for most people the issues remain confused and confusing. Neither sound-bite media coverage nor simplistic declarations from podiums and pulpits and a growing number of partisan books can shed the light that is needed on these issues. For many, the dizzying swirl of events and proclamations produces what I call “detailed ignorance.” The steady stream of images and proclamations presents many “details,” but most people do not have a framework for understanding that puts the images and sound bites in a

coherent context. Predictably, conventional wisdom often surfaces to fill in the gaps. I can't count the number of times I've heard reasonably intelligent people say things like "There will never be peace in the Middle East . . . Jews and Muslims have been fighting for thousands of years . . . it is part of their religion . . . it is the only thing they know," or "Muslims are taught to fight and kill infidels or anyone who disagrees with their religion," or "For Muslims, religion and politics are all one thing; Muslims won't be satisfied until the whole world is conquered and under Islamic rule."

Media reports and images are essential, of course. But the focus is all too often on the most dramatic and sensational events. What we need desperately today is a coherent frame of reference, a more accurate and useful way of thinking about and engaging issues of religion and politics. The challenges of the 21st century require that we draw from the best of our traditions for the wisdom and resources needed in a globally connected world community. Otherwise, detailed ignorance and religious zealotry will combine to increase exponentially the probability of ever more deadly sectarian conflict. In a world filled with weapons of mass destruction, it is frighteningly possible to imagine the end of the world as we know it. New, more constructive paradigms offer us hope for the perilous journey ahead.

Why Is It All So Confusing?

In the three decades since the Iranian revolution, Israel's shift to the right as led by Begin, and the political rise of the religious right in America, new and often violent manifestations of religion and politics have become daily reality. The number of stories has grown sharply, and the pace of events has quickened markedly in the years following September 11. We have literally been inundated

with “information” about religion and politics through two presidential elections; multiyear wars in Afghanistan and Iraq; clashes among Israel, the Palestinians, and Hizbullah in Lebanon; and ubiquitous stories related to the rubric of the “worldwide war against terrorism.” The information overload comes from an exploding array of 24/7 television, radio, Internet, social networking, and newspaper sources. Despite the abundance of information, however, few of us consider the unstated assumptions shaping the headlines and stories: What presuppositions inform a particular television or newspaper story? What models of religion and politics are being employed? Why do so many people appear to speak with such cocksure certainty about the “ideal” provided by their religion and the fallacy of rival religions? How representative are the snapshot images of particular nations, groups, or religions? How can one speak meaningfully of “Christian,” “Muslim,” or “Jewish” approaches to political organization and goals?

The picture is confused further by oversimplified pronouncements regarding the separation of church and state. Many enlightened, secular progressives believe that religion ought to be privatized and kept out of public life. They want an insurmountably high wall to separate religion and politics. At the other end of the spectrum are those Muslims, Christians, Jews, and others so convinced that they know God’s plan for society that they are prepared to use whatever means necessary to establish the theocracy envisioned in their particular interpretation of sacred texts and sacred history.

Many modern exponents of the separation of church and state interpret events today as a showdown between the progress of democracy with its humanizing benefits and the regression and damage of theocracy. In this view, excesses and misadventures of religious movements shaping political structures—particularly within Judaism, Christianity, and

Islam—can be seen in the sordid history of triumphal conquest of one dominant interpretation of one tradition. This interpretation is further reinforced by the resurgence and overt political ambitions of various fundamentalist movements around the world. It is a convenient but terribly inadequate and inaccurate way to simplify a complex history.

Practical considerations are also important. Although some secularists might prefer to see religion as nothing more than an anachronistic way of viewing the world, this simple fact remains: the vast majority of people who have lived and who are alive today perceive themselves to be religious or spiritual. Put simply, religion permeates human society. Religion will continue to be a powerful and pervasive force that weaves through social, political, and economic structures for the foreseeable future. Realistic steps forward simply must include ways of understanding and appropriating elements of religion into viable political life and structures in the 21st century.

It gets more convoluted when it comes to democracy. Whose democracy? And which of the many forms of democracy are we talking about? Most Americans would be surprised to learn that more than half of the roughly 56 countries with Muslim majorities are substantially democratic. The variations present in non-Muslim-majority countries as diverse as Israel, the Islamic Republic of Iran, India, Sweden, Russia, Lebanon, and the United States illustrate the malleable nature of “democracy” in many national settings. The raging debate about globalization makes clear that the issues cannot be distilled down to straightforward choices between democracy and theocracy. More accurate and nuanced understanding of the interactions of religion and politics within cultures and social settings is required if we are to fashion a more viable future in an interdependent world of nation-states.

For some, the questions about religion and politics may seem overwhelming. It is far easier not to think deeply about these matters, or to simply let preachers, politicians, pundits, journalists, and talk show hosts do the thinking for them. It may be easier, but in my view it is a recipe for disaster. If concerned people of faith and responsible citizens hope to offer a better future to their children and grandchildren, we must be willing to wrestle with a range of presuppositions and questions. As we will discover, this task is challenging, though not as daunting as it might seem.

In Search of Understanding

The pages that follow are based on more than three decades of study and experience working in and around many of the most highly charged flashpoints in the Middle East and the United States. My academic, professional, and personal pilgrimage has included some 40 journeys to the Middle East and hundreds of trips to Washington, DC, to colleges, churches, and conferences throughout the United States, Canada, and Europe. I have had extraordinary opportunities to study the major religious traditions and to engage firsthand many of the leaders, people, and groups animating the compelling controversies that most Americans know primarily through news stories and headlines. This extensive exposure has made me sympathetic to the ambiguity surrounding the multiple, converging issues and the shifting religious-political landscape. I believe we are at a point now, however, where we can take a step back and see the bigger picture more clearly.

Constructing a coherent framework for understanding begins with transcending the one-dimensional either-or thinking that too often defines approaches to religion and politics. Theocrats who believe they possess God’s template

for a contemporary Islamic, Christian, or Jewish state are wrong. There is no fixed template for any of the Abrahamic religions. On the other end of the spectrum, secularists who insist that religion is nothing more than an anachronistic way of viewing the world and who call for a complete separation of religion and politics simply don't get it. The truth is found between these extremes. The path to a hopeful and healthy future is found in a more nuanced understanding of the multiple ways in which religion and politics interconnect and have been manifest historically within Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. A clearer framework is an invaluable tool for evaluating and critiquing ideologies as they evolve and compete for support in the 21st century.

A Way Forward

We can and must learn from the wisdom of history and tradition, if we hope to live together respectfully. We are helped enormously in this task by the comparative study of how Jews, Christians, and Muslims have approached the interplay between religion and politics. By looking back across the religious traditions and through the centuries, we can identify fundamental principles that inform political structures connected to these major religions. In fact, Jews, Christians, and Muslims have much more in common than we might think.

Contrary to popular images, all three traditions embrace enough flexibility to allow their adherents to adjust to very different times and circumstances. Historically, the moderate and flexible center of every faith tradition has helped it to survive in the face of extremism. The religions that survive the test of time have been able both to dismantle unhealthy and violent extremes and to encourage the constructive role of religion in society.

Many Christians, Muslims, and Jews now endeavor to build on the foundation of their traditions as they fashion structures that affirm and protect religious and political freedom and diversity. They face many formidable challenges, including extremists who articulate and sometimes employ violence in pursuit of a particular religious or social vision within their respective traditions. Accordingly, four of the chapters that follow include case studies that explore how conflicting visions are being played out in Israel, Iraq, Iran, the United States, and elsewhere.

These contemporary struggles are not new. Sincere but often overly zealous adherents have clashed frequently with their fellow believers as well as followers of other religions. Lawrence Wright elucidates this dynamic in his best-selling book *The Looming Tower: Al-Qaeda and the Road to 9/11*. In a compelling account, Wright describes how Osama bin Laden's pursuit of a pure Islamic state led him from Afghanistan to the Sudan in 1990. Bin Laden's close associates believed Hasan al-Turabi, an influential religious and political leader in the Sudan at that time, was fashioning the kind of Islamic state bin Laden envisioned. But what began as perhaps the happiest period in bin Laden's life quickly changed as it became apparent that these leaders had a distinctly different understanding of the template for an Islamic state:

> Now that he was finally living in a radical Islamist state, bin Laden would ask practical questions, such as how the Islamists intended to apply Sharia in the Sudan and how they proposed to handle the Christians in the south. Often he did not like the answers. Turabi told him that Sharia would be applied gradually and only on Muslims, who would share power with Christians in a federal system. . . . "This man is a Machiavelli," bin Laden confided to his friends. "He doesn't care what methods

he uses." Although they still needed one another, Turabi and bin Laden soon began to see themselves as rivals.[9]

In my previous book, *When Religion Becomes Evil,* I examined five major warning signs that signal the danger of religion being used for violent and destructive purposes. As I did there, in this book I will use a comparative approach to reveal destructive, pathological patterns of behavior present among believers in a number of religions. Understanding what is unhealthy helps elucidate the healthy, life-affirming dimensions of these religions. We can find within Judaism, Christianity, and Islam the resources for constructive political structures that go far beyond tolerance, to a respectful affirmation of diversity.

At another level, the world today is distinctly different—and far more dangerous—than at any other time in human history. Among the many lessons in the years since September 11, 2001, everyone can agree on three. The first lesson is that religion is an extremely powerful force in human society, sometimes a force used to inspire or justify violent extremism. Second, the world is full of weapons of mass destruction. In addition to the growing threats posed by nuclear, chemical, and biological weapons, we've learned that there are many ways people determined to harm or kill others can accomplish the goal. Commercial airplanes, trains and buses, and combinations of commonly available ingredients such as agricultural fertilizer can easily become weapons of mass destruction. And finally, we now know with certainty that it doesn't take very many people to wreak havoc on a global scale. Violent extremists claiming inspiration from their religion do not represent the vast majority of Christians, Muslims, and Jews. They may be very much on the fringe, but just a few can produce devastating results.

Jonathan Sachs, the chief rabbi of England, articulates the challenge we must face squarely:

> As one who deeply believes in the humanizing power of faith, and the stark urgency of coexistence at a time when weapons of mass destruction are accessible to extremist groups, I do not think we can afford to fail again. Time and again in recent years we have been reminded that religion is not what the European Enlightenment thought it would become: mute, marginal and mild. It is fire—and like fire, it warms but it also burns. And we are the guardians of the flame.[10]

Together, adherents within Christianity, Islam, and Judaism make up roughly half the world's population. Jews, Christians, and Muslims—all of whom trace their history and theology to a common ancestor, Abraham—have traveled a long road together. Examining the intertwined history of these communities reveals common patterns of behavior and significant differences across religious lines. It also offers instructive examples; some can serve as a framework for viable future models in pluralist societies, and some show us approaches Jews, Christians, and Muslims dare not repeat.

Many of the most dangerous global flashpoints today involve political dynamics where dedicated believers from one, two, or all three of these religious communities are visibly engaged. Many of these flashpoints are potential catalysts for even wider conflagration. The 2006 war between Israel and Lebanon illustrates the point because the U.S., Syrian, and Iranian connections to Israel and Hizbullah were readily apparent. The more people in all communities can learn to demystify and understand what is happening, the more likely we will be able to avert potential disasters.

In the chapters that follow, we examine both destructive and constructive ways in which Israel, the United States, and even Iran can help facilitate inclusive pluralism in predominantly Jewish, Christian, and Muslim lands.