

Religious Reaction and the Rhetoric of Generational
Danger

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Last year, in *The Paradox of Liberation*, Michael Walzer offered a customarily brilliant account of how secular revolutions evolved, seemingly inevitably, into religious counter-revolutions. His main case-study was Israel, but he also offered comparative discussions of India and Algeria. I do not for a moment challenge his analysis, but I raise two additional points. One is that the process he describes is by no means confined to what we might term revolutionary states, and in fact, one of the best examples of such a trajectory can be found in the United States itself – now some two centuries out from its own revolution. Also, the religious reactions that Walzer describes occurred at particular historical moments, in response to specific circumstances at that time. They do not occur within a specific number of decades or generations from the success of a given revolution.¹

In modern times, the most striking era for such a transformation was the late 1970s, when conservative and reactionary religious politics suddenly achieved a startling visibility around the world. The most sensational and lasting images were associated with Islam, as events in Iran, Saudi Arabia and Afghanistan sparked a series of movements that are still very much with us today. Yet in other contexts too, and usually without any violent associations, religion re-entered the political realm to a degree that thoroughly startled and confused observers who were thoroughly confident that they lived in a secular age. In countries as diverse as the United States, Israel, India, and Iran, Right-wing, fundamentalist and reactionary movements not only challenged or overthrew progressive liberal establishments and their orthodoxies, but they commonly did so in the name of God. As Walzer writes, “the backwardness came back.”²

Academics, no less than policy makers, struggled to understand the new reality. In his 1978 book on the growing Iranian crisis, influential scholar Fred Halliday analyzed every possible scenario for the post-Shah world, detailing every freakish Marxist sect, until in a footnote he commented, reluctantly, on the existence of some reactionary Shi’ite Muslims. More succinctly, US Vice President Walter Mondale famously reacted to the Khomeini regime by demanding, “What in Hell is an ayatollah anyway?” US intelligence agencies could provide little enlightenment on the subject.³

The near-simultaneous upsurge of religious politics in so many different contexts and faith traditions demands explanation. While some cross-cultural influences might be traced, it is far more likely that the parallel events were common responses to larger events that affected

¹ Michael Walzer, *The Paradox of Liberation* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2015).

² Walzer, *The Paradox of Liberation*, 27. Hartmut Elsenhans, Rachid Ouaiassa, Sebastian Schwecke and Mary Ann Tétreault, eds., *The Transformation of Politicised Religion* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2015)

³ Fred Halliday, *Iran: Dictatorship and Development* (London: Penguin, 1978); Diane Winston, ed., *The Oxford Handbook of Religion and the American News Media* (New York : Oxford University Press, 2012).

far removed parts of the globe. In the various settings, activists built on widespread perceptions that particular nations had gone badly astray and had failed or neglected their people. This had happened because arrogant elites had imposed progressive policies that flouted traditional values, and especially religious tenets. Such conservative protests might take the form of complaints about national political weakness, but they always posited a close linkage between national failure and moral decadence or degeneration. Nations failed because of assaults on the family, and on traditional concepts of gender and sexuality.

This paper will sketch the process of change in the United States, where particularly close linkages existed between political and military reconstruction and theories of moral and religious rearmament. I will then ask how many of those themes can usefully be applied to other societies and nations, focusing especially on Iran and Israel. I should warn in advance that I will be noting almost as many dissimilarities as commonalities, and the generational factors I stress in the US – themes of threats to children - do not apply easily in other settings. But at least it is important to frame the problem. In each case, moreover, I will repeatedly return to one critical sequence of events, namely the Yom Kippur war of October 1973, and its global aftermath. This above all marks the transition in post-World War II politics realities, and the rise of new religious alignments.

The American 1970s

American political disasters of the mid-1970s require little elaboration here. The Watergate scandal destroyed the Nixon presidency in 1974, while the Vietnam war ended in a humiliating fiasco in 1975. American global prestige stood at a historic low in 1975-76, when the Soviet Union expanded its military reach into several African and Asian countries, commonly using Cuban forces as proxies. Sober commentators, no less than sensational novelists, speculated about a general collapse of the West in visions that oddly prefigure the apocalyptic fall of the Communist world in 1989. The further humiliations of the Iran crisis in 1979-1980 opened the door to a candidate who could promise to restore national power and dignity.⁴

So much is well known, but the story makes little sense without stressing the economic crash of 1973-75, which was profoundly traumatic. Although smaller in scale than the 2008 crisis, in some ways the 1970s event was more shocking, not least because it fractured the illusory hopes that the modern world had put such extreme cycles behind it after 1945. While recessions had of course occurred in previous decades, 1973 seemed to mark a return to Depression conditions. This was made all the worse by the abandonment of the Bretton Woods system, and the coming of really threatening inflation. Growing as it did out of the Yom Kippur War and the oil embargoes, the new crisis also raised real fears about the sustainability of advanced capitalist society, among other things sparking a wave of dystopian popular fiction. Such fears were stimulated anew by the energy shortages of the late 1970s.⁵

⁴ Philip Jenkins, *Decade of Nightmares* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006).

⁵ Niall Ferguson, Charles S. Maier, Erez Manela and Daniel J. Sargent, eds., *The Shock of the Global* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2010); Gerard DeGroot, *The Seventies Unplugged* (London: Macmillan, 2010); Thomas Borstelmann, *The 1970s* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2012).

In different ways, that economic crisis had a truly global impact, to which I shall return shortly, and arguably, it directly precipitated the US political crisis of mid-decade. Without the underlying economic disasters and fears, it is highly likely that the Nixon administration would have contained Watergate scandal, and prevented the ruinous Congressional losses of 1974. That in turn would have prevented the frantic US departure from Indo-China, and US air power would probably have sustained the South Vietnamese government indefinitely.

So much is speculation, but the economic catastrophe vastly aggravated existing discontent. The crash contributed powerfully to the wave of corruption scandals that so destabilized many regimes around the world in mid-decade, opening the way to newer movements. Obviously, elites had not suddenly become more dishonest or corrupt at this time, but rather the risks of exposure and investigation rose dramatically. Many business figures, for instance, were engaged in delicate and illegal transactions that collapsed suddenly with the economic crisis and the near-instant reduction of credit and bank flexibility. Collapsed and collapsing companies were left unable to sustain payments, and their illicit activities were laid bare. In addition, the Watergate crisis encouraged new attitudes to investigative reporting, and by no means only in the US. Without paying attention to those scandals, and attendant allegations of systematic corruption, it is difficult to understand the appeal of anti-elite rhetoric in this era.

The crisis focused concerns about post-1960s social change as much as economic decline. As I have argued elsewhere, we commonly use the term “Sixties” to indicate a package of values and attitudes that, among other things, included youth culture, sexual libertinism and easy access to drugs, together with more transformative movements such as feminism and gay liberation. Yet despite the popular name, it was in the early and mid-1970s that these trends became mainstreamed to a mass American public, through legislation, and through depictions in popular media. Legislation regulating individual morality was under general assault, with the widespread legalization of homosexuality and sexually explicit materials, and the sharp decline in censorship. Even if previously illicit drugs were not actually legalized, public attitudes became much more tolerant.⁶

From a conservative or moralist point of view, such liberalizing changes had catastrophic effects, as measured through growing family breakdowns and soaring crime rates. Already crippled by urban decline and white flight, American cities now received a fatal blow from the economic collapse. (New York’s brush with bankruptcy in 1975 was one of many such disasters in these years). American cities seemed unable or unwilling to enforce large sections of the criminal code. Sexual vice and trafficking flourished in inner cities, where drug trafficking was scarcely concealed, and where violent crime became much more common. In mid-decade, New York in particular suffered serious terrorist campaigns associated with a variety of revolutionary and nationalist, with multiple fatalities. The cities became perfect symbols of the evil effects of progressive liberalism, of national degeneration and decay.

Most alarming, the main symbols of this crisis were children and youth, the victims of child prostitution and pornography, the recruits of exploitative religious cults, and the perpetrators

⁶ Edward D. Berkowitz, *Something Happened* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006).

of violence and gang crime. To see the astonishing concatenation of fears and crisis – some valid, others not – we look for instance at David Talbot’s survey of San Francisco in the 1970s, the aptly titled *Season of the Witch*.⁷

Reclaiming Manhood

Taken together with political and economic weakness, those domestic horrors suggested a country that was failing if not actually failed. In seeking explanations, conservatives found it easy and natural to link global affairs with cultural and sexual politics, and to speak the language of threatened masculinity. Traditionally male institutions all lay discredited – army, intelligence, policing, the corporate world – while liberal agendas advanced women’s causes and gay interests. Particularly during 1977, conservatives rallied around a series of causes that neatly linked foreign and domestic grievances: overseas, the Panama Canal treaties, strategic arms limitations talks with the Soviets, and Soviet rights violations, especially against Jews. At home, this year marked the peak of campaigning against the Equal Rights Amendment, as well as intense campaigns against local gay rights ordinances, and burgeoning anti-abortion groups.⁸

All these movements mobilized conservative activists, who created significant new and much more inclusive coalitions. Old-style Cold War hardliners now found themselves allied with moral and religious conservatives, who commonly based their movements in churches. That alliance was vital in light of the growing religious enthusiasm from the mid-1970s onwards, which especially benefited evangelical and more conservative Christian groups, as well as traditionally minded Jews.

God Made Visible

Because of the mass base it provided to conservative causes, that Christian religious upsurge demands special attention, and in the context of the 1970s, it proved almost as shocking to mainstream analysts as did the concept of ayatollahs. When presidential candidate Jimmy Carter announced in 1976 that he had been born again, the main nightly news programs treated the term with bemusement, and sought out experts to assess whether this was some kind of cult concept. Yet at the time, that born again status was boasted by at least a quarter of Americans.

The fact of that ignorance is significant, in rebutting any suggestion that the evangelical political constituency was in any sense a new phenomenon. Rather, it had always been there, or at least since the earliest days of the nation, and President Ulysses S. Grant famously complained that he had to deal with three political parties, namely Democrats, Republicans and Methodists. At different times, though, the constituency had been more or less in evidence in the public sphere, and in the mid-twentieth century, it was widely ignored. What

⁷ David Talbot, *Season of the Witch* (New York: Free Press, 2012); Francis Wheen, *Strange Days Indeed* (New York: BBS/PublicAffairs, 2010).

⁸ Jenkins, *Decade of Nightmares*; Rick Perlstein, *The Invisible Bridge* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2014).

changes in the 1970s is not so much that new religious forces emerge, but that it is no longer possible to ignore their existence and numerical strength.⁹

In part, issues of media control and access go far towards explaining the relative invisibility of conservative religious believers. In the mid-century, religious conservative and indeed far Rightists had been highly active in the mass media, with a powerful foothold in radio. After long struggles, though, the so-called mainline churches had secured a firm dominance over religious broadcasting, while especially in the early 1970s, the government fought to suppress the ultras. (I am here drawing on the important work of my doctoral student, Paul Matzko). This fact encouraged a perception that the American Christian spectrum in fact stretched only to Catholics and liberal Protestants, with more conservative groups marginalized and ignored. The main exception to this rule was, of course, the always visible Billy Graham, whose political statements fell well within the mainstream Cold War consensus.

Insofar as evangelicals and Pentecostals had any media presence, it was as fanatics or hypocrites in popular fiction, either demon figures or joke figures. From a very large repertoire from the 1950s, we think of *Night of the Hunter*, *Inherit the Wind*, or (of course) *Elmer Gantry*. By 1970, say, mentioning evangelicals in a political context was likely to summon visions of Prohibition and the 1920s.

Yet of course, religious politics had never vanished from the United States, and activism covered a wide range of activities. Arguably, without the Roman Catholic Church and its clergy, putting the New Deal into practice would have been a far more difficult task. From the late 1940s, Catholics and evangelicals alike were deeply committed to Cold War causes, in which Communism served a near-diabolical role. At least at national level, issues of personal morality and religion were strictly non-partisan, except that Democrats were likely to be more conservative than Republicans on matters involving sexual morality, such as contraception or censorship. Distinctly evangelical political activism was not in evidence because it was scarcely necessary. The only two exceptions to this rule were the spasmodic conflicts over allegedly excessive Catholic involvement in public life, especially in matters of education; and the related grievance of the Kennedy presidential candidacy in 1960.¹⁰

During the 1960s, though, the substance of American politics changed very substantially, as personal issues and matters of gender and sexuality took center stage in public life, supplanting older concerns. Throughout, also, issues of education and the control of children were central to the new political debates. Conservative religious believers who had usually been quite passive politically were drawn into the political process by debates over education, notably the removal of public prayer and religious symbols from public schools. Also, government efforts to remove the traces of segregation led to IRS campaigns against private Christian schools. During the 1970s, Creationism and creation science proved another bellwether issue, as conservatives bitterly challenged the teaching of evolution in public schools, or at least demanded equal time for their approaches. By the mid-1970s,

⁹ See the important collection of essays in Andrew Preston, Bruce J. Schulman, and Julian E. Zelizer, eds., *Faithful Republic* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2015).

¹⁰ Philip Jenkins, *The Last Acceptable Prejudice* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003).

debates over school busing suggested a determined government campaign to end local community control over schooling.

Together, these issues provoked a religious backlash. Ironically, it was the 1976 campaign of evangelical Jimmy Carter that galvanized those religious voters, although most were rapidly disenchanted with his administration.

Great Awakenings

Adding to the power of explicitly political activism, the US was in the throes of a significant and still under-studied religious revival, which was most obvious in the evangelical/Pentecostal Christian worlds, but which also had ramifications through Catholic and Jewish traditions. Again, we tend to under-state this phenomenon because of the power of the profoundly distorted media narrative of the time. During the post-1968 decade, US media devoted a vast amount of media attention to the upsurge of alternative spiritualities in the US, of Asian-derived faiths, as well as occult and esoteric movements, while also noting the rise of sinister cult movements that preyed on young people. Both claims had some substance, but were tiny in significance besides the mighty growth of evangelical and charismatic movements, both laced with a strong element of apocalyptic belief, and doctrines of spiritual warfare. So potent was this movement that some plausibly dignify it with the title of a Fourth Great Awakening, the latest in a succession of American revivals dating back to the 1790s.¹¹

In fact, the existence of so-called cults is quite relevant to this evangelical-centered revival, as we can best understand the cults as the distant and sensational penumbra of a widespread national enthusiasm. In turn, the existence of those cults actually helped the mainstream revivalists, by providing them with an all-too-visible enemy, thus reinforcing apocalyptic beliefs about the growth of Satanic movements in the Last Days.

I will not attempt an exhaustive survey of this effervescent revival here, but I will just list some major trends. One was the power of new forms of media. Evangelical ideas were popularized and mainstreamed through popular culture, including country music but also appeared in the work of many mainline rock artists. Redemption, salvation and the Devil all became mainstays of popular music. Although we see these trends in all parts of the country, they were particularly associated with the South and West, regions that grew substantially in significance from the 1960s onwards. “Southernization” was a critical cultural trend of the American 1970s.¹²

¹¹ Robert Fogel, *The Fourth Great Awakening and the Future of Egalitarianism* (University of Chicago Press, 2000).

¹² Bruce J. Schulman, *The Seventies* (Cambridge, MA.: Da Capo Press, 2002); David W. Stowe, *No Sympathy for the Devil* (University of North Carolina Press, 2011); Darren Dochuk, *From Bible Belt to Sunbelt* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2011); Larry Eskridge, *God's Forever Family* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013).

Also, the religious explosion transformed American denominations. The so-called mainline churches entered a period of precipitous numerical decline, which stood in marked contrast to the mushroom growth of conservative and Pentecostal denominations, such as the Assemblies of God, or of new churches, like the Vineyard. Within denominations, moreover, conservative and fundamentalist activists aggressively asserted their views to the point of driving out more moderate groups. The best-known instance occurred in the Southern Baptist convention, which was and remains, by far, the country's largest Protestant denomination. Beyond insisting on internal orthodoxy, conservatives also sought more active involvement in explicitly political campaigns.

The various moral issues brought evangelical and Pentecostal Christians into a wholly unprecedented alliance with Catholics, while Cold War confrontations inspired alliances with neo-conservative Jews. The anti-ERA movement proved highly significant for this, in pulling together not just Catholics and Protestants but also Mormons and Jews. The ERA proved so critical because it threatened to use federal law and courts to impose progressive gender values throughout the whole nation, overriding any chance of local resistance or withdrawal. Together with the ERA conflict, campaigns over abortion and gay rights placed the Roman Catholic Church on what was newly defined as the political and religious Right. This was a surprising stance for a church that had for decades espoused socially liberal views on matters such as labor rights and immigration.

Besides the evangelical revival, the US also experienced a reassertion of Jewish identity with the *Baal teshuva* [Master of repentance] movement and the growth of Orthodoxy among the young. Partly, this reflected Jewish pride following the Six Day War of 1967, followed by activism on the part of Soviet Jews in following years. In the 1970s, the movement also became committed to the expansion of settlements in Israel and the occupied territories (more on that topic shortly). Also during the 1970s, concerns about US military weakness drove many Jewish thinkers to found the neo-conservative movement, and thus to more hardline positions in face of the Soviet Union, and international terrorism.

All these movements, also, made full use of the various forms of mass media now becoming popular, including cable television and talk radio. Those media in turn contributed to sophisticated new forms of fund-raising for conservative political campaigns. In 1979, Baptist minister Jerry Falwell created the Moral Majority as the umbrella organization for these various groups. Meanwhile, the appeal of conservative activism to Catholics and Jews disrupted the Democratic Party coalition that dated back to the era of Franklin Roosevelt.

I am of course describing the genesis of what became the potent Reagan coalition of the 1980s, but that political victory was only one aspect of a broader cultural triumph. In 1980, after all, Reagan only won 50.8 percent of the popular vote, and many of his supporters had little sympathy for the religious and moralist militants. Arguably, those skeptics included Reagan himself. Underlying the Reagan Revolution was a more general movement towards moral conservatism, a trend that at the time seemed profoundly improbable given the widespread dissemination of broadly libertarian attitudes towards personal behavior. Watching films or television programs from around 1980, even a very liberated modern audience is likely to be shocked at the frank depiction of some actions, including drug taking and underage sex. Yet in a very short time, a new conservatism triumphed in some areas – by no means all.

Reclaiming Childhood

How could morality activists enforce their views on a country broadly convinced of the argument that consenting adults should generally be allowed to pursue their own pleasures? The answer of course lay in the word “adult.” Especially after 1977, moralist critics successfully sublimated their attacks on immorality and decadence into child protection campaigns. At a time when anti-drug rhetoric was seen as futile if not actually hilarious, people were prepared to believe in the supposed menace of drugs that specifically targeted children, respectively PCP and later crack cocaine. By the early 1980s, the US was committed to a drug war that transformed national social policy and urban policy – indeed, which largely supplanted urban policy.¹³

Movements to liberalize sexuality laws met a ferocious response in campaigns against child abuse, child pornography and prostitution, which firmly restored threatened age of consent laws, and which moreover supplied added ammunition in struggles against gay rights. This movement reached its crescendo with the anti-child abuse movement, a fact of social life that now seems so obvious and fundamental, but which was entirely novel in this era. Prior to 1977, indeed, the phrase “child abuse” usually had no sexual implications. Child protection ideology also took the form of the movement against supposed ritual and Satanic abuse by (non-existent) sinister cults. The vast publicity arising from this movement served further to discredit fringe religions, and to reinforce the fundamentalist message about the upsurge of evils in the years preceding the apocalypse.

Repeatedly, threats to children provided a linchpin for conservative religious campaigns. Understanding this theme requires some sense of the generational shift in progress during the decade, an era of sharply declining birth rates. Much of the liberalism of the 1960s was associated with the baby boom generation, born roughly between 1945 and 1962. Although this generation had shared the hedonistic ideology of the 1960s and early 1970s, they proved a willing audience for the moralist claims of later years, and the need to control and protect the younger generation. This cohort is conveniently labeled as Generation X, the group born between 1962 and 1980. However implausibly, boomers aligned with their elders in crediting the fantastic charges about the dangers posed by, and to, Generation X. That permitted a substantial rollback of the now receding cultural revolution.

The axiom that “leadership is a function of followership” is rarely demonstrated as well as in the Reagan years, when the administration so exemplified popular hopes and fears. During the 1984 presidential election, Reagan won arguably the greatest electoral victory in American history, with 59 percent of the popular vote.

Explaining the Cultural Shift

I have suggested a number of themes that contributed to the new conservatism that became such a force in the US in the late 1970s. Religious changes and constituencies were

¹³ Jenkins, *Decade of Nightmares*.

important parts of this story, but by no means the only significant elements. Among these themes, I would highlight the following:

1. The rejection of a master narrative of seemingly unstoppable progressive, secular liberalism. A widespread perception holds that the nation had taken a radically wrong turn that even threatened its destruction.
2. Rhetorical linkages between national decline and moral crisis. This perception was based on concerns and fears that social changes were subverting traditional gender and family roles, especially in terms of concepts of masculinity.
3. The economic crash gave an acute material basis to generalized malaise, and discrediting existing regimes and assumptions. Cities played a critical role as rhetorical symbols of national decay, weakness and immorality.
4. Economic and political crisis offered an opening to the politics of populist resentment of existing elites. This was accompanied by a widespread interest in conspiracy theories as means of explaining the disasters experienced by the community. The public became willing to consider leaders who personified supposedly traditional values, whose rejection by mainstream elites would be a major part of their attraction and their popular support. New forms of media emerge to disseminate anti-elite messages, outside the control of mainstream authorities.
5. That populist movement draws into activism large sections of the public that had previously been excluded from active participation in the political process, and which largely defined its interests and values in religious terms. We see the re-emergence of fundamentalist and conservative religious groups that had long existed, but which had been largely excluded from official narratives because their views were so at odds with the assumed mainstream of opinion. The secular narrative falls into profound crisis.
6. That religious transformation encourages the popularity of a religious and apocalyptic framework for the critique of authority, with the consequent demonization of enemies. The movement extols the religious destiny of the nation, while older elites and their values are rhetorically excluded from the national community.
7. Throughout, children and young people are central to anti-elite rhetoric. Religious activists were drawn from political passivity by government steps that threatened to impose alien elite values on local communities, especially through seizing control of education. Children were thus threatened directly. Demographic and generational tensions permitted and encouraged a rhetoric of young people being dangerously out of control, and in need of protection and supervision. Moral and conservative reform is essential to save children.
8. New conservative and populist movements and governments extol values of strength and heroism, usually defined in traditionally masculine terms.

It is possible to find some or all of these features and trends, such as grievances and resentments, in a great many eras and social settings. What was new and distinctive about the 1970s, though, was the scale and severity of the economic crash, which so discredited old elites. Radical new political visions suddenly became feasible.

Parallels and Divergences

I have no wish to force American-based explanations on other countries that experienced conservative upsurges around this time, and some of the explanations and themes clearly work better than others. Obviously, tensions and conflicts must be approached differently in an open democratic society like the United States from a dictatorship like Iran, whether we are considering conditions before or after the 1979 Revolution.

In many areas, we do find parallels that are quite close, but one of the weakest themes from this point of view is the generational issue, which emerges so strongly in the United States and several European countries. Such generational conflicts make much more sense in the West than in the Middle East, for instance, and this is presumably connected with the much slower and more limited impact of family change. In countries like Iran or India, for instance, fertility rates remained little changed through this era at least. (They would change dramatically during the 1980s, but that is beyond our present theme). Gender and family issues assuredly do matter in those other societies, but we are in a sense observing situations at different stages of development.

Having said that, much of the structure I describe here actually applies very well. Israel certainly offers important analogies that go beyond a mere coincidence of dates. With Walzer's work so much in mind, it would be futile to offer a detailed account here, but the election of May 1977 marked a "revolution," *HaMahapakh*, as Menachem Begin became Prime Minister as head of a Likud-dominated coalition. This was a startling transformation for a country long dominated by largely secular elites, who tended to dismiss and even despise religious activism. By the 1970s, though, the poorer Mizrahi (Sephardic) population became ever more important, partly because of sharply higher fertility rates and larger family sizes, and they defined their grievances in religious terms.¹⁴

But immediate political events provided the detonator for transformation. Again, the 1973 war proved decisive in discrediting the older political order. Although Western media celebrated Israeli victory in the war, Israelis themselves recognized it as near-fatal catastrophe, which pointed to major failings of intelligence and planning. Golda Meir and Moshe Dayan resigned shortly afterwards, and a delicate coalition took power. Meanwhile, the oil crisis threatened grave inflation, and economic crisis.

The oil shock also persuaded the Americans to seek more balance in their negotiating effort, provoking one of the most tense points in US-Israeli relations. In March 1977, Jimmy Carter framed the Palestinian issue as a human rights problem, suggesting a clear tilt to the Arab side in the conflict. He even espoused the notion of a "right to a homeland." As in so many other nations, corruption scandals contributed to general disgust and disenchantment.

¹⁴ Colin Shindler, *Israel, Likud and the Zionist Dream* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1995); Avi Shilon, *Menachem Begin* (New Haven CT: Yale University Press, 2012).

Battered further by a new Arab domestic insurgency, the confidence and reputation of the Israeli government was in tatters by 1976. That opened the door to a government led by a man who in the early 1970s was generally viewed as unacceptably extreme, intolerant and hawkish, very much like Ronald Reagan in the contemporary United States.

Meanwhile, the shock of the war stirred a more determined Right wing commitment to absolute unity, and the resistance of concessions at all costs. Likud itself was formed to fight the immediate post-war election in December 1973, and appealed strongly to blue-collar voters of Mizrahi background. There was also intense activity on the far Right. It was just four months after the war's end, for instance, that the potent settler movement Gush Emunim was formed, committed to widespread settlement over the whole land claimed for Israel. Like the settlers, Likud referred to the occupied West Bank by the ancient names of Judea and Samaria, claiming total Israeli sovereignty. By 1977, Likud was offering an intoxicating blend of anti-elite messages, condemning traditional elites as corrupt puppets of foreign governments, who wished to dismember and betray the land. At once, the old elites betrayed God's law, and public security. As in the contemporary US, the conservatives were demanding an explicit recognition of the divine role for a holy nation.¹⁵

Apart from general parallels to the US experience, there were also direct linkages. Hardline religious factions in Israel drew heavily on US-born Jewish supporters, and Likud reached out directly to US conservatives. They found a highly sympathetic hearing among evangelicals and Pentecostals, who gave the Jewish return to Israel a central place in their own End Times narrative. The growing Christian Religious Right constituency in the US became passionately ultra-Zionist, potentially weakening the power base of any US president who sought a more balanced position. For Christian Zionists, as for Jewish hardliners, the arguments over land and peace were increasingly framed in terms that were religious, scriptural and apocalyptic.¹⁶

At several points, then, we see analogies between that Israeli experience and the US model sketched earlier. The main analogy is the reassertion of conservative and fundamentalist religious views at the expense of a secular-minded elite ruined by its association with failed policies.

A new elite led a restored nation, pledged to God.

Iran: Betraying the Faithful

Oddly, perhaps, Iran's religious politics offer a still closer analogy to the US pattern. What was new in the late 1970s was not that Islamic beliefs and political ideologies came into existence, but rather they came into public view after long repression. As in the West too, it was especially threats to values of gender and family that proved most explosive. At first sight, we might think that the rapid rise in oil prices should have been an enormous boom to major producer nations like Iran, and should have enriched their regimes. In the

¹⁵ Nachman Ben-Yehuda, *Theocratic Democracy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010); Gadi Taub, *The Settlers* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010).

¹⁶ Yaakov Ariel, *An Unusual Relationship* (New York: NYU Press, 2013).

short term, the Shah's government did indeed profit mightily, but that did not prevent growing economic grievances fueling anti-government protests.¹⁷

From the 1950s, the Shah's regime was strongly devoted to modernization and Westernization, which attracted populist resentment. In some ways, the Shah's economic policies did indeed increase prosperity, boosted by enviable oil wealth, but the resulting urban growth and mass migration caused severe disruption. Between 1955 and 1980, the population of Tehran alone swelled from 1.5 million to almost five million, not counting major growth in suburbs and satellite towns. Government services could never keep pace with this growth, leaving millions of newly urbanized residents in desperate need of facilities for health, education and social welfare - services that in many cases they found from their local mosques. With a characteristic Third World demographic profile, Iranian fertility rates in this era were approaching 7.0 children per woman, with the consequence that large numbers of adolescents and young adults faced poverty and unemployment, and were easily available to be recruited by protest movements.

Urban poverty and despair contrasted painfully with expressions of imperial wealth and power, and Iran's ostentatious alliances with the West and Israel. Against this background, expressions of imperial pageantry – such as the 1971 commemoration of the Iranian monarchy – only served to highlight gross inequality, and imperial megalomania.¹⁸

Foreign alignments became very sensitive from 1973 onwards, with the sudden openness to Islamic politics. For many reasons, Iranians felt little direct involvement with the Arab-Israeli conflict, which among other things involved populations that were both Sunni and Arab. The 1967 Arab-Israeli war had discredited the secularist Arab nationalist regimes of Egypt and Syria, although without offering a real substitute. For some years, Arab hopes were pinned on the romantic revolutionary movements of the Palestinian guerrilla movements – militantly secular, and often Christian-led. In 1973, though, the far more impressive performance by Arab armies in the Yom Kippur war raised the possibility of the states themselves actually defeating Israel, while the subsequent oil embargo showed the potential for economic action against the whole West. Meanwhile, the Palestinian movements dissolved into infighting, usually driven by the machinations of the various states sponsoring their activities.

Almost overnight, Islamic unity was a closer and more promising prospect than it had been for many years, yet the Shah's Iran remained aloof from the embargo, and provided crucial oil supplies to the US. (Ironically, the Shah had been a prime mover in escalating the price of oil, although he rejected the embargo). That act decisively proved the Shah's estrangement from any Islamic loyalties. At once, his government was betraying the faith, the nation, and the Iranian people.

Iran: Gender and Family

¹⁷ I will be drawing throughout on James Buchan, *Days of God* (New York, NY: Simon & Schuster, 2013).

¹⁸ Abbas Milani, *The Shah* (New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011).

I have suggested that elite attempts to control and restructure family patterns were among the most sensitive and potentially disastrous actions that regimes could take. Nowhere, perhaps, is this linkage clearer than in India, where the post-1975 State of Emergency permitted the sterilization of several million poor citizens in the name of population control. The popular fury unleashed vastly benefited the opposition, out of which emerged the Hindu fundamentalist BJP, the Bharatiya Janata Party.

Although India stood at an extreme here, Iran also tried to impose its own near-overnight cultural revolution. Modernization campaigns involved frontal attacks on traditional religious ideas and elites: the Shah's White Revolution was officially proclaimed in 1963. Among many revolutionary changes, the regime promoted women's interests and independence. Women received the suffrage in 1967, Comprehensive family legislation in 1967 significantly raised the minimum age at marriage from around thirteen to eighteen, while restricting polygamy. The government tried to make divorce more difficult, making it harder for men to dismiss unwanted spouses unilaterally with little effort or ceremony. Abortion was legalized. By the early 1970s, Iran was one of the leading non-Western nations in terms of women's equality and women's rights. Apart from official policies, social attitudes were transformed by the arrival of television, which shoed many Western programs, with their depictions of women and of romantic relationships.¹⁹

One particularly sensitive area was the veil, which had actually been banned by the Shah's father in the 1930s. Although not actually illegal in later years, the veil became a focus of gender politics. Widely abandoned by Westernized elites, by the 1970s its use became a symbol of resistance to the regime.

Traditionalist critiques of the Shah also drew on other sexual themes. Although the regime had not sought any liberalizing of laws against homosexuality, critics widely deployed anti-gay charges against the court and the elites, suggesting that such practices reflected the Shah's systematic decadence. One sensational issue involved the alleged mock marriage conducted between two men at Court. Anger at such alleged misconduct fueled the ferocious anti-gay reaction of the Khomeini years, when homosexuals faced the death penalty.²⁰

Media and Revolution

The Iranian Revolution is a vast and complex topic, which is far beyond the scope of the present paper. I would though emphasize one factor that I have already stressed in the US context, namely the central role of new forms of media in mobilizing populist sentiment.

Religious conservatives naturally challenged the regime through the 1970s, but their voices were muted in multiple forms. Apart from the direct threat of repression and secret police activity, the regime and its US allies bought off many determined opponents and persuaded them to exercise self-censorship. The declining US role in such activities after 1977 proved

¹⁹ Janet Afary, *Sexual Politics in Modern Iran* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009).

²⁰ For the post-revolutionary regime, see Annabelle Sreberny and Massoumeh Torfeh, eds., *Cultural Revolution in Iran* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2013).

highly damaging to the Shah's survival. As the Shah offered liberalization, so mosques and their weekly sermons became a primary means of distributing anti-regime propaganda.²¹

Even before that, though, censorship could not silence the exiled radical clergy, who deployed innovative techniques of media and propaganda. Based in France, the Ayatollah Khomeini frequently preached incendiary sermons against the Shah's White Revolution, and among other things urged soldiers not to fire on demonstrators. Once these messages were smuggled into Iran on cassette tapes, nothing could prevent their near limitless duplication and circulation. Khomeini's radicals also benefited from the US-sponsored improvement of the once-inadequate Iranian telephone system. Overseas activists could read Khomeini's words over the now efficient telephone lines, so that Iran-based activists could transfer them to audiotapes.

Through such means, the Islamist opposition achieved an impact far beyond anything available to the secular anti-regime forces. Victory fell to the best propaganda networks, and the most efficient use of available mass media. Religions have the virtue of multiple centuries of experience in such matters.

Secularism: The Exceptional Case

At the beginning of this paper, I noted the puzzlement and even embarrassment with which both commentators and historians treat the rise of conservative religious politics. Commonly, they seek to explain it as some kind of unnatural departure from "real" or natural political development, possibly arising from the cynical machinations of political factions or economic interests. Viewed globally though, we might well ask whether secular and progressive politics can claim any more normal or natural status than religious or reactionary views.

For many years, Western and especially European scholars examined religious allegiances around the world, commonly with the intent of finding why particular areas and faith traditions resisted seemingly obvious trends towards secularization. From another point of view, though, we might rather ask why it is Europe that is so secular, and whether the rest of the world might not in fact represent the religious norm. Sociologist Grace Davie, for instance, writes of Europe as "the exceptional case" in these matters.²²

Might we apply a similar perspective to the rise of religious politics during the 1970s? Instead of asking why the world took such a bizarre swing in this era, we might rather ask how regimes could have realistically hoped to maintain secular political assumptions in the face of the widespread religious convictions of the people they were governing – whether we are looking at the US or Israel, India or Iran, Egypt or Turkey. Indeed, we should be impressed that they succeeded as long as they did. Aggressive modernizers lasted until their policies seemed to strike directly at families, and children, or at least could so be portrayed by conservative critics. At that point, radical modernizers became their own gravediggers.

²¹ Michael Axworthy, *Revolutionary Iran* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).

²² Grace Davie, *Europe: The Exceptional Case* (Darton, Longman and Todd, 2002)

In retrospect, perhaps it is the seemingly secular 1950s and 1960s that should strike us as so bizarre, and in such urgent need of explanation. They were the really exceptional case.