

Scott W. Hibbard, *Religious Politics and Secular States: Egypt, India and the United States*, Baltimore, Md.: John Hopkins University Press, 2010

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If a social scientist writing in the 1950s had claimed that religious politics would be among the most fervently discussed topics in the first decade of the twenty-first century, she/he would most probably have been laughed at since everyone was convinced that religion was doomed to fade away as modernity progressed. However, things did not evolve that way: the 1980s and 90s saw the rebirth of religious movements as important political powers, and things got even more complex after 9/11. With America's subsequent attacks on Iraq and Afghanistan, we all got used to hearing about 'religious terror' and 'religious fundamentalists.' Building on this background, Scott W. Hibbard's book, *Religious Politics and Secular States*, pursues the answers to a very well-known but still intriguing and unanswered question: If modernity was supposed to wipe religion off the public and political sphere, why "has religion – and particularly a conservative and often illiberal rendering of religious tradition – remained so influential" (6) in today's world? More specifically, how can we explain the resurgence of religious politics "given the marginalization of illiberal religious ideologies in the mid-twentieth century"? (6) Hibbard tries to explain this phenomenon by looking at three separate geographies with different political histories yet with surprisingly similar state structures: Egypt, India and the United States. Focusing on the political histories of these three ostensibly secular states, he tries to come up with an explanation as to why and how, in the last three decades, exclusionary religious ideas gained strength and credibility in these formerly pluralist countries.

To that aim, Hibbard starts the book off with a detailed look at the literature on religion and politics and presents an alternative framework for understanding contemporary religious politics. He suggests that, in contrast to the claims of modernization and secularization theories, religion is central to the formation of nationalist and communitarian ideologies. According to him, "religious fundamentalisms do not reflect a conflict between tradition and modernity ... rather these are ideologies that embody a selective interpretation of religious tradition and were explicitly developed for a modern political context." (20) His argument is two-fold: First, he believes that the demise of secular ideologies did not happen suddenly in the 90s as many theorists claim, but had been well under way since the late 1960s and early 1970s, when state actors decided to embrace religion. Second, and more importantly for his overall theory, it was only when the state elites decided to

support and promote an overtly religious discourse that religious revivalism happened. Hence, for Hibbard, previous studies on religion and politics have been wrong to ascribe the world-wide religious resurgence to a failed modernity project or to the efforts of a bunch of crazy religious fundamentalists. Even though 'the failure of modernity' and 'the strength of religious fundamentalists' are important factors, they cannot explain, on their own, the ideological transformation these countries went through. Hibbard believes that any comprehensive and realistic explanation needs to take into consideration the role state actors played in fostering religious ideologies and suppressing ideologies associated with a more liberal and non-sectarian world view.

Making use of a comparative-historical approach, Hibbard analyzes the political history of Egypt, India and the United States in nine chapters. Under consideration in his comparison is the revival of conservative Islam in Egypt, Hindu nationalism in India and the Christian right in the United States. Allocating two chapters to each country, he first looks at the period when a more pluralist understanding of citizenship was in place in these countries, and then focuses on the later period when a more exclusionary religious nationalist discourse started to overtake the liberal politics of the 1950s and early 60s. The chapters on Egypt entitled "The Rise and Decline of Egyptian Secularism" and "The Islamization of Egyptian Politics" concentrate on the Nasser, Sadat and Mubarak regimes, while "The Rise and Decline of Indian Secularism" and "Embedding Communalism in Indian Politics" trace the rise of the Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) via a closer look at the Nehru and Gandhi periods and the rule of Congress Party. The last two chapters, "The Rise and Decline of American Secularism" and "Religious Nationalism in the Reagan-Bush Era," are devoted to the rise of American religious nationalism, beginning with Nixon and peaking in the period under Reagan and Bush. These chapters present a detailed narrative of the rise of Christian nationalism and the decline of American civil religion which was to resurge only in the Clinton and Obama periods

One might think that there is nothing new about Hibbard's account, as there is a plethora of books written on the relationship between religion and politics. However, even though the resurgence and the growing influence of religious movements is a 'well-beaten' topic, Hibbard manages to make a valuable contribution to this discussion in at least three different ways: First and foremost is his attempt to highlight the role of state elites in the promotion and revival of exclusionary religious conservatism through their use of religion as a tool to legitimize their authority and preserve the status quo. As Hibbard himself puts it, what the literature usually overlooks is the fact that the so-called "secular state leaders and other mainstream political actors worked to normalize illiberal religious ideologies and helped to bring the ideas and activists associated with fundamentalist movements into the

ideological mainstream.” (xiii) As Hibbard worked for the U.S. government in the 80s and 90s, he saw firsthand the manipulation of ‘religious sentiments’ and ‘the right-wing populism’ of the Reagan era, and he uses his personal experience and insider knowledge to draw the reader into his argument.

Hibbard’s work is also important in that it conceptualizes religions as multifaceted entities, rather than as monolithic ones. One of the biggest problems extant in the literature on religion and politics is that most works deem certain religions as more prone to religious violence, while others are seen as free of this tendency. Aware of the problems such an approach may cause, Hibbard suggests that we need to pay attention to not only inter- but also intra-religious and intra-communal conflicts if we are to make sense of why and how conservative religious movements prosper in the political arena: “The real ‘clash of civilizations,’ in short, occurs within traditions, not between them” (27).

This book is a successful display of the strength of comparative-historical methodology. Both the comparisons and the historical approach Hibbard uses help shed much light on this long-discussed and complex topic. The biggest contribution Hibbard seems to make to the field of comparative-historical social science is the comparison of three countries which would otherwise be thought of as very different and hence unsuitable for comparison. Even though the field of religious nationalism does not lack comparative studies, most of them are ‘regional’ studies (e.g. the Middle East, South/Southeast Asia or Eastern Europe), comparing cases in the same region with one another. Though these studies are valuable to a certain extent, focusing on only one region unfortunately contributes to the understanding that certain religions or certain communities are more prone to religious and/or ethnic violence. Hibbard, on the other hand, shows us that whether it be Islam, Hinduism or Christianity, *religions* have an exclusionary aspect, and they can become harmful when used as a tool of manipulation by strong state actors, and especially when combined with ethnic and nationalist chauvinisms.

Hibbard’s study is not free of minor shortcomings, however. The biggest danger in Hibbard’s account lies in the fact that he credits almost all the historical autonomy to state elites, which creates an ‘agency’ problem regarding the actors in religious fundamentalist or conservative religious movements. Hibbard sees religion as a tool to be used by political actors, and is thus likely to be criticized as using an ‘instrumentalist’ approach which sees people as automatons to be controlled, either by state elites or by insurgent groups. Aware of this danger, Hibbard states in the introduction that his aim is not “to argue that religious revivalism is simply a matter of elite manipulation or that social movements are unimportant [or] religion is devoid of causal properties.” (20) Be that as it may, as the book progresses

Hibbard cannot help portraying state actors and their decisions as the primary reasons for the resurgence of religious movements. Furthermore, after finishing all nine chapters, one still keeps wondering why the state elites would change their minds in the late 60s and would decide to support illiberal religious movements rather than repress them. Hibbard tries to explain this phenomenon by suggesting that it was easier for the elites to preserve the status quo with the help of religious discourse, rather than with liberal policies. Regardless, the reader is left without a satisfying answer to this question.

These minor glitches aside, Hibbard's book is a must-read for those interested in religious politics and the modern day revival of influential conservative religious movements. It is a refreshing book in that it not only criticizes the fruitless dichotomies in the existing literature (e.g. modernity vs. tradition, secular societies vs. religious societies), but also offers a nice alternative to these theories by suggesting that secular states can and do include religious discourse in their policies, and that religions are not inherently anti-modern as they have both liberal and illiberal interpretations. If we are to fully understand the proper role of religion in today's political arena, and not succumb to the fallacies of the 'war on terror', 'religious terrorists' or 'the clash of civilizations,' then we definitely need more nuanced studies like Hibbard's.

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