1. Introduction

When Muslim militants explode bombs in the Middle East, Christian extremists attack abortion clinics in the United States, Jewish settlers clash with soldiers in Israel, Hindu activists destroy mosques in India, and angry Buddhist monks demonstrate against peace in Sri Lanka, are these acts of protest about religion or are they about something else? They do not appear to be aimed at religious issues—at least not if one defines ‘religion’ in the narrow sense of theological positions or particular doctrines. The anger of many of the groups is propelled by politics and a deep mistrust of the secular state (see Juergensmeyer 2004, 2008 for further discussion of this idea).

The antisecular paranoia of activist religious groups is often fueled by matters unrelated to religion, such as economic or cultural issues, or by the poignant sense of being displaced from, or denied, a homeland. This is what Robert Pape has argued in an intriguing book, *Dying to Win*, which relies on statistical surveys of recent incidents of suicide bombing in South Asia and the Middle East to show that religion—in the sense of piety or ascription to beliefs—has little to do with them (see Pape 2005).

From al Qaeda to the Christian militia, today’s religious activists have entered the political fray for reasons that most in the Western world would describe as social or political. They are not trying to convert others. They are not trying to destroy other people’s faiths. They are almost uniformly critical of secular politics and secular modernism, but none of them attempts to force others to join their ranks. Nor—Islamophobes aside—does anyone think that forms of religious piety lead to violence. Though sometimes Islam is accused wrongly of supporting suicide attacks, no one blames Christianity for abortion clinic bombers, nor Judaism for militant Zionist settler movements.

Though ‘religion’—however we think of that term—is not the cause of violence, it is also absurd to claim that there is not a religious side to the violent images and dogmatic claims of today’s religious activists. Although the motivations might not be religious in a narrow sense, the acts of violence perpetrated by many activists groups in the past three decades are identified with religious language, symbols, identities, and leadership roles. The grand narratives of religious scenarios and the absolutism of authoritarian claims buttressed by the religious images of cosmic war are—if not the problem—problematic. Thinking of social conflict in the
magnified theatrical images of sacred war may raise large crowds in support of political ventures but they also harden positions and make them less easy to negotiate or resolve.

Yet questions remain. Why have religious language and identities become involved at this moment of history? Why is the contemporary critique of the social order, in many parts of the world, stated in religious terms, and why have religious ideas and images been posed as an attractive way of thinking about alternatives to social order? The very fact that it is the secular state that is the target implies a religious basis to the critique. For this reason one answer to these questions may lie in the very distinction between secularism and religion that dates to the time of the European Enlightenment, and which has given rise to the religious opposition to the secular politics of today.

2. The Rise of the Secular State

Secular nationalism as we know it today – as the ideological ally of the nation-state – began to appear in England and America in the eighteenth century. Only by then had the idea of a nation-state taken root deeply enough to nurture a loyalty of its own, unassisted by religion or tradition, and only by then had the political and military apparatus of the nation-state expanded sufficiently to encompass a large geographic region. Prior to that time, the administrative reach of the political center was so limited that rulers did not govern in ‘the modern sense’ (Giddens 1985: 24; see also Gellner 1983; Calhoun 1998). Although there were embryonic forms of secular nationalism before then, the power of the state had been limited. According to some historians, secular nationalism was promoted in thirteenth-century France and England in order to buttress the authority of secular rulers after the clergy had been removed from political power earlier in the century. In the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, there was a reaction against central secular-national governments; the next great wave of laicization occurred in the sixteenth century (Strayer 1971: 262-265).

Until the advent of the nation-state, the authority of a political center did not systematically and equally cover an entire population, so that what appeared to be a single homogeneous polity was in fact an aggregation of fiefdoms. The further one got from the center of power, the weaker the grip of centralized political influence, until at the periphery entire sections of a country might exist as a political no-man’s-land. For that reason, one should speak of countries prior to the modern nation-state as having frontiers rather than boundaries. Though this was originally a European phenomenon the same process occurred later in India and other parts of the world (Embree 1989: 67-84).