“ONLY WHEN RELIGION does something other than mediate between man and God does it retain a high place in people’s attentions and in their politics,” observes Steven Bruce—but in the context of Northern Ireland.¹

But just exactly when does religion do something other than mediate between man and God? The moment religion finds some resonance among the public on political issues, it is sure sign that some need is not otherwise being met effectively by existing political means. Those needs can be multiple. This chapter looks at one of the key reasons for the vigor of political Islam: the immensely variegated roles it plays in the politics and society of the Muslim world.

A ROLE IN SEARCH OF AN ACTOR

In the early 1950s Gamal Abdel Nasser remarked that Egypt’s vigorous activism in the Middle East was in response to “a role in search of an actor”—the existence of certain needs and aspirations in the region, a role not being filled. He won the adulation of the Arab masses in the process of attempting to fill this vacuum, and ultimately failed. The vacuum has reemerged. Indeed, the concept is a potent one: how does a leader or a movement successfully perceive a political vacuum and proceed to fill it? The question relates directly to the issue raised at the outset of the chapter: what needs, conditions, and circumstances invite religion to play a broader role in society than simply intermediating between Man and God?

Today Islamist movements meet a deeply perceived public need in the Muslim world, a need that continues to be felt after several decades of activism that have not yet reached their end. Otherwise how does one explain these movements’ success and support? It is quite possible that the role of political Islam in politics will be sharply diminished at some point in this new century, but *one of two things must happen:* either the conditions that helped impel Islamism into political life will have to weaken or disappear, or some other force or ideology will arise to meet the need more effectively.

Obviously no political movement or ideology rides high forever; movements tend to be cyclical and responsive to specific needs at specific times. But neither do ideological movements completely die: having fulfilled a certain historical role and function, they simply recede in exhaustion and hibernate until new circumstances arise in which a fresh variation of their message might regain political and social relevance. That has been the history of intermittent Islamic resurgence since Islam began. But this time there is a brand new phenomenon here: this is the *first time that Islamic resurgence has played on the stage of modern politics in a democratizing and globalizing era.***

Islam itself, of course, is not a political ideology but a religion. Yet Islamism is different: while it has some aspects of political ideology, this ideology takes various forms. Islamism is a broad term embracing a body of quite variegated and even contradictory political, social, psychological, and economic—even class—functions. It is represented by differing types of movements that draw general inspiration from Islam. Islamist movements today are merely the latest wave among the many political and social movements in Islamic history that have developed out of the faith and culture under specific historical conditions. Islamism in some of its current guises will certainly run its course and recede in popularity and importance over time—indeed, that process is already observable in a few more fringe or extremist movements. But Islamism as a phenomenon will never fully disappear, because its message in one sense is timeless for Muslims: that Islam has something important to say about the political and social order. Political Islam will thus evolve and change, divide and unite, wax or wane in its popularity, but it will not disappear. We are talking here about multiple understandings and interpretations of Islam in politics and society; hence, it is more accurate to discuss “Islamisms.”

In the end we are talking less about Islam than we are about Muslims—what can inspired Muslims bring to the political forum to help resolve current problems of the Muslim world? We are speaking not about what Islam is, but what Muslims want. Islamists have proven adept at offering striking critiques of today’s realities, but so far considerably less ability to offer new political solutions from a position of power.