# The Social Role of Religion in Contemporary India

*Ainslie T. Embree*
*Columbia University*

A modest indication of the contents of this paper would need a lengthy subtitle: "An impressionistic statement of the activities of some religious groups in selected areas of North India." And to this must be added an immediate disclaimer: there will be no references, except in the most oblique way, to the relation of religious ideologies to economic development.[1] Instead, for reasons I shall try to make clear, I shall focus on areas of tension and conflict where a religious vocabulary is used to articulate the aims and aspirations of the participants.

That the sources of information available for making a comment on the religious situation in modern India are so astonishingly meager is immediately relevant. Modern Indian religion has not received much scholarly attention in the West. Farquhar's great study has long been outdated, but it has never been replaced by a survey of the same caliber.[2] In India itself there are few scholarly journals and reviews dealing with contemporary religious phenomena,[3] and in the daily press, religion is almost always bad news. Communal riots; the support of untouchability by the Sankaracharya of Puri; the killings in Kashmir that followed the theft of the Prophet's hair; stories of human sacrifice at the laying of the foundations for a bridge in Rajasthan—these are the religious images that emerge from the Indian press.

Many thoughtful Indians, by no means personally ill-disposed to religious values and customs, have been led by such phenomena to conclude that the only creative role religion can play in India is to accept a self-denying ordinance—to remove itself from the political arena, where its intrusion serves only to hinder the search for social justice. A. B. Shah, one of the most interesting of Indian social critics, recently argued in this fashion quite explicitly: "India has enough problems to tackle apart

from those created by the obscurantism of its communal parties and quasi-political groups; if religion is allowed to complicate these problems, we may as well give up all hope of creating a modern, secular democracy and a single nation out of the diverse groups constituting the people of India."[4] This is not a new note in Indian political thought; it echoes the criticism that such very different thinkers as Rabindranath Tagore and M. N. Roy made about the direction in which Gandhi led the nationalist movement.[5] Yet surely Gandhi's assessment—partly intuitive, partly the result of shrewd social analysis—that Indian nationalism would have to be articulated in a religious vocabulary was more realistic than that of his critics. Those who pleaded for a strictly political vocabulary may have been on the side of the angels of rationality, but they were asking Indian society to be other than what it is. This is not to suggest that Indian society is in some sense peculiarly spiritual or religious in contrast to other societies, but only that the vocabulary of political and social discourse in India in the modern period has been inextricably related to what, for lack of a better phrase, must be termed religious concerns. In this reality is rooted the response of the dominant religious forces in India to the political groups that are attempting to bring about rapid social change.

The conflict and tensions produced as religious formulations of society confront the agents of change have often been presented as the result of a headlong clash between the forces of tradition (or reaction) and those of modernity (or progress). Gunnar Myrdal, for example, has spoken of such a clash as a major motif of the unfolding Asian drama. One sees, he suggests, "a set of inner conflicts operating on people's minds: between their high-pitched aspirations and the bitter experience of a harsh reality; between the desire for change and improvement and mental reservations and inhibitions about accepting the consequences and paying the price."[6] This almost mythic vision is no doubt valid; but one should not assume that it takes the form of a collision between the defenders of traditional religion and the exponents of modernity. What is happening in India is, I would suggest, something much more complicated and more subtle.

As a basis for considering this conflict and tension, I would like to make three general observations. First of all, the spokesmen for traditional religious values are not merely defending the past, nor are they reactionary in any simplistic sense. They

are, on the other hand, profoundly radical; for they, quite as much as the modernizers, have a vision of the future they intend to work for. The defenders of tradition are "modern men," quite as modern in their education, their life styles, and certainly in their political techniques as those who identify themselves with programs of change and modernization in politics and society. They have their own program of change and a blueprint of the good society, however fantastic it may seem to those who do not share their premises and their concerns. Second, in advancing their programs of change, the religious groups do not come in conflict so directly or so importantly with the agents of modernity as they do with other religious groups who have competing, or alternative, visions of the good society based on other perceptions of reality. As I will try to suggest, this fact explains both the ferocity and the increasing frequency of communal riots. And third, it seems obvious that those who care most deeply for traditional religious formulations—or, to put it another way, those whose personal identities are dependent upon such formulations—are most unlikely to cooperate in furthering the social and religious change desired by the modernizers. There has always been a curious ambivalence in the thinking of the modernizers on this point. Nehru at one time would speak of those who supported traditional religious life styles as obscurantists; at another, he would appeal for their cooperation in instituting a new social order. The modernizers never seem to ask themselves: Why should the guardians of tradition cooperate in its destruction? Perhaps one can summarize these three points by saying that the traditionalists—or the radical right, to use a more meaningful term—are not the debris of a retreating sea of faith, but are as much a part of the wave of the future as are the spokesmen for modernity.

The goals of the traditionalists can perhaps be most clearly perceived in relation to the aims of the modernizers. In reacting to the modernizers, the traditionalists tend to formulate their own view of the good society. The attitudinal changes desired, and the social and political forms for institutionalizing them, can be fairly summed up under four headings: national unity, social justice, political democracy, and secularism. These are the commonplaces of political rhetoric, of the five-year plans, of the Constitution itself. There is no need to spell out the specific content of these goals—except to say they all entail profound changes in the fabric of Indian society. Karl Marx was pre-

mature when he allocated to the British the credit for causing
the only social revolution ever known in Asia by undermining
the traditional society, which "had restrained the human mind
into the smallest possible compass, making it the unresisting tool
of superstition, enslaving it beneath traditional rules, depriving it
of grandeur and historical energies."[7] It is only in our own time
that this process seems to be really under way, with its agents
coming from within the society itself. Each of the goals relates
immediately to the interests of the articulate spokesmen for re-
ligion, because, as already stressed, they too have their vision for
the future. It is perhaps fair to say that what may be defined as
the spokesmen for the dominant political culture of India at the
present time—the groups who hold actual political power, the
heirs of the Indian National Congress even though many have
long since gone into one form or another of opposition—are in
agreement with regard to the importance of these goals, al-
though not with regard to the mode of implementing them. It
is when one turns to the other side of the equation—the tradi-
tional systems of life and thought—that the sources of tension
become manifest.

There is no need to stress the fact that since Indian religious
systems are not monolithic, it is impossible to make any gen-
eralizations about their responses to social change that cannot
be easily challenged. Even more than with most systems of be-
lief, those of India display an internal fragmentation that is de-
rived from geographical particularism as well as from historic
doctrinal and intellectual developments. But keeping in mind
that North India is our main focus, the responses of Hinduism,
which are obviously of primary importance, can, without too
much violence being done to historic realities, be fitted into two
main categories.[8] The first of these responses can be included
under the blanket term of "Neo-Hinduism," which covers
numerous attempts made in the last century and a half to relate
Hindu religion and culture to the pressures historically asso-
ciated with the establishment of British political power. It has
sought to purge Hinduism of what had come to be regarded as
corrupt elements, by declaring, on the one hand, that they were
not integral to its structures and by asserting, on the other, that
all religions have a common core of truth. Many of the leaders
famous in modern India's social and political life would fall
into this category, including Ram Mohan Roy, Vivekananda,
Aurobindo, and, above all, Gandhi. In this response, which

denies the importance of those outward characteristics that are usually regarded as definitive, Gandhi played a crucial role, not so much because of any particular theological subtlety in his teaching but because he made this interpretation of religion of central importance in Indian politics.

The secularism that is one of the most cherished goals of the dominant Indian political culture is not derived from modern Western political practice, as are so many aspects of modern Indian thought, but from Gandhi's translation of nationalist ideals into the vocabulary of Neo-Hinduism. The theological basis of Indian secularism is not a denial of the claims of religion but an assertion—one can say a profoundly dogmatic one—that all religions are true. Anything that appears to be socially harmful can be abandoned—what is left will be the kernel of truth. This is what Gandhi meant when he said, "For me, truth is God," which is very different in its implications from the Christian formula, "God is truth." For Gandhi and his followers such an interpretation of religion was the answer to India's most pressing political problem—the antagonism between Hindus and Muslims—as well as of such social problems as untouchability. Secularism, in the Indian sense, is an attempt to create the basic requisite of a nationalist state, a homogeneous population.

The Neo-Hindu, or Gandhian, solution will always have an attraction for men of good will, but patently it did not work. Many serious and knowledgeable students of modern India have wondered if Gandhi's use of a religious vocabulary—inevitably Hindu in origin—did not in fact exacerbate the political and social relations between the Hindus and Muslims. As A. B. Shah has suggested, Gandhi—and this is true for Neo-Hinduism in general—by overlooking the historically determined character of man's culture and institutions, misunderstood the intractable nature of India's social problems, especially the basis of conflict between religious groups.[9] Mistaking the form for the substance, Neo-Hinduism supposed that if it could be demonstrated that all religions had common aims, this would end conflict, not understanding that the modern religious labels were almost accidental to the deep divisions of Indian society. One might almost say that Gandhi, who was so deeply conscious of the need for personal purity, did not take seriously the problem of human passion.

There is another factor in the Neo-Hindu approach to con-

flict that must be noted: a seemingly complete inability to understand that Muslims and Christians, to the degree that they are committed to their faiths, find their identities in membership in a religiously defined community. For Hinduism at the deepest level, on the other hand, salvation is ultimately individualistic, concerned with transcending the social order. The statement that outside the church there is no salvation is both abhorrent and childish to a Neo-Hindu, while it must be fundamental to anyone who truly lives within the confines of the Semitic faiths. Neo-Hinduism's solution to the fact of religious pluralism is thus a denial of the basis of what to Muslims is the great reality—the sense of community. The grimmest commentary on the irrelevance of the Neo-Hindu answer is given in the story of the bitter religious riots of the last few years.

One turns, then, to the other category of responses made by Hinduism in coming to terms with the modern world: that of the groups known variously as Hindu communalists, Hindu reactionaries, or, as I prefer, the Hindu Radical Right. This response is represented institutionally by such groups as the Jana Sangh, the Hindu Mahasabha, and the R.S.S. They are, as I have suggested above, radical, not reactionary, because the goals they formulate and the solutions they propose would as truly transform Indian society as would those of the Radical Left. Their literature, especially in Hindi, is filled with programs for change, however absurd these may seem to those with different ideological commitments. The Hindu Radical Right does not appeal to the peasants, whose religious beliefs and practices have been scarcely touched by the modern world, but rather to those, particularly in the urban areas, who are most conscious of the pressures of change.[20] This means, one can hazard a guess, that the appeal of such groups will not decrease as modernization progresses in India—as liberals hopefully assume—but rather will increase.

The thrust of the Hindu Radical Right can be seen most significantly in attitudes towards the four major goals of the dominant political culture. These goals—national unity, social justice, democracy, and secularism—are not rejected by the Radical Right, but rather are transformed through redefinition. They allege that it is the dominant political groups who, through a false interpretation of the goals, are destroying India. National unity, they argue, means an integrated, homogeneous society; and this can only be found by recognizing that Indian culture

and Hindu culture are synonymous terms. This means, of course, that the place of the religious minorities is at once called into question, for the essence of Islam and Christianity—the belief in salvation through membership in a collective social body—seems to be a denial of national unity. Territorial integrity, a basic concern for any modern nation state, is also given a religious coloring, for the threat to that integrity comes from such groups as the Christian tribesmen in the northeastern hills or from *India irredenta,* Pakistan. Social justice is also given a different definition—one, the Hindu Radical Right would insist, that draws upon the Hindu understanding of the nature of society, not upon the alien ideas of the West. There is vagueness in programmatic details, but with the continual references to the ideal of *dharma* as enshrined in the *varna* concept, it does not take a very imaginative reading between the lines to see who will be the hewers of wood and drawers of water. As for democracy, nothing in India, as elsewhere, is more easily shaped to special needs. A quotation from a Jana Sangh newspaper suggests the tone and temper of the democracy advocated by the Hindu Radical Right: "In any democratic country only the majority has rights. . . . Some Muslims will get terribly disturbed after reading this . . . [but] the minority will have only the rights which the majority bestows upon them at its pleasure."[11]

Secularism is, of course, the obvious area for redefinition, with the meaning given to it subsumed by the interpretation of the other goals of the society.[12] A succinct summary was given some years ago by M. S. Golwalkar, the best-known spokesman for the Hindu Right, when he stated, "The non-Hindu people in Hindustan must adopt the Hindu culture and religion, must learn to respect and hold in reverence Hindu religion, and must entertain no ideas but those of glorification of the Hindu race and culture . . . claiming no privileges . . . not even citizens' rights."[13] Such views are not put forward as part of any party's political platform, but they are part of the rhetoric of religious appeal. Such a quotation, however extreme and perhaps atypical, reinforces the point made at the beginning—that the Radical Right does not engage in frontal attacks on modernity so much as on other religious groups. The demand for a ban on cow-slaughter illustrates this quite neatly, for it is at once a way of embarrassing the government's devotion to secularism and of attacking Muslims.[14] A ban on cow-slaughter would be obvi-

ously sectarian legislation; but its symbolic appeal is very considerable, although it seems to be confined to the urban areas, having less impact on the countryside. The attack on Urdu in Bihar and Uttar Pradesh is defended as a movement towards national unity, but the goal is the homogeneous society characterized by the dominance of Hindu culture.

A rather bizarre illustration of the ambiguities of secularism was provided in 1969 when the Sankaracharya of Puri, one of the most prestigious figures of Hindu orthodoxy, began making public speeches in which he stated that ritual pollution and the idea of untouchability were scripturally sanctioned. Not surprisingly, he was able to quote chapter and verse.[16] The fierce public outcry that followed indicated how sensitive a nerve he had touched. The leaders of the Jana Sangh were content to say that they disagreed with the Acharya's interpretation of the shastras, but many spokesmen for the modernizing groups, true to the Neo-Hindu approach, began earnest exercises in textual criticism to show that the scriptures, far from sanctioning untouchability, preached equality and brotherhood. They had missed the point that the Acharya, who appears to be an intelligent man, was not seeking to obstruct change; quite the contrary, as his speeches made plain, he was wanting to bring about what he regarded as a change for the better, a society based on what he considered a rational view of human nature and the cosmic order.

The Radical Right defines itself not only in relation to Neo-Hinduism, but more importantly, in many ways, in relation to the Muslim community. The use of the word "community" is misleading in that it always carries with it a sense of cohesion and homogeneity, when, in fact, Islam in India is almost as fragmented as Hinduism. Muslim writers correctly insist that there is no Muslim response as such in India, since Muslim society is deeply divided by linguistic, cultural, social, and regional differences.[16] But as in the case of Hinduism, it is possible to identify two main responses to the pressures of modern social and political changes that are of great importance, with both being analogous to the two main categories of Hindu responses.

One is a movement of accommodation that has had rather different manifestations at different periods. In the late nineteenth century, as represented by Sir Sayyid Ahmad Khan and the Aligarh movement, it identified itself with a relatively

cautious program of theological revisionism and a political platform that opposed the democratic implications of the Indian National Congress. Then, under the impetus of Gandhian nationalism in the 1920's and 1930's, a new variety of accommodation with both the modern world and Indian nationalism found expression in the group associated with Jamia Millia Islamia in Delhi. Irenic in its approach to other faiths and dedicated to a nationalism that could contain a religious pluralism, this group claimed for Islamic culture a significant role in the creation of a modern nation-state.[17] Yet, attractive as its approach is to outsiders, the reinterpretations of the Islamic role advocated by Jamia Millia Islamia do not seem to have engendered a very deep response from Indian Muslims. The reasons for this are partly theological, having roots in the nature of Islam as an intellectual system, but more immediately in the political and social conditions under which the Muslim community exists in India today.

Almost all observers would agree that whether the objective situation justifies it or not, a deep sense of frustration and anxiety characterizes much of the Indian Muslim community. According to Dr. Abid Husain of Jamia Millia University, it was the Muslims of India who had to pay the heaviest price for partition and independence, "not only in the form of spiritual and mental anguish but also in that of economic depression and educational and cultural backwardness."[18] It may be argued that the condition of Indian Muslims is no worse than that of millions of other Indians located in similar interstices of the social system, but the Muslims' perception of their situation as isolated from the mainstream of national life remains. There are two aspects of this perception, as a perceptive journalist pointed out in an article in the *New York Times* that was based on careful reporting. The Muslims are "a remnant in their own eyes," cut off from the Islamic state many of them in fact had supported; and because of this, they are in the eyes of the Hindu majority "a potential fifth column."[19]

Out of this situation comes the other response to social change, one that is analogous in many ways to that of the Hindu Radical Right. There are a number of Muslim groups that fall into this category, but the most important both in terms of its following and the articulation of its ideas is the Jama'at-i-Islami.[20] Founded in 1941 by Maulana Maududi to define and defend the concept of an Islamic state, it remained quiescent for

117

some years after partition. Then, admidst the increasing frustration of the Indian Islamic community, it began to engender a wide response. Like the Hindu Radical Right, it accepts the general goals of the dominant political culture—national unity, social justice, democracy, and secularism—but then it redefines them. The Western idea of the state comes in for special denunciation as corrupt in its very essence, for the true state must be the expression of God's guidance. The idea of re-creating an Islamic state in modern India is, from a rational point of view, wholly fanciful; but the Jama'at-i-Islami represents the politics of a despair that is beyond reasonable political calculation. The rigorous simplicity of its teaching has a potent appeal for those who, as Principal Mujeeb of Jamia Millia has put it, "are ignorant of political procedure and the facts of political life."[21]

The Muslim politics of despair is not only the response to modern pressures within a modernizing society; it is also a response to the vision of the future sedulously propagated by the Hindu Radical Right. Muslims undoubtedly overreact to this propaganda, but its demands underline Muslim fears and frustrations. The political expressions of the Jama'at-i-Islami therefore become more absolute, more apocalyptic, more incapable of compromise with the secular arms of the dominant political culture. One is tempted to assume that in the Indian situation the Hindu Radical Right is alone responsible for the increasing violence and bloodshed of the communal riots during the last ten years, but there is reason for thinking that the Islamic extremists—the Muslim Radical Right, to maintain the analogy—have been responsible to some extent for bringing about the violence. The declaration by the Jama'at-i-Islami and other groups that salvation comes through communal solidarity and a return to obedience to God as the only sovereign ruler suggests to the more despairing that it is better to die in a righteous cause than to live in subservience to an alien culture. Death was the reward for such views. There were fifteen times as many riots in 1968 as there were in 1960. In 1967 alone, three hundred persons were killed, 90 percent of whom were Muslims.

While Hinduism and Islam inevitably claim the major share of attention in any discussion of the social role of religion in contemporary India, certain insights can be gained from at least a cursory glance at Christianity's place in what has been called the "uneasy mosaic" of Indian society. Although Christianity has had roots in India for a very long time, it has often

been accused, because of confrontations between modern missionaries and such Hindu reformist groups as the Arya Samaj, with being an alien, foreign minority. Since 1947, Christians have been subjected to a considerable barrage of criticism and investigation, although at the level of the state, rather than the central, government. The general charge, however phrased, is the one already alluded to: that Christians owe primary allegiance to a religious community, and one, furthermore, that is extraterritorial in its organization. The specific outcome of this criticism has been the passing of laws in a number of states (such as Orissa and Madhya Pradesh) putting obstacles in the way of conversion. To most Hindus, and perhaps to many casual Western students, such restrictions may seem just. But as an acute observer of the Indian religious scene has pointed out, such restrictions are in fact the result of the tyranny of the majority.[22] They are also a denial of secularism, for presumably in a truly secular society, change of religious affiliation would not be a concern of the state. That so much is made of conversion in India is perhaps an indirect testimony to the point that the Hindu Radical Right and the Muslim Radical Right both make from their different perspectives: Indian society is fundamentally Hindu, and therefore conversion from Hinduism is an attack on national identity. "The dilemma of the Christians is the nation's predicament."[23]

I have tried to suggest that the vital social role of religion in modern India is not to be found in the numerous attempts at accommodation made by Neo-Hindus or Islamic modernists, but in the groups categorized as the Radical Right, both Hindu and Muslim, but especially in the Hindu ones. Their vitality is not demonstrated in an obscurantist defense of the past, but through an assertion of what they regard as a better vision of the future than that offered by the forces of social and political modernization. The very rapid and sweeping advances in industrialization will not lessen the conflicts and tensions but, rather, will exacerbate them. The actual areas of conflict have been the most modern of cities—Indore, Ahmedabad, and Jamshedpur—not the rural hinterlands. One can hazard the guess that out of the vitalities of Hinduism, and perhaps also of Islam, will come not lesser but greater confrontations as the lines are more clearly drawn in the future.

# NOTES

1. One aspect of this theme is examined in Ainslie T. Embree, "Tradition and Modernization in India: Synthesis or Encapsulation," in *Science and the Human Condition in India and Pakistan*, ed. Ward Morehouse (New York, 1968).

2. Donald E. Smith, ed., *South Asian Politics and Religion* (Princeton, N.J., 1966), focuses on the political significance of religion.

3. An important exception is *Religion and Society*, The Bulletin of the Christian Institute for the Study of Religion and Society at Bangalore.

4. A. B. Shah, "Religion in Public Life," *Opinion*, Sept. 3, 1968, quoted in *Religion and Society*, 16.1:3 (1969).

5. M. N. Roy, *Fragments of a Prisoner's Diary* (Calcutta, 1950), Vol. 1; and Rabindranath Tagore, "The Call of Truth," *Modern Review*, 30.4:29–33 (1921).

6. Gunnar Myrdal, *Asian Drama* (New York, 1968), I, 34.

7. Karl Marx, "The British Rule in India," in *K. Marx and F. Engels: The First Indian War of Independence, 1857–1859* (Moscow, 1959), p. 70.

8. For an interesting discussion of this point, see Richard Taylor, "Hindu Religious Values and Family Planning," *Religion and Society*, 16.1:6–22.

9. A. B. Shah, foreword to Hamid Dalwai, *Muslim Politics in India* (Bombay, 1968).

10. Craig Baxter, *The Jana Sangh* (Philadelphia, 1969), passim. Some of the most useful information on the attitudes and activities of the Radical Right comes from the publications of the Sampradayikta Virodhi Committee, an organization for opposing communalism, and from the publications of the Communist Party of India. The weekly *Organiser* provides insights into the thinking of the Hindu Right. It should be read in conjunction with its opposite number from the Muslim Radical Right, *Radiance*.

11. *Pratap*, Dec. 8, 1968, quoted in M. F. Farooqi, *Communist Party and the Problems of Muslim Minority* (n.p., 1969).

12. D. E. Smith, *India As a Secular State* (Princeton, N.J., 1963), and G. S. Sharma, *Secularism: Its Implications for Law and Life in India* (Bombay, 1966), examine the meaning of the secular state. One of the most interesting examinations of the philosophical implications of the whole question is Frank D. Van Alst, "The Secular State, Secularization and Secularism," *Quest*, No. 62 (July 1969), pp. 24–35.

13. M. S. Golwalkar, "We and Our Nationhood Defined," quoted in Farooqi, *Communist Party and the Problem of the Muslim Minority*, p. 8.

14. A. B. Shah, ed., *Cow Slaughter: Horns of a Dilemma* (Bombay, 1967), for an analysis of the anti-cow-slaughter movement.

15. Detailed accounts are to be found in the Indian newspapers for April 1969.

16. See Rasheeduddin Khan, "Uneasy Mosaic," *Citizen*, Vol. I, Nos. 6, 7, 8, and 9 (May 24–July 12, 1969).

17. For the significance of this movement, see Aziz Ahmad, *Islamic Modernism in India and Pakistan, 1857–1969* (London, 1967), pp. 254–57, and M. Mujeeb, *The Indian Muslims* (London, 1967).

18. Abid Husain, *The Destiny of Indian Muslims* (London, 1965), p. 129.

19. Joseph Lelyveld, *New York Times*, Oct. 28, 1968.

20. The pamphlet literature of the Jama'at-i-Islami Hind, New Delhi, both in English and Urdu, is considerable, and the materials of the Sampradayikta Virodhi Committee are useful for the Muslim Radical Right. See, especially, "Introducing the Jama'at-e-Islami Hind" (Delhi, 1966).

21. Mujeeb, *The Indian Muslims*, p. 403.

22. Frank Thakur Das, "The Dilemma of the Christians," *Citizen*, 1.10: 14–15 (July 26, 1969).

23. *Ibid*.