

The Under-Appreciated Problem of Religious Ideology in Nuclear Proliferation

by

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Introduction

The term “Hindu Bomb” is sometimes used in geopolitical discourse to describe India’s nuclear weapons program. Coined after India’s first nuclear test in 1974, it implies a connection between India’s Hindu majority population and its nuclear ambitions. India’s official rhetoric surrounding its nuclear weapons has focused on strategic needs, but the term “Hindu Bomb” – which is not a term used only by India’s critics but, importantly, one that is also used by some Hindu nationalists within India itself – has symbolic and ideological implications that remain too little known. This essay explores the historical setting, ideological underpinnings, and the implications of associating religion with nuclear weapons power, particularly in the South Asian and Middle East contexts.

Historical Background

India’s journey into the nuclear arena began in earnest shortly after British exodus from the Indian subcontinent in 1947. The architect of India’s nuclear program, Homi J. Bhabha, envisioned nuclear energy as a tool for national development in a newly post-colonial India. The Atomic Energy Commission was established in 1948 under Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru’s leadership, reflecting a commitment to peaceful uses of atomic energy. However, the geopolitical landscape – marked by the 1962 Sino-Indian War¹ and then China’s nuclear test in 1964 – shifted India’s priorities toward a potential weapons capability.

The country's push for such a potential weapons capability culminated in India's first nuclear test on May 18, 1974, under the codename "*Smiling Buddha*." Though *Smiling Buddha* was termed a "peaceful nuclear explosion," it was a nuclear explosion nonetheless, demonstrating India's entry into the nuclear weapons "club;" it accordingly triggered international reactions, including sanctions² and a deepening of non-proliferation concerns. India's explosion of that nuclear device occurred under Prime Minister Indira Gandhi's government, which maintained a "non-aligned" ideological outlook during the Cold War, making the Indian test a signal that nuclear weapons capabilities were emerging *outside* the capitalist-versus-communist rivalry. For over two decades thereafter, however, India refrained from further tests, adhering to a policy of nuclear ambiguity amid global non-proliferation pressures.

India's nuclear journey began under scientists like Homi Bhabha, driven by a vision of scientific self-reliance and independent technological success in the post-colonial context rather than religious zeal.³ Describing the 1974 *Smiling Buddha* test as a "peaceful nuclear explosion" reflected India's ambivalence toward nuclear weaponization, rooted in Nehruvian ideals of non-alignment and moral opposition to nuclear hegemony of the U.S. and Soviet nuclear superpowers.⁴ This ambivalence came to an end in May 1998, however, when overtly weapons-related tests were carried out under the Bhartiya Janata Party (BJP)-led government, which was strongly associated with Hindu nationalism. This prompted speculation about possible religious motivations beyond weaponization, especially given the BJP's ideological ties to the extremist [Rastriya Swayamsevak Sangh](#) (RSS) organization.⁵

The "Hindu bomb" label gained traction in part due to statements from BJP leaders, such as L.K. Advani – the country's Home Minister and Deputy Prime Minister of India in 1998 and then the second most powerful man in the government – who framed the tests as an assertion of national pride and strength, resonating with Hindu cultural imagery of power and sovereignty.⁶ Critics, including some Indian communists, furthered this narrative by linking the tests

to Hindu nationalist agendas. For instance, Vinod Rai of the Communist Party of India (Marxist-Leninist) organization⁷ called the bomb a “Hindu bomb,” alleging that it symbolized anti-Muslim sentiment tied to broader BJP policies. Such critiques, however, often overlooked the strategic imperatives that also seemed to drive the tests, such as countering Pakistan’s nuclear advancements and China’s regional dominance, and which Indian leaders invoked at the time.⁸

The 1998 Nuclear Tests and the Rise of Hindu Nationalism

Yet Indian politics and government discourse of that period and thereafter have suggested that India’s nuclear weapons program may still have some important religious undertones. The BJP is a political party rooted in the *Hindutva* ideology of Hindu nationalism, which had assumed power in a coalition government in March 1998. Shortly thereafter, on May 11 and 13, 1998, India conducted its series of five nuclear weapons tests at the Pokhran testing facility site some 70 miles from the Pakistan border, in the State of Rajasthan, under the operational code-name *Shakti*. The Indian government, in fact, said that the second of these two days of tests had involved detonation of what it claimed was a thermonuclear device (a.k.a. “H-bomb”). (This occurred at the same site where India had carried its first nuclear test in May 1974.)

With these new tests, Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee (1924-2018) declared India to be a “full-fledged nuclear state,” citing security threats stemming from both Pakistan and China. These tests met with jubilation domestically, being seen as a symbol of national strength and technological achievement.

The BJP’s ascent marked a step forward from the alleged “secular ethos” of previous governments, especially those of the Congress Party. *Hindutva*,⁹ an ideology long championed by the RSS and its numerous affiliates, seeks to define India officially as a Hindu nation. For proponents within this movement, the nuclear tests were not merely a strategic necessity, but a fulfillment of cultural destiny wrapped around Hinduism. Some nationalist voices thus celebrated the bomb as a “Hindu Bomb,” a term coined in media and political

rhetoric to signify the triumph of a Hindu-majority nation over the past colonial and foreign dominations. A 1998 article in *The Indian Express* by journalist Chidanand Rajghatta entitled “The Hindu Bomb,”¹⁰ for instance, encapsulated this sentiment, framing the tests as a moment of Hindu pride.

The “Hindu Bomb” Narrative: Ideology and Symbolism

Hindu militarism is a genuine and powerful force, influencing Indian foreign policy. It is all the more dangerous because it is unanalyzed, unexposed, and insidious. No one is likely to understand the actions of the Hindu government of India in the international sphere during the last fifteen years without recognizing the existence of a strong under-current of militarism among the people of the country.

Nirad C. Chaudhuri (1965)¹¹

The association of nuclear weapons with Hindu identity draws from a complex interplay of history, mythology, and politics. Hindu nationalists often invoke ancient texts such as the *Mahabharata* and *Ramayana*, which describe fantastical weapons such as the *Brahmastra*, a projectile of immense destructive power, as evidence of India’s historical scientific sophistication – even suggesting that modern India’s acquisition of weapons of mass destruction (WMD) thus has ancient precedents and that India is today merely recovering its ancient glory. Following the numbers suggested in these ancient legends, in fact, the number of people said to have died in the Mahabharata War is put by Yudhishtira, truth striving hero of the epic, at “1 billion, 660 million, and 20,000 men” (1,660,020,000), with the survivors numbering no more than 24,165. (This kill-count is a specific detail given in the epic text itself.) It is important to remember that the *Mahabharata* is an ideological and mythological text and not an actual historical record, of course, but its mythologized account of ancient Indian proficiency in WMD warfare resonates with modern political narratives of a proudly Hindu country reclaiming a gloriously

imagined past after centuries of disruption by Muslim and British colonial rulers.

India's 1998 nuclear tests occurred against the backdrop of heightened communal tensions, notably the 1992 demolition of the Babri Masjid (Mosque) by Hindu activists, an event that bolstered the BJP's rise – including that of a Gujarati politician named Narendra Modi, who is now the Prime Minister. Critics, including leftist and secular intellectuals, accused the BJP of linking the country's nuclear weapons program to *Hindutva* in order to consolidate domestic support.

India's embrace of nuclear weaponization also fed into longstanding debates about Hindu nationalism in Indian society. As early as 1965, for instance, Nirad C. Chaudhuri, had offered a critical analysis of Indian society, challenging the then-prevalent notion (being promoted then by the Congress Party government) that India was in some sense inherently pacifist. He argued that militarism has been a consistent aspect of Indian (Hindu) civilization, with violence and warfare being deeply embedded in India's cultural and historical fabric and integral to its history and cultural identity, and he purported to trace this trait from ancient times through various dynasties. Chaudhuri cited examples such as Emperor Ashoka's conquest of Kalinga¹² and the military exploits of the Gupta kingdom, suggesting that these instances reflect a broader pattern of militaristic behavior in Indian society. His arguments were further supported by literary evidence from epics such as the *Mahabharata* and *Ramayana*, which, as noted above, depict large-scale wars and valorize martial prowess.

In more recent years, especially with the rise of the BJP, discussions of Hindu nationalism and its influence on India's foreign policy have gained prominence. Some scholars argue that Hindu nationalist ideologies have introduced a more assertive and security-oriented approach to foreign policy, emphasizing India's civilizational identity and strategic autonomy. However, others contend that while Hindu nationalist rhetoric is present, India's foreign policy remains largely pragmatic, driven by geopolitical and economic considerations

rather than ideological imperatives. Nonetheless, Chaudhuri's insights from his 1965 book *The Continent of Circe* provide a historical context for understanding these contemporary debates, highlighting the enduring complexities of militarism and ideology in the shaping of India's national and international identity – complexities that would seem to have become all the more important now that the country openly possesses the most powerful form of weapon in existence.

As noted, India's official stance upon its nuclear weapons tests in 1998 emphasized deterrence, not ideology. Nevertheless, internationally, the "Hindu Bomb" label raised concerns about religious extremism influencing nuclear policy. Pakistan, which conducted its own nuclear weapons tests weeks later in May 1998, dubbed its arsenal the "Islamic Bomb," thereby intensifying the perception of a religiously infused nuclear rivalry in South Asia. Western analysts worried that intertwining nuclear power with religious nationalism could destabilize the region.

Domestic and Global Reactions

Domestically, the 1998 nuclear tests enjoyed broad support across political lines, transcending the BJP's government's political base. Scientists such as A.P.J. Abdul Kalam, who later became India's President, were hailed as national heroes, underscoring the program's technical rather than religious roots. However, dissenters like Arundhati Roy, in her essay "[The End of Imagination](#)," condemned the tests as a descent into militaristic chauvinism, arguing that they betrayed alleged "India's Gandhian legacy of nonviolence." Roy's critique implicitly challenged the "Hindu Bomb" narrative by framing acquisition of the weapon as an ethical *failure*, not a religious triumph.

Globally, the 1998 nuclear tests created shock, and the response to the 1998 tests was overwhelmingly negative. The United States imposed economic sanctions, and the United Nations Security Council condemned the tests. The "Hindu Bomb" label fueled fears of proliferation driven by identity politics, though India maintained its no-first-use nuclear declaratory policy and (notwithstanding its open development of nuclear weapons) its professed commitment to global

nuclear disarmament – a stance at odds with the aggressive rhetoric of some nationalists.¹³

Upon India changing its nuclear posture from ambiguity (1974) to clarity (1998), despite two decades of changed geopolitics, the international community reacted strongly. Even at the point of the 1974 explosion, India's actions had generated shock and alarm. In the words of Raja Ramanna, the architect of that test,

... [the 1974 explosion] came as a surprise to the world. They hadn't expected such an achievement from a developing country ... their criterion for measuring success was different in the sense that they judged the success of a country by its material acquisitions and its overt proof of development.... India didn't conform to any of these, and in this context alone it seemed somewhat relevant when the Western world expressed bewilderment, coupled with fear and panic at the success of Pokhran [in 1974].¹⁴

Some such surprise occurred again 1998, but this time without even the pretense of the tests having been “peaceful” nuclear explosions.¹⁵ India had not openly joined the nuclear weapons world. The international community reacted with [sanctions](#), diplomatic backlash, and strategic recalculations.

India cited multiple justifications for its nuclear tests and bomb program.¹⁶ They included:

- *Threat from China:* Long-standing border disputes and China's nuclear arsenal, compounded by Beijing's 1962 victory over India and its support for India's regional arch-rival Pakistan.
- *Pakistan Conflict:* Ongoing hostility and past wars with Pakistan, including tensions over the Kashmir region since 1947.

- *Kashmir Tensions:* Allegations of terrorism support by Pakistan and persistent regional instability.
- *Regional Prestige:* A show of nuclear strength to command respect from neighboring smaller countries of South Asia.
- *Demonstrated Capability:* Proving India's ability to weaponize its nuclear program through underground tests irrespective of international concerns.
- *National Reassurance:* Boosting public confidence in national security amidst regional nuclear uncertainty.
- *National Pride:* Enhancing a sense of prestige and identity tied to nuclear power.
- *Nuclear Club Aspirations:* Gaining entrance into the elite group of nuclear-armed states.
- *U.N. Security Council Membership Ambition:* Strengthening [India's case for permanent membership on the U.N. Security Council.](#)
- *Moral Disarmament Position:* Framing its acquisition of nuclear weapons as a "protest against nuclear apartheid" – that is, against the division of the world into nuclear weapons "haves" and "have not" countries – with India positioning itself morally through a so-called "Nuclear Satyagraha" for eventual global disarmament. [Satyagraha](#) refers to applying [Mahatma Gandhi's](#) principle of Satyagraha, or nonviolent resistance, to the issue of nuclear weapons. It embodies the belief that

nonviolence can be a powerful force against nuclear weapons and the threat they pose to humanity.¹⁷

Senior U.S. officials rejected India's rationales for developing nuclear weapons without offering alternative explanations for its actions. Senator Jesse Helms (R-North Carolina), for example, suggested that India's nuclear actions posed a threat to the United States, while *Insight* magazine's James P. Lucier attributed India's motives to internal ethnic issues and warned of potential tragedy. Some blamed the ruling BJP, with *Time* magazine caricaturing Prime Minister Vajpayee as a "Nuclear Yogi." Prime Minister Vajpayee, however, defended India's nuclear policy in Indian Parliament, citing cultural obligations and quoting from the Hindu spiritual classic, the *Bhagavad-Gita*¹⁸ – though this ironically lent credence to critics who had argued that Hindu nationalist motivations lay behind the country's nuclear weaponization.

As noted, India's 1998 nuclear tests prompted Pakistan to conduct its own tests on May 28, thus escalating the South Asian crisis and creating a new nuclear arms race. *The Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists* set the "Doomsday Clock" to nine minutes before midnight, marking the 16th adjustment since 1947 due to heightened nuclear risks.

Ideology and India's Nuclear Program

Surprisingly, despite ruling India for two centuries, the British never truly understood – let alone connected with – the Hindu mindset.

Nirad C. Chaudhuri (1965)¹⁹

The "Hindu Bomb" narrative intertwines strategic imperatives with cultural symbolism. As described earlier, Hindu nationalists often cite ancient texts like the *Mahabharata*, which as we have seen describes the *Brahmastra* – a mythical weapon of mass destruction – as evidence of India's historical scientific legacy. For instance, RSS ideologue M.S. Golwalkar (1906 – 1973) claimed in 1966 published

book *Bunch of Thoughts* that ancient India possessed advanced knowledge suppressed by foreign invaders.

While such claims are historically unverifiable, they resonate with a narrative of reclaiming a lost golden age, a theme echoed in BJP rhetoric from the late 1990s – a narrative that seemed to be reinforced by the tests in 1998. The BJP had in fact actually campaigned on a pro-nuclear weapons platform, promising in its 1998 election manifesto to “exercise the option to induct nuclear weapons,”²⁰ [an agenda that aligned with its muscular nationalism](#). Senior BJP leader L.K. Advani [linked the tests to national pride](#), stating of the tests’ government divinely-derived code-name that “Shakti symbolizes India’s strength rooted in its civilization.”²¹ Critics, however, saw such rhetoric as the BJP’s politicization of a nuclear program that had in fact been built by the more secular governments of the past and created by scientists of diverse religious background, including A.P.J. Abdul Kalam (1931-2015), a secular Muslim who had overseen the 1998 tests as chief of India’s Defense Research and Development Office (DRDO).²²

Broader Implications and Legacy

The “Hindu Bomb” concept and its apparent embrace by at least some segments of the Indian political community pose enduring questions about identity and power. Strategically, the 1998 tests bolstered India’s deterrence against Pakistan and China, and set in motion an Indian effort to develop explicit nuclear deterrence policies, as evidenced by its formalization in 2003 of a nuclear doctrine emphasizing credible minimum deterrence, as articulated by the [Cabinet Committee on Security in January 2003](#). Yet the 1998 tests also presented a challenge for the global nonproliferation regime and its flagship instrument, the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT)²³ – which India had not signed – prompting debates about what degree of nuclear legitimacy to permit non-signatories and whether or not nonproliferation requirements should somehow be extended to such states.

The “Hindu Bomb” concept serves as a lens for examining how cultural narratives may shape technological milestones. This is a

phenomenon not unique to India, for Pakistan's "Islamic Bomb" and Israel's undeclared arsenal – as well as Iran's potential for a Shia-flavored Islamic bomb – offer interesting parallels. Observers still debate the motivations behind India's nuclear weaponization. Scholars such as George Perkovich argued that India's program reflected a "defiant nationalism" rather than religious zeal.²⁴ It would be a mistake, however, to dismiss the importance of Hindu themes in India's nuclear trajectory.

Western countries, I submit, have on the whole failed to understand India's true motives. Their recurring surprise and shock and India's nuclear steps suggest a deeper gap in understanding India – perhaps, in particular, reflecting too limited a grasp of Hinduism, which shapes India's national psyche. The following section explores the ideological forces that appear to lie behind India's pursuit of nuclear weapons, particularly the idea of a "Hindu bomb."

Evolution of Modern Hinduism

The Hindu dreams that he will eventually be able to hoist the West with its own petard, and he is not such a fool as many might imagine.

Nirad C. Chaudhuri (1965)²⁵

The evolution of modern Hinduism was significantly shaped by British colonial rule, Christian missionary efforts, and Western education. Colonial policies – especially those led by figures like [Thomas Macaulay](#) – displaced traditional Hindu and Islamic education systems, introducing English and Western sciences as replacements. According to Lord Macaulay,

We must at present do our best to form a class who may be interpreters between us and the millions whom we govern ... a class of persons Indian in blood and colour, but English in taste, in opinions, in morals and in intellect.²⁶

This effort may not have been successful in producing the *de facto* Englishmen that Macaulay intended, but it did lead to greater

nationwide communication among Indians, particularly high-caste Hindus – and this led, in turn (if ironically, given the aims of Macaulay’s project) to a resurgence of Hindu cultural values.

The translation and much wider spread and availability of Hindu texts during the British colonial period, notably the *Bhagavad Gita*, played a pivotal role in this revival. Though virtually unknown in India before its 1785 English translation, the “Gita” gained prominence abroad and then eventually “returned” to India to inspire a new wave of modern Hindu thought and nationalism.²⁷ The resulting fusion of Western science and Hindu ideology gave rise to reinterpretations to such as “Hindu Physics” and “Hindu Chemistry,” promoting the idea of Hinduism as a rational, scientific faith. This ideological shift also alienated the Muslim minority, contributing to rising tensions and eventually helping lead to the creation of Pakistan after the British withdrew and the country split. It eventually also thus contributing to the pursuit by Pakistan of an Islamic bomb in response to what became known as the Hindu bomb.

Age of The Atom Bomb

Modern Hindus had not forgotten their *Mahabharata*. They presented Colonel Rusk who commanded the task force of the 32nd American Air Division in India with a model of the [ancient] battle of Kurukshetra!²⁸

Nirad C. Chaudhuri (1965)²⁹

Hindu concepts in post-independence India seem to have continued to fuel nationalist pride and ideological revival in ways linked to scientific achievements such as nuclear weapons development. In fact, even Mahatma Gandhi (1869-1948) – something of a prophet for modern Hinduism but a notable practitioner of nonviolence (*ahimsa*) within the Indian independence movement, who was ultimately assassinated by a Hindu nationalist zealot – gave a speech in 1947 in which he proclaimed that

... today they [Sikhs] are thinking of the sword. They do not realize that the age of the sword is past. They do not realize that no one can be saved by the strength of the sword. *This is the age of the atom bomb.*³⁰

(Later, Gandhi also asserted that in that “age of the atom bomb, “the sword was a rusty weapon.”)³¹

Gandhi’s seeming conclusion that, in contrast to the “sword,” nuclear weaponry had some potential to “save” the country was not lost on later Hindu nationalists. Decades later, with nuclear weapons stockpiled, Indian leaders – particularly the staunch nuclear hawks – did not hesitate to invoke Gandhi’s name to justify their stance. Drawing strength from Gandhi’s writings, they also cited his somewhat paradoxical essay titled “The Doctrine of the Sword,” penned in the pre-atomic era of the 1920s, to support the development of more atomic bombs.

This work is worth examining in more detail. Gandhi’s lengthy article “The Doctrine of the Sword” was published on August 11, 1920, in the newspaper *Young India*. A relevant portion of that essay says:

I do believe that where there is only a choice between cowardice and violence, I would advise violence. Thus, when my eldest son asked me what he should have done had he been present when I was almost fatally assaulted in 1908 – whether he should have run away and let me be killed, or used his physical strength to defend me – I told him it was his duty to defend me, even by using violence.

Hence, I took part in the Boer War, the so-called Zulu Rebellion, and the Great War. I also advocate arms training for those who believe in violence. I would rather have India take up arms to defend her honor than remain a helpless witness to her own dishonor in cowardice. Let me not be misunderstood. Strength does not come from physical capacity; it comes from an indomitable will. The average Zulu, in terms of bodily strength, may be superior

to the average Englishman, but he still fears the English boy's revolver. He fears death, and that fear renders him powerless, despite his strong physique.

It is better to use brute force than to betray cowardice. It is better for India to arm itself and take the risk than to avoid arms out of fear. That was why I joined the Boer War and aided the government during the Zulu Rebellion. During the last World War, I also supported the British, both in England and India, including recruitment efforts. Forgiveness is the virtue of the brave. Only the strong can truly forgive. Likewise, only one who is capable of enjoying pleasures can qualify to be a *brahmachari*³² by restraining desires. There is no such thing as the mouse forgiving the cat. India's soul-force will be proven only when it refuses to fight despite having the strength to do so. This "strength to fight" does not mean physical might alone. Anyone with courage and who has overcome the fear of death possesses such strength.³³

Today when we judge Gandhi's above comments from 1920, his alleged pacifism might come across curious and problematic. Whether or not these comments were actually intended somehow to invoke moral strength against British force or in fact to endorse violence and power, this passage has proven very helpful to modern Hindu nationalists seeking to build up the country's military might and seek virtue in such power.

Preparing for the Age of the Hindu Bomb

Modern defense as well as modern industry require scientific research both on a broad scale and in highly specialized ways. If India has not got highly qualified scientists and up-to-date scientific institutions in large numbers, it must remain a weak country incapable of playing a primary part in a war.

Jawaharlal Nehru (1956)³⁴

For all his famous devotion to nonviolence, Gandhi seems to have had a degree of ambivalence about nuclear weapons. At a prayer speech on June 16, 1947, for example, he observed that: “If we had the atom bomb, we would have used it against the British.”³⁵ This was not an unambiguous endorsement of nuclear weaponization, of course, for he did not exactly say that it was a bad thing that Indian nationalists had lacked the bomb, and by June 1947 India was clearly about to win independence without it. Nevertheless, India’s post-independent leaders seem to have felt India needed such weaponry.

In 1942, Gandhi had named Jawaharlal Nehru as his successor, confident in his loyalty. And after British left the Indian subcontinent, Nehru, a high-caste Brahmin, would lead India into the nuclear era despite the nation’s poverty and lack of infrastructure. Under the guise of peaceful development and Western-style progress, India quietly pursued nuclear ambitions, projecting a non-violent, democratic image to the world even as militant groups such as the RSS and associated modern Hindu³⁶ groups developed their thinking on the margins of the Indian political community and prepared to transform such ideas into a new national ideology.

Various legislative and institutional steps were taken that helped prepare India not only for nuclear power production but also for the “age of Hindu Bomb.” In 1948, for instance, Prime Minister Nehru introduced the Atomic Energy Bill, seeking to ensure the secrecy of (and central government control over) nuclear technology, and limiting nuclear policymaking to a select few government officials without legislative oversight. It also contained severe penalties against those who would violate the law.

This law faced little opposition in the Constituent Assembly (India’s provisional parliament at the time). During debates on this measure, a number of legislators from various portions of the political spectrum framed the issue in terms suggesting that they associated nuclear questions with Hindu religious themes.

H.V. Kamath framed atomic energy policy through a Hindu nationalist lens, for example, linking it to ancient Hindu wisdom, while Nehru himself emphasized a global “world-time” perspective with clear Hindu resonances, urging India to harness atomic power to avoid historical backwardness. S.V. Krishnamurthy Rao questioned the restrictive controls on nuclear technology to ensure its use for peaceful purposes, comparing India’s approach unfavorably to less restrictive laws in Britain and the United States. In responding to these complains, Nehru deflected, stressing timing and geopolitical opportunity, but thereby apparently also revealing the bill’s underlying strategic motives, hinting at a “Hindu Bomb” agenda. The heated exchange between these two personalities is worth quoting, for it suggests the true nature of what was being debated in the parliament:

Rao: May I know if secrecy is insisted upon even for research for peaceful purposes?

Nehru: Not theoretical research. Secrecy comes in when you think in terms of the production or use of atomic energy. That is the central effort to produce atomic energy.

Rao: In the Bill passed in the United Kingdom secrecy is restricted only for defense purposes.

Nehru: I do not know how to distinguish between the two [that is, peaceful and defense purposes].³²

Building a Nuclear Bureaucracy

From the start, India’s atomic program had a military aspect. Nehru’s stance reflected Modern Hinduism’s blurring of lines between violence and nonviolence. Despite some debate, the bill passed with support for its military intent. The industrial revolution in India at its most disinterested is an expression of anti-European and anti-Western nationalism. It is the realization of the desire, and now the policy, of the Hindus to get even with the

West and take revenge for the dead European imperialism by adopting its technology and organization.

Nirad C. Chaudhuri (1965)³⁷

On August 15, 1948, the Atomic Energy Commission (AEC) of India was established under the Atomic Energy Act of 1948. It was led by three prominent scientists – H.J. Bhabha, K.S. Krishnan, and S.S. Bhatnagar – who had also been appointed a month earlier to the Scientific Advisory Committee of the Ministry of Defense.

Dr. Homi Jehangir Bhabha, a nuclear physicist trained in Europe, became the AEC chairman. Before Indian independence in 1947, he was already heading key scientific institutions such as the Tata Institute of Fundamental Research (TIFR) and bodies within the Council of Scientific and Industrial Research (CSIR). He had also secured international support from Canada, France, and the United Kingdom for nuclear energy collaboration. With Prime Minister Nehru's backing, Dr. Bhabha helped push the Atomic Energy Act through Parliament with minimal scrutiny, and India began building a nuclear infrastructure.

By the late 1950s and early 1960s, India had developed a substantial and increasingly complex nuclear infrastructure, exemplified by the Trombay Atomic Reactor Center. This facility operated through six specialized divisions covering education and training, uranium production and plutonium extraction, scientific research, engineering, biological and medical research on radiation effects, and atomic minerals exploration.

In 1958, the Atomic Energy Commission (AEC) was restructured, increasing its membership from three to seven, with Bhabha continuing as chairman. To further strengthen state control, the Atomic Energy Act of 1962 replaced the earlier 1948 Act. The new law granted sweeping powers to the government, even allowing it to override any other national legislation (Clause 28) that could hinder

atomic energy activities. This marked a significant escalation in the centralization and secrecy surrounding India's nuclear program.

In its public pronouncements, the Indian government constantly proclaimed that the entire nuclear energy program existed exclusively for peaceful purposes, and that the atomic energy it would produce would provide an incredibly cheap and abundant source for electricity and for other forms of economic and industrial development. Over time, however, the government slowly changed its messaging by introducing themes identifying India's neighbors as enemies thus gradually altering the context in which comments about "peaceful" nuclear energy were made.

In the early years, China was portrayed a friend, but from the late 1950s it came to be depicted as a great enemy of India, especially after Sino-Indian War of 1962. In time, not just India's initial rival Pakistan, but also China, Nepal, Myanmar (Burma), Bangladesh, and Sri Lanka were all portrayed as potential threats. Even as they helped India develop its nuclear infrastructure, the United States and other Western countries were also regarded with deep suspicion. Amid growing perceptions of "enemies all around," nuclear non-proliferation must have seemed less and less attractive.

And indeed, even though India's scientific and technological efforts had long been justified as aiming for post-colonial "self-reliance," critics of India's nuclear power program such as [Dhirendra Sharma](#) have long argued that the country's nuclear industry is bloated and corrupt – and nuclear power generation remains "[an unfulfilled promise in India](#)." This suggests that other motives may have been present all along, and indeed declassified documents now reveal that at least as early as 1968, Western visitors to the Trombay facility were "[unsettled](#)" by "[data suggesting that India was heading toward the 'development of a nuclear device'](#)."

The Rise of Ethno-Religious "Bombs"

India's nuclear weapons program does not exist in a vacuum, but rather is but one example of a disturbing trend in nuclear

proliferation to states whose possession of such weapons is taken to represent their acquisition on behalf of and for the purposes of advancing a specific ethnic or religious group. Alongside the “Hindu Bomb,” in other words, there is also perceived to be an “Islamic Bomb” and a “Jewish Bomb.”

India’s nuclear development is often seen as a strategic response to China – which tested its first nuclear weapon in 1964 – and other regional threats. In my view, however, another powerful force in its development are ideological imperatives of Indian greatness tied to and fueled by modern Hindu nationalism. These ideological resonances have alarmed the Islamic world – especially Pakistan – triggering its own nuclear response. These ongoing dynamics risk wider proliferation, especially in the Middle East, where there is already said to exist an Israeli nuclear arsenal, and where both the sectarian religious state of Shi’ite Iran and the Sunni kingdom of Saudi Arabia are also envisioned as potential future proliferators. Meanwhile, in Russia, the Putin government has presided over increasing connections between the Russian Orthodox Church and Russia’s own nuclear weapons establishment.

Competitive ethno-religious identity politics between such nuclear-armed countries or groupings risks spurring both further proliferation and escalation to a nuclear conflict. As Nigel Calder put it back in 1979, “even the early phase of the nuclear epidemic is dangerous, and the Israeli and Pakistani bombs could be the death of us.”³⁸

Emergence of the Pakistani Nuclear Program

If India builds the bomb, we will eat grass or leaves, even go hungry. But we will get one of our own. We have no alternatives.

Zulfikar Ali Bhutto (1965)³⁹

While India portrayed its nuclear program as peaceful, Pakistan tended to see it as a threat, its views shaped by centuries of Islamic rule, Hindu-Muslim conflict, the trauma of Partition, and multiple

wars with India. In particular, the 1971 war, leading to Bangladesh's independence,⁴⁰ marked a major blow to Pakistan and what felt like a symbolic victory for modern Hinduism over Islam. Driven by deep historical memory and religious rivalry, Pakistan suspected India's nuclear ambitions early on, and viewed them as a serious threat.

We know that Israel and South Africa have full nuclear capability. The Christians, Jewish and Hindu civilizations have this capability. The communist powers also possess it. Only the Islamic civilization was without it, but that position was about to change.

Zulfikar Ali Bhutto (1977)⁴¹

It is our right to obtain this [nuclear] technology. And when we acquire this technology, the entire Islamic world will possess it with us.

General Zia ul-Haq (1986)⁴²

The United States shared nuclear power-generation knowledge with both India and Pakistan under the “[Atoms for Peace](#)” program, and Pakistan accelerated its efforts to develop a nuclear technology base after its 1971 defeat. In 1972, then-Prime Minister Zulfikar Ali Bhutto (1928-1979) launched Pakistan's nuclear weapons program, later supported by Islamic nations and other foreign suppliers. Dr. Abdul Qadeer Khan, using insider access in Europe, stole European enrichment technology and thereafter [smuggled key centrifuge designs to Pakistan \(and thereafter other countries as well, along with Chinese nuclear weapons designs\)](#). By the late 1980s, with China's help, Pakistan had a complete nuclear arsenal. As a result of U.S. pressure, Pakistan refrained from testing until India's 1998 nuclear tests forced its hand – at which point it, too, openly weaponized.

The nuclear weaponization of both India and Pakistan from 1998 created a dangerous arms race that has alarmed international onlookers ever since. As William E. Burrows and Robert Windrem had put it in 1994, for instance, even before both countries had openly tested weapons,

... [t]he Indian subcontinent is [already] the most dangerous place on Earth. It is the incubator of racial and religious hatred that is more virulent and persistent than any biological epidemic (though it, too, could be unleashed in a war). The slum of every city of consequence is a purgatory in which rampaging Hindu and Muslim fundamentalists search for their opposite number and kill them. The race for superweapons is therefore driven as much by sheer hatred as by geopolitical considerations. While both sides have invented elaborate excuses for developing nuclear weapons – strategic deterrence, for example – their real purpose is genocide.⁴³

Such concern heightened further once both India and Pakistan began their arms race.

Zionism and Israel's Nuclear Program

The idea of Israel emerged in the late 19th century under Theodor Herzl as a response to rising antisemitism in Europe, advocating for a Jewish homeland, eventually centered on Palestine. Its core ideology emphasized Jewish nationhood and the necessity of a sovereign state for survival. Growing nationalism and events like the [Balfour Declaration](#) (1917) strengthened the movement. The development of Israel involved early Jewish migration, institution-building, and then considerable international support following the Holocaust, which seemed to illustrate that the Jews had no safe alternative but to create a distinct, separate national home. Israel declared independence in 1948, leading to immediate conflict with its Arab neighbors and long-term issues associated with the occupation of formerly Palestinian-occupied land after the 1967 war.

Zionist security ideology, shaped by Holocaust trauma and regional hostilities, focused on survival, perceived existential threats, and the doctrine of self-reliance, prompting Israel to seek military and nuclear superiority to ensure its existence. Israel, though never officially confirming its possession of a nuclear arsenal, is widely

believed to possess nuclear weapons. And Zionism, as both a political and religious ideology, played a key role in shaping Israeli security doctrine. Israel's nuclear strategy, including the policy of strategic ambiguity (*i.e.*, not confirming it has nuclear weapons but benefiting from widespread assumptions to this effect),⁴⁴ is influenced by a belief in existential threat from its neighbors – all of which are predominantly Muslim, and which have repeatedly attacked it in the past – and by a theological commitment to the survival and protection of the Jewish people in what they view as having been their God-given homeland since Biblical times.

In the 1950s, Prime Minister David Ben-Gurion secretly authorized efforts to develop Israel's nuclear capabilities. His motto was "Never again will we be helpless." [France, after the Suez Crisis of 1956, collaborated with Israel](#), helping construct the Dimona nuclear facility in the Negev desert that is today widely believed to be the center of Israel's secret weapons program. (France provided the nuclear reactor, heavy water, and technological expertise.)

As noted, pursuant to its policy of nuclear ambiguity ("Amimut"),⁴⁵ Israel neither confirms nor denies having nuclear weapons. This strategy allows it to benefit from a degree of nuclear deterrence while minimizing the risk of formal retaliation, international sanctions, or reciprocal weaponization by a hostile Muslim neighbor. Possessing nuclear arsenal also provides a "last resort" retaliatory capability in case of national catastrophe.

By the late 1960s, Israel is believed to have acquired its first operational nuclear weapons.⁴⁶ (During the Yom Kippur War of 1973, Israel's nuclear preparedness reportedly influenced the U.S. decision to resupply Israel with conventional arms against its Arab adversaries.) The size of Israel's nuclear arsenal is the subject of much speculation, with guesses about its total number of warheads ranging from 60 to "over 400."⁴⁷ Its delivery systems include aircraft, land-based missiles, and cruise-missile submarines (which offer some degree of survivable second-strike capability in the event of a catastrophic attack upon Israel itself).

Despite its deliberate opacity, Israeli nuclear capabilities have contributed to regional arms races, such as the Iraqi and Syrian pursuit of a nuclear capability, resulting in the Iraqi reactor project at Osirak being destroyed by Israel in an aerial attack in 1981 and the Syrian reactor at Dair Alzour being similarly bombed by the Israelis in 2007, as well as ongoing concerns over Iran's nuclear program. This opacity has also led to criticism from Arab states, who view Israel's exemption from the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT) – a treaty that, like India and Pakistan, it never signed – as a clear double standard. Calls for the [establishment of a nuclear weapons-free “Zone” in the Middle East](#) have become loud, particularly from Arab states who perceive the current *status quo* as unsustainable.

Israel's nuclear posture remains a highly sensitive issue in diplomatic discussions involving the United States, European nations, and the United Nations. Israel's nuclear capability, however, is embedded within its strategic partnership with the United States, rooted in mutual security interests. For Washington, Israel's nuclear deterrent is often viewed as a stabilizing force that supports U.S. hegemony in the Middle East.

Shi'ite Ideology and Iran's Nuclear Program

Iran's nuclear ambitions are shaped by a complex interplay of Shia Islamic ideology, nationalism, and strategic considerations. Since the 1979 Islamic Revolution, Iran has been governed by a theocratic regime that integrates religious authority into all aspects of governance. It has been reported in some circles that supreme leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei has issued a *fatwa* (authoritative pronouncement under Islamic law) [declaring nuclear weapons un-Islamic](#), yet suspicions persist internationally both [regarding the existing of such a fatwa](#) and more generally regarding Iran's ultimate intentions. ([One recent account from Iran](#), in fact, suggests that the purported fatwa only bars the *deployment and use* of nuclear weapons, but would permit their production!) Iran's compliance with its NPT and nuclear safeguards obligations has been poor for many years, and the International Atomic Energy Agency has documented many

aspects of Iran's nuclear work that have appear to be related to weaponization.⁴⁸ The tension between Iran's reported religious prohibition and its pursuit of nuclear technology reflects deeper ideological divisions within the regime and illustrates how religious doctrine can both constrain and justify nuclear development.

Iran's nuclear power program started under Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, with U.S. support as part of the Atoms for Peace Program. The Shah's aim was energy diversification and prestige; he wanted up to 20 nuclear reactors and even hinted at possible weaponization. After the 1979 Islamic Revolution, Ayatollah Khomeini initially halted the program, reportedly seeing nuclear power as unnecessary and nuclear weapons as un-Islamic and extravagant⁴⁹. But the long and bloody Iran-Iraq War of 1980-88 changed Iranian perceptions: chemical weapons attacks by Iraq and regional insecurity reignited Iranian interest in nuclear capabilities as a way to help preserve Iran's Islamic Revolution.

Shia political thought strongly emphasizes resisting injustice and protecting the rights of the *Mazlum* (oppressed).⁵⁰ This is rooted in their belief that the only legitimate government is one that follows God's righteous will, advocating for social justice and equality, as well as by a long and painful Shi'ite history as an oppressed minority even within Islam. The Battle of Karbala in the year 860 – at which Husayn ibn Ali, grandson of the Prophet Mohammed and head of the Shi'ite community, was slain by Sunni Muslim rivals of the Umayyad caliphate – is seen as a key example of standing up against injustice, even at the cost of martyrdom. Shia political thought sees resistance against unjust rulers and systems as a moral and spiritual duty, drawing from the Quran and teachings of the Prophet Muhammad and his descendants.

In the modern era, Iran's lack of advanced technology (including nuclear technology) had been seen as a symbol of Western domination, and the development of nuclear capabilities in Iran as a symbol of standing up against oppression in ways that draw upon these Shi'ite traditions. Shia Islam encourages independence from foreign powers, aligning with Iran's push for indigenous nuclear technology. As

Shafat Yousuf and Syed Jaleel Hussain have noted, Iran frames its nuclear program as strictly peaceful, justified by Islamic law forbidding weapons of mass destruction but allowing defensive science. Some, however, doubt its sincerity in this respect, noting that in Shia tradition, the doctrine of taqiyya permits concealment of one's true intentions under threat – a concept that developed during the long years in which Shi'ites had to conceal themselves against Sunni Muslim oppression.

There are several strategic and theological themes upon which Iran may be drawing in justifying the pursuit of nuclear weapons:

- **“Science as worship”:** Some Islamic scholars in Iran argue that scientific advancement, including nuclear technology, is a form of religious duty.
- **Defensive Deterrence:** Building robust scientific and possibly latent nuclear capability is seen as deterrence against existential threats (e.g., Israel and the United States).
- **Imam Mahdi's Return:** Some Shi'ite religious leaders believe that building a powerful Islamic society (including demonstrating Iran's technological mastery) is necessary for the eventual return of the Mahdi, a messianic figure in Shia eschatology who is felt to have become “occulted” after the Battle of Karbala. (It is also conceivable that Shi'ite traditions valorizing glorious martyrdom in standing up against injustice may make Iran more willing to contemplate nuclear escalation.)

Iran's nuclear program thus blends national security needs, religious justifications, and Shia political philosophy. Shia Islam provides both moral *restrictions* and *motivations* for Iran's scientific nuclear pursuits while encouraging it to resist Western hegemony and

promote national sovereignty as a theocracy representing the world's only Shi'ite government.⁵¹

Ideology and Saudi Arabia's Nuclear Program

Saudi Arabia's interest in nuclear technology began in the 1970s, primarily for peaceful purposes such as energy and desalination, given its rapidly growing population and water scarcity. However, regional tensions especially with Iran's nuclear advancements and Israel's undeclared nuclear arsenal have pushed Sunni-ruled Saudi Arabia to consider a more strategic dimension to its nuclear program. In 2015, Saudi Arabia launched a major initiative called the King Abdullah City for Atomic and Renewable Energy (KACARE) to formally push nuclear energy development. Riyadh signed multiple agreements with countries offering nuclear technology, but has not yet accepted the strict "Gold Standard"-style civil-nuclear cooperation agreement with the United States, which would restrict the kingdom's ability to produce its own fissile material through uranium enrichment or plutonium reprocessing.

If Iran developed a nuclear bomb, Saudi Arabia would follow suit as soon as possible.

Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman (2018)

Saudi Arabia's nuclear ambitions are not just technical or strategic; they are deeply ideological:

- **National Security and Regional Balance.** The monarchy sees nuclear capability (even latent capability) as essential to maintaining a balance of power with Iran and Israel. Nuclear technology symbolizes modern sovereignty and strategic independence.
- **Preservation of Regime Stability.** In Saudi political ideology, maintaining the monarchy's survival is paramount.⁵² A nuclear program is viewed as a

deterrent against both external threats and internal destabilization caused by regional conflicts.

- **Islamic Leadership.** As the Custodian of the Two Holy Mosques (at Mecca and Medina), Saudi Arabia's leadership feels responsible for defending Islamic lands. Some ideological narratives frame nuclear capability as necessary to protect Islam from external aggression, especially given Iran's Shia-majority regime and its counterpart Saudi Arabia's Sunni-Wahhabi orientation.

Religious Extremism and Non-State Actors

The most alarming intersection of religion and nuclear weapons arises from the potential acquisition of nuclear technology by extremist groups. Religious militancy, especially where groups interpret holy texts to justify mass destruction, poses a unique and urgent threat.

One obvious potential threat comes from terrorist groups such as Al-Qaeda, ISIS, and others who have openly expressed interest in acquiring weapons of mass destruction. Should they acquire nuclear weapons, their pre-existing religious justifications for mass violence could make them uniquely dangerous – not least since traditional deterrence models that have traditionally helped restrain *state* nuclear use may not apply to these terrorists, as such actors are not necessarily bothered by the prospect of mutual destruction and may indeed prize martyrdom.

Nor is it impossible to imagine that a nuclear weapon could be delivered by terrorist means. A small tactical nuclear device, for example, could perhaps be made portable enough to be secretly transported across borders and placed near strategic targets, or used to render areas uninhabitable.

Following an interview with CBS newsmagazine *Sixty Minutes* on September 7, 1997, late governor of Krasnoyarsk Krai and former Russian Security Council Secretary, General (Ret.) Alexander Lebed

claimed that the Russian military had lost track of 80 or so “suitcase”-sized atomic demolition munitions (ADM)s). Lebed stated that these devices were made to look like suitcases, and that he had learned of their existence only a few years earlier. His account may indeed have been fanciful, and on September 10, the Ministry for Atomic Energy of the Russian Federation (MINATOM)⁵³ rejected Lebed’s claims as baseless. Russian Prime Minister Viktor Chernomyrdin also ridiculed Lebed’s account as “absolute stupidity” and said that “all Russian nuclear weapons are under the total and absolutely reliable control of the Russian armed forces.” Most Western observers today think that no such loss of “suitcase nukes” in Russia actually occurred.

In another instance of possible terrorist nuclear threats, the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) was told by an intelligence source code-named “Dragonfire” that al-Qaeda had smuggled a 10-kiloton Russian nuclear device into the United States, specifically targeting New York City. This alarming report caused considerable concern within the U.S. government, leading President George W. Bush to order Vice President Dick Cheney to leave Washington for an undisclosed location to ensure continuity of the presidency in the event such a device was detonated in Washington. Subsequent investigations found no concrete evidence to support the existence or presence of such a weapon, but the incident underscores the challenges intelligence agencies face in assessing threats based on human sources and the importance of corroborating information before acting – as well as the potential catastrophe that could result if indications of a *real* threat were overlooked.

Nevertheless, such small devices *are* surely possible. Even though their yield would likely be low, if detonated in a populated area, even a low-yield “suitcase”-scale nuclear weapon could cause catastrophic damage. A one-kiloton explosion, for example, could destroy structures within a half-mile radius and result in tens of thousands of casualties, depending on the population density. Additionally, the radioactive fallout would pose long-term health and environmental risks. An act of nuclear terrorism could thus rip the heart out of a major city, and cause ripple effects throughout the world, producing not just local damage but widespread fear elsewhere, flight

from major cities in a large-scale uncontrolled evacuation in response to any further terrorist threats (even false ones), and widespread havoc and economic chaos.

A bomb in Washington, D.C., for example, might kill the President, the Vice President, and many of the members of Congress and the Supreme Court. The explosion would also destroy much of the city's ability to respond. Hospitals would be leveled, doctors and nurses killed and wounded, and ambulances destroyed. (In the Japanese city of Hiroshima – attacked by the United States with an atomic bomb in August 1945 – 42 of 45 hospitals were destroyed or severely damaged, and 270 of 300 doctors were killed.) Resources that survived outside the zone of destruction would be utterly overwhelmed. (Hospitals have no ability to cope with tens or hundreds of thousands of terribly burned and injured people all at once; the United States, for example, has 1,760 burn beds in hospitals nationwide, of which only a third are available on any given day.)

Russian Nuclear Orthodoxy

The prospect of terrorist nuclear use has concerned Western national security planners for many years, but such worries may be all the more acute in connection with the possibility that religiously motivated elements within a nuclear weapons possessor state could facilitate proliferation. This risk is particularly relevant in countries where the military, intelligence, or nuclear establishment has strong ties to religious and ideological extremist groups or movements.

Connections between religious movements and nuclear weaponization can be seen even in the Russian Federation, one of the two “nuclear superpowers” left over from the Cold War and a country that currently possesses the world's largest nuclear arsenal. In a phenomenon that the Israeli scholar Dmitry Adamsky has termed “Russian Nuclear Orthodoxy,” the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC) – once persecuted by the Soviet regime – has emerged as a co-guardian of national security in a close alliance with the Putin government, shaping the values, behavior, and identity of nuclear weapons-related personnel and institutions. The ROC has become deeply intertwined

with the Russian nuclear forces, influencing their symbols, practices, and even strategic thinking. This relationship, encouraged by the Putin regime, sees the Church not only legitimizing but also actively shaping Russia's assertive national security strategy, including its nuclear doctrine; it has been making ROC theology an increasingly important factor in Russian nuclear thinking.⁵⁴

Analysis and Recommendations

The examples above reveal recurring themes in how religion can influence nuclear proliferation. First, religion can enhance perceptions of existential threat. Officials in states such as India, Israel, and Pakistan have invoked religious narratives of survival or martyrdom to justify their nuclear programs, reinforcing the idea that nuclear arms are essential to national and spiritual survival.

Second, religion can provide a moral and ideological justification for the possession or potential use of nuclear weapons. In Pakistan, the concept of defending the Muslim world gave nuclearization a pan-Islamic moral weight. In India, references to Hindu civilization and divine power bolstered domestic support for nuclear tests.

Third, religious ideologies can shape strategic culture in ways that may undermine logic of conventional deterrence. For example, apocalyptic or martyrdom-based belief systems, where death in defense of faith is valorized, complicate rational cost-benefit calculations assumed in deterrence theory and may dangerous special tolerance for escalation risks.

Fourth, however, religion may also sometimes constrain nuclear ambitions. If indeed it exists, Iran's reported *fatwa* against nuclear weapons illustrates how religious doctrine could perhaps act as a limit on military policy. However, such constraints are often contested or reinterpreted within the political-religious elite.

Finally, the symbolic role of nuclear weapons as embodiments of divine favor or civilizational prestige can contribute to a narrative of spiritual and national power and create incentives for proliferation. In

general, nuclear weapons can serve not only as tools of security policy (*i.e.*, deterrence) but also as markers of ideological and religious identity and affirmation in ways that may create risks and challenges not hitherto considered in international security planning.

To address the role of religion in nuclear proliferation and escalation management, policy responses must be sensitive to religious practices while also recognizing the importance of the institutions, values, and practices of the existing nuclear nonproliferation regime. The following are key recommendations:

- 1) **Promote Interfaith Dialogue and Confidence-Building Measures:** International organizations and regional fora should invest in interfaith dialogue initiatives that include discussions on peace, disarmament, and ethical responsibilities related to weapons of mass destruction. Faith leaders can serve as influential actors in tempering extreme narratives and advocating for restraint.
- 2) **Depoliticize Religion in National Security Discourses:** States should strive to separate religious rhetoric from strategic decision-making. This involves promoting secular policy frameworks, discouraging the use of religious language in defense policies, and ensuring that military doctrines are grounded in rational, non-theological terms.
- 3) **Engage Religious Authorities in Non-Proliferation:** Religious leaders and institutions can play a vital role in reinforcing global nuclear non-proliferation norms. Their moral authority can legitimize and amplify calls for restraint. The alleged *fatwa* by Iran's Supreme Leader prohibiting nuclear weapons, for example, may represent a religious-based commitment to non-proliferation. Such declarations should be publicly supported and promoted through

diplomatic channels to strengthen global norms against nuclear weapons development and use.

- 4) **Address Root Causes of Insecurity:** Often major religions consider specific geographical locations under their control as sacred spaces that may be felt to deserve protection at essentially any cost. In addition, religious movements may seek territorial expansion for religious reasons, at the expense of others. Some religious justifications for nuclear weapons may stem from non-religious insecurities, such as disputes over territory or resources, historical traumas, or identity crises. To treat religious ideology as merely epiphenomenal, however, would be to overlook its real, generative power in politics, conflict, and global affairs – including in nuclear policy. We must recognize that such ideologies can possess independent influence through their moral authority, emotional power, institutional autonomy, and historical impact. They can legitimize political actions, mobilize identity, shape public sentiment, and act independently of the state. Long-term peacebuilding efforts must address these root causes through comprehensive development, equitable conflict resolution, and justice mechanisms.
- 5) **Monitoring Religious Extremism in Nuclear States:** Intelligence cooperation, open-source collection, and analysis by area specialists and civil-society organizations should focus upon detecting and understanding the role of religious extremism within nuclear weapons bureaucracies and nuclear policy-making establishments. Close monitoring of nuclear states can help to identify and prevent radicalization within the scientific, political and military personnel who have access to sensitive technologies.

- 6) **Religious Education Reform:** Religious curricula should emphasize peace, coexistence, and ethical responsibility. Interpretations that justify violence should be morally scrutinized and responsibly challenged by both religious and non-religious scholars and varied institutions. Not all violent interpretations of holy texts are misinterpretations, and some may have historical and theological legitimacy. However, in today's context, if such interpretations go unchallenged, they can undermine peace, human rights, and nuclear nonproliferation objectives.
- 7) **Theological education, scrutiny, and its promotion:** To the extent that major mythology-based religions – such as those based upon the Bible, the Quran and Hadiths, and Hindu texts – have produced offshoots in the form of political movements that promote violence, including the use of weapons of mass destruction, they can pose a significant threat to the existing human-centered world order. As with other elements of terrorist radicalization and propaganda, efforts should be made to stop the spread of hate and counter such provocative messages. Today, multiple exchanges and dialogues are taking place through various media (radio, TV, YouTube, podcasts, etc.) to track and address the destructive nature of such religious ideologies. This work must continue in order to reduce the dangerous impetus that extremist religious movements create.
- 8) **National Security Studies:** U.S. military as well as Intelligence Community schools and research centers must adjust their curricula and scholarly research in order to help better identify, understand, and address the burgeoning threats that can stem from the intersection of religious movements and WMD policy.

- 9) **Military Force:** As a last resort, it may indeed become necessary to take direct action to neutralize the threat presented by nuclear-armed and religiously-motivated fanatics. Strikes against nuclear sites in “rogue states” are rarely advisable due to their high risks, including those of potential escalation into a broader war, violations of international law, undermining global norms, strengthening of hardline elements within the targeted state with the possible side-effect of actually encouraging more rapid proliferation, or even spreading radioactive contamination (*e.g.*, if an operating nuclear reactor is hit). Diplomacy, economic sanctions, cyber operations, and strengthening non-proliferation frameworks are usually far preferable alternatives.

Notably, Israel and the United States jointly resorted to surgical strikes against Iran’s nuclear infrastructure in June 2025. How far they were successful is not clear at this time, though past Israeli strikes on reactor projects in Iraq (1981) and Syria (2007) do seem to have been successful in preventing proliferation. Overall, short of imminent threats, such military strikes should thus remain a last resort, and should occur under strict international oversight if possible.

Conclusion

Religious ideologies, while not sole determinants, can play a significant role in the motivations and justifications behind nuclear proliferation. As indicated by the case studies above, religion can be (and sometimes is) used to sanctify and encourage nuclear ambitions, reinforce existential fears, and increase nuclear weapons-related risk acceptance. At the same time, it can also be used to constrain weapons

development. Understanding the interplay between theology, identity, and security is thus essential for policymakers, diplomats, and non-proliferation advocates alike.

Efforts to curb nuclear proliferation must move beyond traditional state-centric and rational-actor focused models and incorporate ideological and cultural factors into intelligence analysis and national security strategy. Engaging religious leaders, promoting inclusive narratives of peace, and addressing underlying sources of insecurity are crucial steps in building a more stable, less nuclearized world. By integrating these insights into international policy frameworks, the global community can better navigate the complex relationship between faith and force in the atomic age.

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About the Author

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Notes

- ¹ See generally, e.g., Shiv Kunal Verma, 1962: *The War That Wasn't* (Aleph Book Company, 2016); Gerry van Tonder, *Sino-Indian War – Border Clash: October-November 1962* (Pen & Sword, 2018).
- ² George Perkovich, *India's Nuclear Bomb: The Impact on Global Proliferation* (University of California Press, 1999), 163–170; William Burr & Jeffrey Richelson, "'Whether to 'Strangle the Baby in the Cradle': The United States and the Indian Nuclear Program, 1974–1976," *International Security*, vol. 25, no. 4, 2001, 54–99.
- ³ Perkovich, *India's Nuclear Bomb*, 447–52.
- ⁴ Paul S. Kapur, "India and Pakistan's Unstable Peace: Why Nuclear South Asia Is Not Like Cold War Europe," *International Security*, vol. 30, no. 2 (Fall 2001), 127–152.
- ⁵ Perkovich, *India's Nuclear Bomb*, 17.
- ⁶ *India Today*, May 25, 1998, 12. L.K. Advani stated, "The BJP government has shown the will to display our strength. India is now a nuclear weapons state. It has the capacity to defend itself. This has changed the strategic equation. It has added a new dimension to our national self-confidence. India is now a strong nation – and strength respects strength."

- ⁷ The Communist Party of India (Marxist-Leninist) (CPI(ML)) was an Indian communist party formed by the All-India Coordination Committee of Communist Revolutionaries (AICCCR) at a congress in Calcutta in 1969. CPI (ML) saw Naxalbari as the spark that would start a new Indian revolution, and the movement came to be known as “Naxalites.”
- ⁸ In a [letter to President Bill Clinton](#), Prime Minister Vajpayee declared that “We have an overt nuclear weapon state on our borders, a state which committed armed aggression against India in 1962. Although our relations with that country have improved in the last decade or so, an atmosphere of distrust persists mainly due to the unresolved border problem. To add to the distrust that country has materially helped another neighbor of ours to become a covert nuclear weapons state.”
- ⁹ Hindutva is a political ideology encompassing the cultural justification of Hindu nationalism and the belief in establishing Hindu hegemony within India.
- ¹⁰ Chidanand Rajghatta, “The Hindu Bomb,” *Indian Express*, May 21, 1998, https://indianexpress.com/article/news-archive/the-hindu-bomb/?ref=archive_pg.
- ¹¹ Nirad C. Chaudhuri, *The Continent of Circe: An Essay on the Peoples of India* (Oxford University Press, 1966), 104–105.
- ¹² Ashoka is remembered as a wise and generally peaceable Buddhist emperor, but his conversion to that faith is recounted as having occurred out of revulsion at witnessing the bloody results of his war of conquest against the rival kingdom of Kalinga.
- ¹³ See, e.g., Robert Marquant, “India Bomb Hits Chord for Hindus,” *Christian Science Monitor*, June 4, 1998, <https://www.csmonitor.com/1998/0604/060498.intl.intl.3.html>; Bill Drexel, “How Competing Hindu Theologies Drove India’s Nuclear Decision-Making – in Opposite Directions,” Hudson Institute, April 4, 2025, <https://www.hudson.org/missile-defense/how-competing-hindu-theologies-drove-indias-nuclear-decision-making-opposite-bill-drexel>.
- ¹⁴ Ramanna, Raja. *Years of Pilgrimage* (Viking, 1991), 93.
- ¹⁵ The idea of a “peaceful nuclear explosion” (PNE) enjoyed at least some legitimacy at the time, having been mentioned in Article V of the [Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons](#) (a.k.a. NPT) discussing “peaceful applications of nuclear explosions” – which held out the theoretical possibility that nuclear weapons possessors might perform such explosions *as a service* for non-possessors (e.g., for large scale excavations of canals or reservoirs). No one today takes the idea of a PNE seriously.
- ¹⁶ See, e.g., Krishnaswamy Subrahmanyam, “India and the Nuclear Bomb,” *Foreign Affairs* 77, no. 4, 1998, 33–44; Perkovich, *India’s Nuclear Bomb*, 405.
- ¹⁷ G.B. Singh, *Gandhi: Behind the Mask of Divinity* (Prometheus Books, 2004), 193–73.
- ¹⁸ Atal Bihari Vajpayee, Speech in Lok Sabha, May 1998, in *Lok Sabha Debates* (Parliament of India), vol. 148, No. 11, May 1998.
- ¹⁹ Chaudhuri, *The Continent of Circe*, 87.
- ²⁰ John Cherian, “The BJP and the Bomb,” *Frontline*, April 11, 1998, <https://frontline.thehindu.com/cover-story/article30161203.ece>.
- ²¹ L.K. Advani, remarks reprinted in *India Today*, May 25, 1998, 12.
- ²² A.P.J. Abdul Kalam & Arun Tiwari *Wings of Fire: An Autobiography* (Universities Press, 1999), 158. The Defence Research and Development Organisation (DRDO) is an agency under the Department of Defence Research and Development in the Ministry of Defence of the Government of India, charged with the military’s research and development, headquartered in Delhi, India.
- ²³ The objective of the [Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons](#) is to prevent the spread of nuclear weapons and weapons technology, to promote cooperation in the peaceful uses of nuclear energy, and to further the goal of achieving nuclear disarmament and general and complete disarmament.

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- 24 Perkovich, *India's Nuclear Bomb*, 104.
- 25 Chaudhuri, *The Continent of Circe*, 79.
- 26 Thomas Babington Macaulay, "Minute on Indian Education" (1835), *Selections from Educational Records*, Part I (1781–1839), quoted by Bruce Tiebout McCully, "English Education and the Origins of Indian Nationalism," *Studies in History, Economics, and Public Law*, no. 473 (Columbia University Press, 1940).
- 27 Richard H. Davis, *The Bhagavad Gita: A Biography* (Princeton University Press, 2014), 5.
- 28 Kurukshetra is a city in the north Indian state of Haryana. It is known as the setting of the Hindu epic the "Mahabharata."
- 29 Chaudhuri, *The Continent of Circe*, 114.
- 30 M.K. Gandhi, *The Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi*, vol. 88 (May 25–July 31, 1947) (Publications Division, Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, Government of India, 1983), 22 (emphasis added).
- 31 S.R. Tikekar, *Epigrams from Gandhiji* (Publications Division, Ministry of Information & Broadcasting, Government of India, 1971), 253).
- 32 A person professing sexual abstinence and an ascetic mode of life.
- 33 M.K. Gandhi, *The Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi*, vol. 21 (August 21, 1921 – on or after December 14, 1921) (Publications Division, Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, Government of India, 1966), 133–136
- 34 Itty Abraham, *The Making of the Indian Atomic Bomb: Science, Secrecy and the Postcolonial State* (Zed Books, 1998), 49.
- 35 Singh, *Gandhi: Behind the Mask of Divinity*, 314.
- 36 *Modern Hinduism*, as I use the term here, is a combination of ideologies like Theosophy, Communism, and Fascism. The rise of Hindu nationalism based upon Modern Hinduism represents the politicization and militarization of traditional Hinduism. Religious imagery and new temples like the Bharat Mata Mandirs symbolize the merging of Hindu devotion with nationalist propaganda. Modern Hinduism often fosters violence against non-Hindu communities. The RSS and its global networks are also active in North America and pose serious threats to religious pluralism and social harmony.
- 37 Chaudhuri, *The Continent of Circe*, 78.
- 38 Nigel Calder, *Nuclear Nightmares: An Investigation into Possible Wars* (Penguin Books, 1979), 83.
- 39 Steven Weissman & Herbert Krosney, *The Islamic Bomb: The Nuclear Threat to Israel and the Middle East* (Times Books, 1981), 161.
- 40 The Indo-Pakistani war of 1971, also known as the third India-Pakistan war, was a military confrontation between India and Pakistan that occurred during the Bangladesh Liberation War in East Pakistan from December 3, 1971, until the Pakistani capitulation in Dhaka on December 16, 1971.
- 41 Weissman & Krosney, *The Islamic Bomb*, 39.
- 42 William E. Burrows & Robert Windrem, *Critical Mass: The Dangerous Race for Superweapons in a Fragmenting World* (Simon & Schuster, 1994), 360.
- 43 Burrows & Windrem, *Critical Mass*, 351.
- 44 See generally, e.g., Avner Cohen, *The Worst-Kept Secret: Israel's Bargain with the Bomb* (Columbia University Press, 2010).
- 45 See generally, e.g., Avner Cohen, *Israel and the Bomb* (Columbia University Press, 1998), 277–91.
- 46 Dhirendra Sharma, "India's Lopsided Science," *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, May 1991, 36.
- 47 See, for example, the range of estimates given by Cohen, *The Worst-Kept Secret*, xxvii.

- ⁴⁸ See, e.g., International Atomic Energy Agency, “Implementation of the NPT Safeguards Agreement and relevant provisions of Security Council resolutions in the Islamic Republic of Iran,” GOV/2011/65 (November 8, 2011), <https://www.iaea.org/sites/default/files/documents/gov2011-65.pdf>.
- ⁴⁹ *Foreign Policy* reports that when asked about the possibility of developing chemical or nuclear weapons, Ayatollah Khomeini responded sharply: “We don’t want to produce nuclear weapons,” and instead directed nuclear scientists to civilian pursuits at the Atomic Energy Organization. <https://foreignpolicy.com/2014/10/16/when-the-ayatollah-said-no-to-nukes/>.
- ⁵⁰ The Arabic term “Mazlum” broadly refers to the “oppressed, ill-treated, injured, and sinned-against.”
- ⁵¹ Alfoneh, Ali. “Iran’s Nuclear Program and Shiite Political Theology.” *Middle East Quarterly* 19, no. 4 (Fall 2012): 45–55.
- ⁵² F. Gregory Gause III, *The International Relations of the Persian Gulf* (Cambridge University Press, 2010), 52.
- ⁵³ The Ministry for Atomic Energy of the Russian Federation was established on January 29, 1992, as a successor of the Ministry of Nuclear Engineering and Industry of the former USSR.
- ⁵⁴ See Dmitry Adamsky, *Russian Nuclear Orthodoxy: Religion, Politics, and Strategy* (Stanford University Press, 2019).