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Politics of Religion as a Popular Philosophy in a Post-Secular Age

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Summary

I'

For reasons I have not yet fully grasped, the political geography of both religion and democracy began to change after World War II and the changes began to become more apparent during the 1970s and 1980s. At least to me. And I could be considered an interested spectator and a product of those times.

First, suddenly the number of democracies in the world grew from about a dozen to more than 100 and the world population living under democracy quadrupled. Most of these were newly independent countries and it soon became obvious that in many of these new democracies, sizeable sections of the citizens were exercising their democratic rights not to advance their individual needs or demands, but to push their collective cultural, religious or communal demands. Such demands were always there but, in the older democracies, they had become more predictable, manageable and, when not so, they were usually the demands of small vociferous minorities, often apt to be dismissed as a lunatic fringe or as harmless eccentrics. In the new democracies on the other hand, these demands often looked strange, dangerous, unpredictable and primordial. They demands naturally aroused widespread anxiety and fear in the older democracies and among the first generation ruling elite in Asia and Africa.

Secondly and simultaneously, there grew the fear of what the newly enfranchised citizens in the new democracies were bringing into politics by way of cultural preferences. These included new styles and values in governance, indeed new protocols of democracy. These protocols often encompassed new styles of nepotism and corruption, new forms of reverence and irreverence, and new hierarchies of ideological and non-ideological commitments. In these too, there was the tacit presence of religion. In the sense that political actors often seemed terribly under-socialized in existing patterns of expectation from democratic politics, the law-and-order machinery and a secular state. Often they lifted public values and cognitive frames straight from their diverse religious worldviews.

Third, democracy may or may not succeed in distributing economic and social power, but it always redistributes charisma. Indeed, democracy can and perhaps should be re-defined as an institutionalized means of decentralizing and redistributing charisma. In a democracy, however imperfect, charisma tends to be un-stable and labile; frequently it refuses to remain concentrated in designated persons or institutions; it has a permanent long-term, secular tendency to get redistributed and expand the chances of the citizens to share the charisma that once was more centralized.

Even when charisma looks heavily concentrated in non-traditional domains, such as cinema stars and sports persons, it is transient and decentralized. There is no sophisticated attempt to legitimize it, no grand social or political theory and certainly no theology. In the domain of

religions too, in parts of the world, while the importance of charismatic religious leaders and evangelists have grown, the Church paradoxically no longer looks that awe-inspiring and exclusive and the non-Christian religions not so irreligious. Old-style evangelism may be flourishing, but new forms of self-induced conversion or choosing another religion in addition to one's own, without actually converting, is also becoming more common. This expansion of religious choice—it includes also smaller choices that cut across religious lines, such as the growing popularity of yoga, Tibetan healing traditions, and Christian marriage rituals among non-Christian communities—have made many religious leaders and defenders of faith nervous and doubly defensive. They suspect they are living in a new, uncertain, strange world and they try to cope with their fears through cognitive closure. The same fears and the same closure can be seen among those allegiant to the new religion-substitutes of our times, nationalism and secularism. In Turkey, France and India, for instance, any interrogation of such faiths are seen as virtually unnatural acts.

Fourth, it has become obvious that in the South the encounter with aggressively evangelical Christianity during the colonial times has produced among some of the major faiths a reaction that psychoanalysts will call identification with the aggressor—an attempt to produce from within their ranks revised versions of the faith that can stand up to the evangelical challenge of masculine, Protestant Christianity by being like it. These attempts were also fired by the conviction that this particular form of religion was more compatible with modernity, national state and industrial capitalism. In South Asia, for instance, both Hinduism and Buddhism, though considered ancient faiths, have produced their own versions of Protestant reform movements such as Brahma Samaj (founded 1830), Arya Samaj (1875), Ramkrishna Mission (1897) and Mahabodhi Society (1891) and reformers such as Ram Mohan Roy (1772-1822), Dayananda Saraswati (1824-1883), Swami Vivekananda (1863-19020) and Anagarika Dharmapala (1864-1933). Only small groups of people actually opted for belief systems these movements propagated, but they changed the entire culture of religion. To this extent, Hinduism and Buddhism as we know them today in urban, middle-class South Asia are all new faiths, not much more than a century old. (For the moment, I am not discussing the case of South Asian Islam because similar movements in Islam acquired momentum later and their influence became obvious even later. One should be able to say Islam, too, is becoming a new faith today.)

The most important, common core of these projects was a two-fold attempt to brush up their faiths. The more overt part of the effort was to make them more compatible with modern rationality and scientific spirit and cleanse them of the 'superstitions', 'meaningless' rituals and local customs that have come to be associated with them. This went with determined attempts to give their theology—and their 'philosophical' beliefs—a higher status than their rituals, rites and practices. The more covert goals were to use these means to centralize the faiths, give them well-charted borders, and make them more compatible, manageable and subservient to the demands of a modern nation-state and its ideas of secularism and the needs of a modern, urban-industrial society.

II

Responding to these processes and occasionally rebelling against them, there have been attempts to re-imagine the relationship and open a more self-confident, open-ended dialogue between politics and religion during the last four decades. We all know of such initiatives and all I have to do here is to mention, as examples, only three of them that have been prominent.

First, religion has re-emerged as an epic of the oppressed and as a language of resistance. Liberation theology in Christianity and Ali Shariati in Islam are reasonably good examples. I said re-emerged, not emerged, because this is a use of religion known to all religions since ancient times. It has been rediscovered because the fond nineteenth-century belief that this-worldly, science-based, secular knowledge will supply theories of liberation more appropriate for our times lies shattered and discredited all around us. At the same time, with the decline of the secular

power of organized religion, the priestly classes no longer look so formidable, despite the return and spread of fundamentalism in many parts of the world.

Second, the spreading belief that the processes of disenchantment and desacralization have gone too far has led to determined efforts to reclaim some areas of life from, what look like, clutches of the secular, for purposes of resacralization. Some of the most conspicuous of these areas are environment, reproductivity (as an antipode or negation of productivity), childhood and life itself.

Third, the major South Asian faiths do not have centralized, overarching, church-like structures that can be engaged, appeased, or bargained with. This has led to the emergence of new kinds of political formations that try to act like brokers between the state and highly diverse religious communities, but have no intrinsic sanction in the community to do so. They do enjoy political support among the urban, educated, modernized or semi-modernized middle classes that have moved towards an idea of religion as a standardized, generic, global belief-system. These formations can thus also act as political pressure groups in a democratic order and begin to influence public policy under certain circumstances.

There are other important processes at work too. But the ones I have mentioned have most influenced the critique of secularism that follows and my fascination with Mohandas Gandhi's maxim that it is impossible to imagine politics without religion.

III

No one thought that religion would re-emerge from the shadows to occupy centre-stage at the beginning of the twenty-first century. Many wrote obituaries of religions as early as in the middle of the nineteenth century. Since then, it has been the triumph of one secular ideology after another, though steep decline or ignominious fall has usually followed the triumph. Religion has re-emerged at the end of what could be called an age of ideologies, not in its pristine form but bearing the imprint and, sometimes, even the garb of the age of secular ideologies. At the beginning of the twenty-first century, religion is a phoenix that has risen from its own ashes and wears the ashes as a sign of its new triumph.

This may or may not be an enigma. The attempts to banish all mystery and spirituality from life, the increasing poverty of the individualism that envelops lonely crowds in fully developed consuming societies, the steady growth of violence, often gratuitous, the decline in the sanctity of life that finds expression not only in wars, machine violence and torture but also in assaults on the environment and the life-support system of the coming generations, widespread use of the Enlightenment values as justifications for new forms of dominance and despotism—they all have contributed to the erosion of the easy faith in the age of reason and the unlimited power of human reason.ⁱⁱ

At the same time, the religious worldview is a worldview after all and like all other world views it too carries a baggage. After the crusades and holy wars, the genocide of indigenous peoples in the Americas, slavery and colonialism sanctioned by powerful sections of the Christian church, and the more recent rise in religion-based terrorism in the Islamic world and the blatant secular use of religion in South Asian politics—where Hinduism, Islam, Buddhism and Sikhism have been periodically used to mobilize hatred—we are left with no alternative but to admit that the world of religion parallels the secular world and can be as much a domain of gratuitous violence, paranoia and sadomasochism. It is true that one look at R.J. Rummell's data and some rough arithmetical manipulation of them reveal that in the last hundred years fully secular states have killed at least forty-five times as many people as religious violence and fundamentalism have killed.ⁱⁱⁱ But then, as Charles Long likes to say, 'secularism is a hidden religion for which no one has to take any responsibility.' It is probably safer to presume that given opportunities, people will kill, rape and plunder in the name of religion as happily as people have done in the name of secular statecraft, nationalism, progress, revolution and development.

Only two things have changed. First, whatever may have happened in the past, the violence that religion *now* sanctions cannot compete in range and depth with the violence that modern states sanction in the name of secular ideologies. Second, being primarily interest-based and a pathology of rationality, state violence has increasingly become more organized, scientific, efficient and user-friendly, whereas religion violence, to the extent it is passion-based and a pathology of irrationality, still leaves more scope for individual and collective resistance, by having some loopholes and sectors of inefficiency, I hasten to add, however, that these differences are getting smudged; in its new incarnation, religious violence too is acquiring many of the features of state violence.

Why should then we negotiate the domain of religion as citizens? Why should we learn the language of religion or enter the cosmology of religion? The honest answer is that we do not have to, except as ethnographers, historians or psychologists. At one time it must have been different, but now millions of people live without the benefit of faith. It is unlikely that one would run out of company if one refuses to learn the language or enter the cosmology of religion.

However, an even larger part of the world and a huge majority of those staying in the God-forsaken parts of the world—in Latin America, Africa and Asia—have partial or no access to the language of secularism and citizenship. Often they have been denied such citizenship, though invited to use the language of citizenship. Anyone who refuses to learn the language and the cosmology of religion has, as a result, little or no access to that other world. This is no great loss if you are a modern academic in a modern university, or if you plan to live exclusively within the confines of one of the many pockets of modernity that pockmark the Southern hemisphere. I am fully aware that mostly the poor, the marginal, the retrogressive and the disposable today seem to have religion. However, if you happen to be one of those who take democratic participation seriously or seek to influence public life and public policy in the Southern world, it becomes a different story.

This is because, without some access to the religious worldview, you will pretty soon become primarily a spectator of politics and left with only the option of constantly bemoaning the bad choices that 'ignorant', 'ill-informed', 'irrational' electorates make and shedding copious tears on the rise of religious fundamentalism and ethnic chauvinism encouraged by competitive democracy. You will also have to, I am afraid, reconcile yourself to lamenting the way the ungodly and the ill-motivated occupy increasingly larger public space just because they speak the language of religion and can converse from within a religious worldview. If you are enterprising enough, you might console yourself by writing angry columns in newspapers or letters to editors or talk of the good old days when politics and politicians were reportedly purer and more idealistic.

This is not a convoluted plea to return to faith or to establish the superiority of the language of religion. It is a plea to acknowledge the costs of democracy. It presumes that in a democracy citizens have the right to bring their ethical frameworks within politics and the frameworks may not meet the criteria set up by their well wishers. No sloganeering on the need to keep separate religion and politics—the church and the state—can work on those whose everyday ethics are directly or indirectly derived from religion, especially since we may not be able to employ a thought police efficient enough to force citizens to maintain such separation.^{iv} It is a pity, I am sure, that despite more than three hundred years of spirited, dedicated efforts, so many still use religious cosmology as a ballast in life, particularly when buffeted by the disorienting pace of social change, uprooting or personal insecurity. Many of us, may not need such a ballast, but we cannot ensure that in a democracy others would not. The situation has been complicated in recent decades by the growing trend in many secular, modern states to set up as a political ploy entire religions and civilizations as demonic others that need to be de-fanged. Those at the

receiving end of such stereotyping are naturally finding it increasingly difficult to adore the secular worldview as intrinsically opposed to fanaticism and hatred.^v

Here the African Americans in the United States have a lesson to offer to Africa and Asia, particularly to the South Asian intellectuals tirelessly speaking of the virtues of secularism. No one can deny that Christianity was virtually imposed on the community. Their Christianity bears the mark of their suffering over two centuries. Nevertheless, they have made something out of that imposition that is distinctively theirs. Christianity in turn, I dare say, has been at its creative best when deployed as a theology of emancipation by the African Americans and African Africans. From Reverend Martin Luther King to Reverend Desmond Tutu, it has been the unfolding of the potentialities of an Asian faith that defy the European heritage of Christianity to supply a potent political philosophy of militant non-violence that has radically changed our ideas of political resistance and dissent. (This Christianity, conversing with the Hindu-Jain traditions through Gandhi, has also initiated a remarkable dialogue of faiths in our times outside the academe.) It has emancipated European Christianity from some of its conventionalities and, more important, its historical baggage, the history that prompted Mohandas Gandhi to say that Christianity was a good religion before it went to Europe. I need hardly add that the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in South Africa was not a secular enterprise. Nor was it a *sui generis* brainwave of Tutu. It was squarely located in an ecumenical normative frame that cut across faiths and ideologies, beliefs and disbeliefs. The Commission was a clear case of religion intruding into politics, in a way that Gandhi would have applauded. Like everyone else, I am aware and critical of the many limitations of the Commission, but these limitations do not detract from the daring ethical imagination that inspired it.^{vi}

There is another lesson for us from the African Americans. Through all their struggles, they never yielded ground to the religious fanatics though there were small, identifiable groups within them pushing towards extremism. Because the community's leadership never abandoned the domain of religion as irrelevant to the public sphere, some of the most creative inputs into their struggle for equality and dignity came from within their religious consciousness. Those who opposed fanaticism and bigotry among them could make sense to others in their community because they shared the language of religion.

In India, on the other hand, the first generation of post-Independence leaders was respectful towards but fearful of Gandhi and his 'intemperate' use of religion in politics. Some of them, to the delight of 'progressive' intellectuals, quickly shifted to a political idiom that could be called an insipid copy of social-democratic ideologies floating around in Europe, especially Fabian socialism of the inter-war years, leavened with a pinch of the hard materialism of the Leninist kind. They declared the entire domain of religion untouchable and left it to its 'natural' carriers—the 'backward', 'illiterate', 'provincial' apprentice-citizens of the society.^{vii}

The results of that short-sightedness and obeisance to transient fashions could only be disastrous, when combined with the latent fear and contempt for the ordinary citizens and their worldviews and categories. Taking advantage of this fear and contempt, small groups of Hindu, Muslim, Buddhist and Sikh political activists have taken over the responsibility of speaking for these religions. Even the occasional attempts to deploy the language and cosmology of religion to counter extremism and violence enjoy little legitimacy because the credibility of anyone from the modern sector speaking on religious matters has been badly compromised.

The modern intelligentsia in India, too, has devalued the leadership of more serious religious leaders by mechanically accepting the credentials of the political activists speaking on behalf of religious communities. This intelligentsia has to take on face value everyone who claims to speak on behalf of a religion—from psychopathic, violence-prone, rabble-rousers trying to break into politics to scheming, paranoid necrophiles among the political leaders—because it itself does not have any serious acquaintance with the world of religion. One of the saddest spectacles in India in recent years has been the effort of some Catholic religious figures to open a dialogue with the un-elected, self-proclaimed leaders of Hindus like the Rashtriya Swayam Sevak Sangh (RSS) and the Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP). These are formations that claim to speak for all Hindus of

the world—the one billion of them—when they and the parties they support have together never won one-third of Hindu votes in India.

There is a built-in contradiction in the tenor of my argument here. I have made a case for understanding religious worldviews as means of entering popular consciousness and the normative frames that shape the democratic process and, sometimes, decide its fate. Yet, it remains an open question how far the worldviews directly shape democratic choices and how far they are mediated or altered by the packaged interpretations of religions floating around in the public sphere.^{viii}

On the other hand, believers are not obliged to believe in a manner acceptable to philosophers, theologians and historians of religion. For many believers, religion is a matter of periodical participation in rituals and other modest observances. When we speak of the language of religion, do we have in mind what serious scholars and thinkers have in mind? Or do we have in mind the simple, everyday versions of the faith that look anti-philosophical and are often an embarrassment to sophisticated believers? Do we have in mind both? Perhaps the question is not that relevant, if the challenge is to bypass this division and discover the frames of sensitivity, the inter-subjectivity, within which the respect for—and celebration of—the unthinking, casual, everyday forms of religiosity also come to represent serious scholarly visions of a sacralized cosmos and sanctity of life.

Though in my own work, when I use the term religion I do not usually have in mind canonical texts or practices, the so-called high culture of religion, but the lowbrow and the non-canonical, contaminated by ordinary people and everyday life, I have not discussed here how the canonical and the high-cultural have gradually become the official and acquired the right to represent a religion. The modern state has always felt more comfortable with the classical and the canonical and it has always a preference for the centralized and the well organized as opposed to the decentralized and the ill-organized.^{ix}

In South Asia, what was left undone by the colonial administrators, perpetually looking for a single, definitive version of a faith—so that the colonial states could cope with, manage or arrive at a political *quid pro quo* with the native religions—was completed by the modern university system, ever eager to identify the 'real' form and core of a religion. Arab Islam became the main tradition of Islam only in the early part of the twentieth century, redefining the world's largest Islamic societies as abodes of peripheral Islam. Manusamhita became the final, authoritative text on Hindu law only in the middle of the nineteenth century, thanks to the efforts of the colonial dispensation to codify Hindu law. Over generations, these redefinitions have been internalized by large sections of modern, educated believers in the Afro-Asian world. We are paying the costs of such centralization today. The effort of some Muslim denominations and communities to defend their religious identity and self-esteem, by opting for a blood-drenched version of 'pure' Islam, is only one part of the story. For one sees a similar development in a number of other religions, in which the axis of self-definition has shifted under the onslaught of a new, 'universal' idea of faith popularized by the nineteenth-century European knowledge system in general and the European university system in particular.

Second, the religious worldview, being a worldview, always has within it a place for irreverence, wit and play. The global triumph of European Protestantism during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, especially its close links with industrial capitalism and colonialism and its ability to underwrite a housebroken version of religion that is subservient to the nation-state, has introduced or strengthened certain forms of Puritanism in virtually every major religion. Some of the non-Semitic—bearing a strong imprint of the pagan--creeds have been particularly unfortunate in this regard. A huge majority of their followers are accustomed to some degree of playfulness, show of irreverent familiarity, bargaining, blatant eroticism, and even accusations of nepotism against divinities. However, a small minority, exposed to the culture of religion in West

Europe and North America, are embarrassed by such disreputable behaviour and feel even more offended if someone from outside the fold is audacious enough to presume the same intimacy with the gods and goddesses, thereby drawing attention to the 'pagan' elements of their faiths. What was a source of strength in these faiths has, thus, become an excuse for censorship and xenophobia.

One final comment before I end. We are probably entering a period when the decisive battle will be not between fundamentalism and secularism or between identity politics and normal, interest-based politics. The battle may well be between religion in its new, packaged, consumer-friendly version as a political ideological platform and the subversive spiritualities—to steal Frederique Apffel Marglin's evocative expression—that are breaking out at the peripheries and the underside our known world.

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ⁱⁱ See for instance Alister McGrath, *The Twilight of Atheism: The Rise and Fall of Disbelief in the Modern World* (Doubleday, 2004). An instance of the growing doubts about the efficacy of secularism within political theory is William E. Connolly, *Why I am not a Secularist* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 1999).

ⁱⁱⁱ R.J. Rummel, *Death by Government: Genocide and Mass Murder Since 1900* (West Hanover, Mass.: Christopher Publishing, 1994).

^{iv} For that matter, there is little evidence in contemporary psychology that people can maintain such separation within themselves on a long-term basis. Indeed, there is much evidence that they try to reduce such dissonance. While there is some evidence that South Asians can live with greater cognitive dissonance within themselves, this capacity is in decline in the urban melting pots of the region, where most religious violence takes place.

^v On this subject, see for instance, Asma Barlas, 'The Secular Commitment to 'Islamic Fundamentalism'', *Daily Times*, 4 August 2002. Barlas says at one place, '... one could argue, for instance, that whereas in the West, modernity brought the benefits of capitalism, industrialization, and representative democracy, for most of the world, it brought colonization, slavery, economic ruin, a militarization of politics, increased poverty, the extinction of indigenous people and cultural alienation. Similarly, the very secularism that freed 'man'—in the masculinist language of the Enlightenment—from the alleged tyranny of religion, also opened up to doubt people's sense of themselves as purposive moral agents in the world. Hence, what some embraced as freedom, others experienced as profound loss.' For a powerful, detailed treatment of the issue, see Ali Mazrui, 'Progress': Illegitimate Child of Judeo-Christian Universalism and Western Ethnocentrism—A Third World Critique', in Bruce Mazlish and Leo Marx (Eds.), *Progress: Fact or Illusion* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan, 1996), pp. 153-74. Strangely. Such arguments, when made in the context of Islam, are more acceptable in academic circles in India than when made in the context of Hinduism.

^{vi} For a glimpse into Tutu's own way of looking at the Commission, see Desmond Tutu, *No Future without Forgiveness* (London: Rider, 1999).

^{vii} The fear of what religion might do is best illustrated by the absence of a single department of religious studies in any of India's roughly 300 universities, even though many of them are modelled on famous western universities known for their departments of religious studies.

^{viii} Elsewhere I have argued that most of these packaged software come not as religious cults or sects but as religion-based political ideologies that do not include any theory of transcendence. See for instance, Ashis Nandy, 'The Politics of Secularism and the Recovery of Religious Tolerance', in *Time Warps: The Insistent Politics of Silent and Evasive Pasts* (New Delhi: Permanent Black, 2001), pp. 61-88; and 'The Twilight of Certitudes: Secularism, Hindu

Nationalism and Other Masks of Deculturation', in *The Romance of the State and the Fate of Dissent in the Tropics* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2003), pp. 61-82

^{ix} Interested readers may like to look up Ashis Nandy, 'A Report on the Present State of Health of Gods and Goddesses in India', *Time Warps: The Insistent Politics of Silent and Evasive Pasts* (New Delhi: Permanent Black, 2002), pp. 129-56; and 'The Twilight of Certitudes'.